

There is plenty of excitement for the chums of Cliff House School when they encounter—

“THE PHANTOM OF PELLABAY CASTLE!”

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EVERY **2^d** SATURDAY

Incorporating
"SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN"



**Santa Claus No. 1 and
No. 2 Set Out to Jape
Their Rivals!**

*A delightful incident from the
thrilling Yuletide story featuring
Barbara Redfern & Co. inside.*

A Long Complete Story of the Cliff House chums, sparkling with Christmas fun and enthralling with unusual mystery.

The PHANTOM of PELLABAY CASTLE!



By
**HILDA
RICHARDS**

Illustrated by T. LAIDLER

Clara's Strange Adventure!



"GHOSTS! Stuff!" Barbara Redfern said scornfully. "Just rubbish!" Mabel Lynn, Babs' great chum, agreed heartily.

"Hear, hear!" sniffed plump Bessie Bunter valiantly. "Only kids believe in ghosts, you know!"

"Well," Queenie Pelham of Whitechester School retorted stubbornly, "I tell you there's a ghost in Pellabay Castle Hotel!"

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"All dressed in white!" Eve Clavering added, with a serious nod.

"And we say—" Babs cried, beaming round. "What do we say, Cliff House?"

"Stuff!" retorted nine Cliff House voices at once.

The argument in the games-room of Pellabay Castle Hotel was growing almost as warm as the atmosphere of the room.

But arguments, when the representatives of Cliff House School and Whitechester School met, always did. Whatever in their innermost hearts they believed, Whitechester and Cliff House always ventured to disagree.

Far away, back in Kent, the two neighbouring schools were keen, if

friendly, rivals. That rivalry they could never forget in whatever circumstances they met.

To be sure, it was a cheery argument. It was an argument, indeed, punctuated by many gusts of laughter. For Whitechester and Cliff House, if disagreeing, always had a most wholesome admiration for each other.

It was, to say the least, rather hard to believe in ghosts that afternoon, even though it was the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and soft snow was falling on the slopes of the hill outside. A great fire roared up the chimney. The room itself, bright with the gay decorations hung up in honour of the festive season, with its modern appointments, exuded an atmosphere which had not the faintest connection with anything so legendary as ghosts.

Even plump, imaginative Bessie Bunter, who normally would have been starting with apprehension at the very mention of that dread word, was sublimely unconcerned.

"Then supposing," Hazel Brent, another Whitechester girl, asked thoughtfully, "just supposing a ghost appeared in this room at this moment?"

"Supposing fiddlesticks!" Tomboy Clara Trevlyn sniffed. "We shouldn't be taken-in. But it would be fun," she added, "to watch you scared Whitechester kids run!" And there was a chuckle at the hit thus scored at Whitechester's expense.

Hazel shook her head. Rather oddly she stared at the door. Babs, meeting the stare, winked at Gemma Carstairs, who winked at Leila Carroll, and Leila passed on the wink to Marjorie Hazeldene, Gwen Cook, and Janet Jordan, who were seated together at the farther side of the fire. A few other girls, belonging neither to Whitechester nor to Cliff House, but just guests along with the two hundred other guests with which Pellabay Castle Hotel was crammed this Christmas, smiled.

For they, like everybody else, were enjoying this rivalry between the two schools, and, perhaps, they were rather enjoying, for once, seeing Whitechester get the worst of the argument.

For up to now it could not be said that Cliff House had scored at Whitechester's expense. Two days ago Queenie Pelham, Londa Gay, Eve Clavering, and Hazel Brent, had arrived at Pellabay Castle, bringing with them more than a dozen of their school associates.

Cliff House, under the leadership of Babs, had been outnumbered, and, when the old rivalry had started up, more than outclassed. Last night there had been a pillow-fight. Whitechester undoubtedly had been victorious in that. This morning there had been a battle in the snow, and, although Cliff House had two lusty recruits in Dot and Dorette

Eldridge, twins who were staying at the hotel, they had been defeated in that.

"Well, just supposing," Queenie pressed again. "Supposing that door came open? Supposing suddenly the lights went out?"

"But the doors are not coming open, and the lights, sweet believer in fairy tales, are not going out!" Jemima Cartairs chortled. "And if— Hi! Whoa!" she cried, jumping up.

For suddenly, without warning, the lights did go out. And suddenly, while everybody twisted round in utter consternation, there came a bang at the door, followed by a shrieking howl, and through that door—

"Wow! Wow!" yelled Bessie Bunter. "I'm haunted! It's a gig-ghost! Sus-savie me, somebody!"

"Mum-my hat!" stuttered Clara Trevlyn.

And for an instant everybody stood transfixed. Nothing now illuminated the room save the firelight. In its red glow a figure had appeared in the door—a strange figure, dressed in gleaming white, holding both its shrouded arms above its head.

While everybody, struck into speechless stupefaction, watched, and Bessie quaveringly hid her face in the chair, the ghost spoke in a sepulchral voice.

"Listen, all ye in this room! I am the ghost of Christmas. I come to haunt the wooden heads of Cliff House, and all you others who might not believe in me. There is one foolish, big-footed human among you who goes by the name of Clara Trevlyn— Oh, help! I can't keep it up!" And the voice burst out laughing. "Ha, ha, ha! Who isn't afraid of ghosts now, Cliff House?"

And suddenly the lights went up, and the sheet-draped figure standing in front of them went off into a peal of mirth as it met the startled gazes of the girls fastened upon it.

And simultaneously, from Barbara Redfern:

"Linda! You spoofer!"

For Linda Gay, the madcap leader of the Whitechester contingent, it was.

"Linda!" shrieked Mabel Lynn.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Whitechester girls.

"Who isn't afraid of ghosts?" Linda Gay chortled.

"You—you—you—" gasped Clara Trevlyn; and realising, too late, that she and her chums had slipped headlong into the trap prepared by their Whitechester rivals, leapt up. "My hat! Let me get at you!" she roared.

"Catch me first!" Linda taunted.

Her challenge was taken up. Instantly half a dozen of the chums—Babs, Clara, Mabel, Jemima, Leila, and Gwen Cook—made a rush at the figure.

"Bet you don't catch her!" chuckled Hazel Brent. "Go it, Linda!" Jemima yelled. "Tally-ho, Cliff House!" Jemima yelled. "Up guards and at 'em!"

Towards the door in a body they swept; but Linda had a start. Laughing still, she twisted round, slamming the door shut. Clara, the first to reach it, tore it open with a force that almost unhinged it.

"Come on! There she is!" she cried excitedly.

The hunt was up then. Not till the prank-playing Linda was caught and made to pay for that joke would Cliff House's honour be satisfied.

"There she is! Up the stairs!" yelled Babs. "Come on, Mabs! Come on, girls!"

"We've got her, Babs!" cried Mabel Lynn.

But they hadn't—not by a long, long way. Linda, then, was half-way up the stairs which led to the great gallery

which overlooked the ball-room—that gallery, a relic of the time when the renovated Pellabay Castle had been a Norman stronghold, and which, through the dark, dim ages of the past, had witnessed many a feat in the now transformed hall below. Now Linda had reached the top of the gallery; now was flying along it.

"Come on!"

Up the stairs Babs & Co. pelted. Linda disappeared through the door which led to the ancient west wing. That wing, with its secret passages still intact, had been left very much alone, for Miss Grace Trevlyn, who owned the hotel, while renovating up-to-the-minute for the comfort and convenience of her guests in many respects, had been careful not to interfere with the characteristics of the old place, and seeing that the west wing was not required for hotel purposes, had left it practically untouched.

Through the door they pelted, pausing, however, as they found themselves in a dim, hall-like sort of place, supported by stout stone pillars, its roof upheld by a series of arches. From this hall there ran off half a dozen corridors in various directions, and for the moment at least, there was no sign of Linda.

"Now, which way?" panted Babs. "This—"

"Wait a minute! Take a corridor each," Clara said. "She can't get far—all these rooms lead upwards! The first to spot her set up a yell! But quickly!"

Indeed the strangest of ghosts! Frightening one moment, helpful the next—a spectral figure that amazes, baffles and intrigues Barbara Redfern & Co. time and time again.

she added, and without troubling to find out how the suggestion was received, plunged into the passage on her left-hand side.

She did not trouble to reflect that this west wing was the wing reputed to be haunted. The only ghost Clara had any time or any use for then was Linda Gay. Along the corridor she sped.

But Linda? Where was she?

She came to a flight of winding stairs. If Linda had come this way she must have taken them. And hark! What was that?

Above her came a sound.

Clara gurgled. What luck!

With a grin on her face she rushed up the next flight of stairs. Now she had reached another corridor—a long, wide one, supported by a series of Gothic arches. Rather taken aback, she peered along it.

Certainly no sign of Linda. Then where—but wait, what was that?

For suddenly, half way along the corridor, a beam of light splashed across the floor.

Clara glowed then. So Linda had dodged into one of the disused rooms hereabouts? Now there should be no escape!

Chuckling, she advanced along the corridor. Now she had reached the opening through which the light appeared. With a laugh on her lips she mounted the four steps into the room—and then, suddenly thunder-struck, pulled up.

What was this?

The west wing, she knew, was never used. What furniture it contained—relics of ages long past—was only un-

covered to be dusted every now and again. But this room was bright, and snug, and cosy. This room, so far from suggesting neglect, looked as if it was in constant use.

The old table was covered with a white cloth. In the middle of it stood an upright candelabra, containing six candles, all burning steadily. The table itself, filled with gleaming cutlery and shimmering glasses, was set for a meal.

"Well, mum-my only summer bonnet!" Clara gasped.

Dimly she observed, in the darkness that grew in one corner of the room, a panelled door, and that door, even as she spotted it, was opening. Then she heard a voice.

"Ah, so you have come—at last!" it said. "A merry Christmas!"

"Eh?" Clara gasped. She did not recognise that voice, low and throatily kind, like the voice of an old, or oldish, man. And then she stiffened and her eyes glimmered as, in the opening of the door, she saw a figure—a figure dressed all in white. Linda again, was it? Linda playing some new and artful dodge. But this time—

"You—you rotten spoofer!" Clara cried, and made a dive across the room.

Quick as she moved, the figure moved quicker. She saw it hastily draw back hastily drawing the door to at the same time. Clara reached it and banged on it with the palms of her hand.

"Linda, you washout! Come out! I've caught you this time!"

A pause. Then the voice behind the

door spoke again. This time its tones were stern.

"Young woman," it announced, "no right have you here! Begone! I tell you—begone this instant, lest ill befall you!"

And as Clara paused—really, if that was Linda, she was disguising her voice jolly well—there came a puffing sound, and without warning the candles went out.

Clara stared round. Blackness then. For the first time she had a feeling that perhaps all was not well. Now she came to think of it, the figure she had seen was taller than Linda, and Linda, whatever might be her skill as a prankster, could never disguise her voice like that. Uncertain, shaken, she blinked in the blackness.

Then—

"Begone!" the voice boomed again.

"But—look here—" Clara cried.

"Go!"

And suddenly a cold hand touched Clara's neck; she felt an icy breath on her face. Then, and not till then, did she sense that the presence in which she felt herself was not that of Linda but of some other—other thing. And suddenly she had no desire whatever to catch Linda; no desire at all to linger.

Shaking, she stumbled back into the corridor.

"Oh, my hat! What—" she gasped, then spinning round, jumped. What was this? Was she dreaming?

For where, a moment before, had been an opening leading to a candle-lit room, all spread for a Christmas meal, now confronted her a blank, un hospitable stone wall!

Face at the Window!



IN utter, dazed consternation, Clara stared. There were not many girls among the three hundred in Cliff House School who had the iron nerve of Tomboy Clara. There was not one who had more pluck or who was more hard headed. But in that moment Clara herself was as shaken and as scared as any Second Form fag might be in similar circumstances. What was the mystery of the room into which she had so strangely blundered? Who—or what—was the owner of the gruff voice and the icy fingers?

For a moment she struggled with the fear which was on her. Here, a moment ago, had been a door. Now, in the same place, was a blank wall. Had she imagined it?

Then, rallying her, came a shout. It was the voice of Barbara Redfern calling from below.

"Cla-ar-ra!"

"Babs!" cried Clara almost joyfully. "Where are you?"

"I—I'm here!" And Clara gulped, trying to swallow the tremor she knew betrayed itself in her voice, fighting with herself then to regain her self-control. "I—I'm coming!" she answered.

And with a haste she tried to feel was more of courtesy to her chums than due to her own upset state of nerves, she hurried along the corridor.

By the time she had joined Babs & Co. in the big hall outside the gallery, she was feeling better.

"Well," Babs demanded, "did you find her?"

"N-no," stammered Clara. "Did you?"

"Well, does it look as if we did, ninny?" golden-haired Mabel Lynn retorted. "But, my hat, what's the matter with you? You look as white as a sheet! Seen a ghost, or something?" "Gig-ghost!" stammered Clara. "Oh crumbs! Was that it?"

"Was that what, forsooth?" Jemima Carstairs asked, and she ceased polishing her monocle to stare curiously at the Tomboy.

"Nothing. But—but—" And Clara, with a shudder, looked back along the passage. "Oh rats, I don't know!" she added gruffly. "I—I saw something—I heard something. I went into a room—"

"What for?"

"Be-cause I thought I saw Linda in there."

"And she wasn't?" Gwen Cook asked.

"Nun-no! But—but— Oh, my aunt!" And Clara shook her head. "I went into this room—it was lighted by candles, with a meal all set for two—"

"What? In the west wing?" Babs cried incredulously.

"Yes. And—and then a voice spoke to me, wishing me a merry Christmas. And—and—" And Clara, encouraged by the curious, if bewildered stares of her chums, plunged into the story. "Who it was or what it was, I don't know," she finished. "But—but it gave me a start, I can tell you!"

"And a start, I figure, that wants some beating!" Leila Carroll chuckled. "Now I'll tell you one, I guess! There was once a fisherman—"

Clara glanced at the American junior. "Idiot! I'm not telling you a funny story! This happened!"

"Tough!" Jemima sighed. "Too jolly tough! I warned you, comrade, what would happen if you had that second helping of roly-poly for lunch.

But, as usual, Uncle Jimmy's Solomon-like wisdom was wasted on the desert air! All the same, a pretty good spoofer, our Linda, to lead you to seeing pictures like that!"

"I tell you," Clara hooted, red faced, "it actually happened!"

"Says you!" Leila grinned.

"Says me!" Clara glowered.

"Well, sure doesn't add up, to my way of thinking!" Leila said. "First a door, then a blank wall. First a 'merry Christmas,' then a 'begone!' Poor old Clara!" she chuckled.

"Bother it! You're a lot of chumps!" Clara sniffed.

Babs frowned. Curiously, she glanced at her chum. The Tomboy's story required some swallowing, but she knew Clara was not the type to imagine things she had not experienced.

"It might," she suggested, "have been one of the secret rooms. I believe this west wing is honeycombed with them."

"And honeycombed, too, with ghosts who get feeds ready for you and then

TWA-A-A-ANG!

A bowstring throbs, an arrow wings silently on its way, embedding itself in the castle wall. Eagerly, the young Lady Fayre reaches out for the note attached to that arrow. It is from Robin Hood!

YOU will meet Robin Hood—and the young Lady Fayre, of course—the week after next in the first of a series of stories which, though featuring a much-lauded character, are quite unlike anything which have ever appeared before.

chuck you out!" Mabs chuckled. "Oh stuff, it must have been Linda! She was just playing another prank on you!"

Clara compressed her lips. "All right, then. If it was Linda, Linda must still jolly well be there!" she snorted. "And if she is there, and if it is a prank—well, hold me back by my strong right arm when I meet her, somebody! Come on!"

And she led the way, the chums, still chuckling, following her.

"Well, here we are," she said, reaching the deserted passage at last.

"Here we are, in truth!" Jemima Carstairs beamed. "But where, my fair sweetheart, is the door which is not a door? Which reminds me." Jemima went on, in her usual burbling fashion, "of a very natty old conundrum I learned in my youth—"

But nobody wanted to hear about the natty conundrum Jemima had learned in her youth. They were all staring at Clara.

"Well, there's certainly no door in this passage," Babs said. "Whereabouts was it, Clara?"

"Well—er—some-somewhere about here," Clara answered, blinking, not at all certain now she had re-arrived at the spot.

"Sounds helpful, I must say," Gwen Cook said. "Sure this is the right passage, Clara?"

"Rats! Of course I'm sure!" Clara answered crossly. "In any case, as it was a secret door, you don't expect it to be yawning open now, do you? Let's tap, or something. We'll jolly well soon see if the wall's hollow."

"But what," Mabs objected, "can we tap with?"

"Well, there's Clara's head," Jemima said thoughtfully. "Frightfully useful for such purposes, what? I mean to say, with hollowness calling to hollow-ness—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But they did not use Clara's head, for, as luck would have it, Gwen Cook spotted a dust-pan and brush left behind by some careless maid. Using the back of the brush as a sort of hammer, Jemima went along the wall, tapping solemnly, while the other girls, chuckling, made do with their knuckles.

But no ringing sound anywhere suggested that there might be a hollow place behind that wall.

"It was just spoof!" Mabs said. "B-r-r-r! Come on, it's getting jolly draughtily up here! Poor old Clara!" she chuckled. "Linda certainly *did* lead you a dance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Clara glowered.

"It's all very well you chumps laughing!" she protested. "But there was a secret room—there was a ghost!"

But the chums just grinned. If they had been sceptical before, they were convinced now, and Clara saw an uncomfortable period of leg-pulling ahead of her. But even she was not feeling too certain about things now. Looking back, her experience did seem rather in the nature of a dream.

In ruffled, red-eared silence, she accompanied her chuckling chums downstairs. Had she seen, heard, and felt all those things, or had it really just been some rather miraculous spoof of Linda's? She was soon to know. For as they stepped into the narrow gallery there was a cheery hail from the ball-room floor below and a howl of laughter greeted them.

"Well," Linda Gay cried from among the crowd of Whitechester girls, "did you find me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It wasn't for the want of trying, that's a cert!" Queenie Pelham chuckled. "They've been gone half an hour."

"Who crows now?" chortled Hazel Brent.

"Whitechester!"

The Cliff House chums breathed deeply. Down the stairs they went. Linda, her fingers crossed, laughed merrily and backed away as they advanced upon her.

"Pax!" she cried. "Joke over now! Pretty interesting rummage you had in the west wing, I'll say—and Clara scooting up those stairs—Ha, ha, ha! You never noticed me crouching in the alcove at the bottom of the stairs, did you, Clara?"

"You spoofer!" Clara snorted. "So you were there?"

"Oh, I was there—yes!" Linda laughed again. "Fun, wasn't it? Oh, help! If you could have seen the look on your face when you came haring along the passage!"

Clara snorted.

"You mean you tricked me into that room?"

"Room?" Linda blinked. "I never went into a room! I never," she said, while Clara stared, "even went up the stairs! I hung back at the bottom of the first flight, and when you came tearing along like a fire-engine and paused, I chucked a button up the stairs just

to lead you on! But what room are you talking about?"

"Oh rats!" said Clara crossly.

And she bit her lip. For, obviously, the ghost she had seen was not Linda. All the same—

"Er—excuse me, girls!" a voice put in behind her, and Miss Grace Trevlyn, her aunt, and owner of the hotel, came hurrying forward. "Clara! Barbara! I wonder if you'd mind coming into the vestibule for a moment?"

"Why, of course not!" Babs and Clara said at once.

"Because," Miss Trevlyn said, "I want to introduce you to a newcomer, a girl—Selma Gideon her name is—and she's just arrived with her uncle—a Mr. Charles Withers. I feel rather sorry for her; she does look so sad and lonely, and I'm sure it would buck her up no end to meet you. She and her grandfather and this same uncle spent their summer holiday here."

"But why the sadness and loneliness?" Clara asked.

"Because," Miss Trevlyn answered, "Selma is very, very much attached to her grandfather—a solicitor, I believe. Well, the grandfather hasn't arrived—called abroad on business suddenly, I gather. But here she is," she beamed, leading the way into the vestibule. "Selma, my dear, this is my niece, Clara, and her friend, Barbara Redfern!"

"Merry Christmas!" Clara beamed.

And they shook hands with the girl—a girl slightly older than themselves, very pretty, whose face at this moment wore a rather wistful expression, however. A nice girl. Both Babs and Clara took to her instinctively.

"And this," Miss Trevlyn went on, "is her uncle, Mr. Charles Withers!"

"And a merry Christmas to you, sir!" Babs laughed.

"A compliment," Mr. Withers murmured—he was a youngish uncle, not more than thirty, with dark eyes and a scrub of black moustache which added to the undoubted attractiveness of his handsome face—"which is very heartily reciprocated, Miss Redfern—or shall I call you Barbara? Many more girls like you stopping in the hotel?" he added to Clara.

"About thirty," Clara grinned. "Which reminds me. I say, Selma, bags you for the Cliff House side!" she added gleefully; and then, while Mr.

Withers talked to her aunt, went on to explain the rivalry which had broken out at the hotel.

Selma laughed.

"Oh, it sounds fun!" she cried, and for the first time her eyes sparkled. "And, of course, I'm on your side—from this minute! Oh, yes, I'd love to help, really!" she cried, with eagerness.

"Just ask me anything you want me to do, and I'll do my best to do it! I'm so glad that I've met you! To—tell you the truth, I was feeling just a wee bit down in the mouth—"

"And at Christmas?" Babs chided.

"Oh, Selma, tut!"

Selma gulped a little.

"Oh, yes, I—I suppose I'm silly!" she said. "But—well, it's rather difficult to explain. You see, grandpa and I and uncle had made all sorts of lovely arrangements for Christmas at the hotel, and—and we were all so looking forward to it. Then, at the last moment, grandpa had some beastly business call which sent him flying off to Italy!"

"Business," Clara said firmly, "ought to be abolished at Christmas!"

"That's what I felt," Selma answered.

"Because, you see, grandpa and I have never, never missed a Christmas together in all our lives before, and I—I—well, perhaps you understand! Apart from that," she added, a cloud in her eyes, "I haven't heard from him since he went off, and—and I can't just help getting a little worried, because the first thing he would have done normally was to write to me as soon as he reached his destination. Uncle, there wasn't a letter this morning, was there?" she asked hopefully.

"Nothing, my dear—nothing!" Mr. Withers shook his head. "But he'll write, never fear. You know very well he wouldn't have gone off in such a rush without saying good-bye if the business hadn't been terribly urgent. He's probably so up to the neck in it that he hasn't even had an opportunity. Still, here we are," he added jovially. "Try to forget it, Selma, and enjoy yourself. Miss Trevlyn, may we see our rooms, please? Selma, you can join your friends later on."

"Nice girl!" Babs said, when she had gone.

"Jolly nice!" Clara heartily enthused.

"Tough luck, her grandpop not being with her! You can see she thinks no

end of him. Still, what about tea? We'll save a place for Selma at our table."

And off they scampered into the lounge, where the rest of the Cliff House chums were already having tea.

Selma, looking very pretty in a white dress, presently joined them, introductions were effected, and in a few minutes they were all chatting and talking as if they had been friends for years.

By common consent, nothing was said in front of Selma about Clara's adventure in the secret room, and for that reason, at least, Clara was grateful for Selma's presence, knowing very well that later on the leg-pulling would break out with redoubled vigour. The talk was all of Christmas.

And then, in the middle of it, there came a startled, choked exclamation from Bessie Bunter.

"Oh crumbs! Lul-look!" cried the plump duffer, in sudden terror.

She was staring with round eyes towards the window, the sandwich she had been in the act of conveying to her mouth suspended in her shaking hand. As one the chums turned—just in time to see a vague, white, fluttering movement; just in time, for one heart-stopping instant, to observe the white old man's face which peered in. Then, before any of them could move, the face had vanished again.

"The gig-ghost!" gulped Bessie. "Oh crumbs!"

"Ghost, my foot!" Babs said, and jumped up.

She ran to the window, flung it open, and stared out in the snowbound night. But of the strange man there was no sign.

"Gone!" she said.

"B-r-r-r!" Janet Jordan shivered. "Close that window! Anyway, what was it?"

"Nun-nothing!" Selma Gideon said. But she said it shakily. She said it with such a forced and faltering smile on her lips that Babs looked at her curiously. "It—it was only a—white cat or—something!" she stammered.

"Well, it wasn't a cat! It was a ghost!" Bessie persisted. "I saw it first—an old man with staring eyes! He looked ghastly, you know! Oh d-d-d-d-d! I sus-say, Marjorie, d-draw the blinds, will you?"



"IT'S all very well you chumps laughing," Clara protested, "but there was a secret room!" The chums, tapping in vain for sign of that secret room, chuckled at Clara's bewilderment.

"It's just spoofer Linda Gay again, I guess!" Leila Carroll breathed.

But it wasn't Linda. For at that moment Linda herself came in. And most certainly it wasn't a white cat, because, brief though their glimpse of the face had been, there was no doubt as to its human form. The chums regarded each other, rather puzzled and rather confounded, but only two of them were looking shaken. One was Clara.

For Clara had also seen that face. And if Clara wasn't a Dutchman, that face was the face of her phantom!

Still, she wasn't saying anything—especially with Linda here. Clara's most feverish desire at this moment was for her chums to forget that incident.

The other girl who looked shaken was Selma Gideon.

Babs, resuming her seat, saw the expression on her face now—an expression which seemed to express fear and bewilderment. Why should Selma look so utterly unnerved?

"Selma——" she whispered.

Selma flashed her frightened sort of smile.

"You—you aren't afraid?" asked Babs.

"Afraid?" Selma sharply glanced at her. "Afraid? No—no!" she said uncertainly. "But that—that face—— And she shook her head. "I—I seemed to—to—— Babs, did—did you recognise it?"

"I hardly saw it," Babs answered. "All I saw was a face—but what sort of a face I couldn't tell you. It was certainly no one—I know. But cheer up!" she added comfortingly. "It was probably only some silly practical joker with a mask on, perhaps. Linda, I suppose none of your empty heads have been playing ghosts again?"

"Being Whitechester and not Cliff House, we never play the same joke twice!" came Linda's bland retort. "You see, we happen to have ideas at Whitechester. Here, I say, who's slipped this beastly roll into my pocket?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Linda glared as the laugh was turned against her, and in the middle of it Selma's debonaire uncle, Charles Withers, came in.

"Excuse the interruption," he said gallantly. "I just came to see how Selma was getting on. Bit of a joke on, eh?" he added, grinning. "Well, don't let me spoil it. Selma, my dear girl——"

Selma rose. Babs did not miss the half-frightened look she shot towards the now blind-covered window.

"Uncle, can—can I speak to you?" she asked a little unsteadily.

"Why, of course! Will you excuse my niece, girls?"

"Of course!"

And Selma went out. In the room next door they heard her voice muttering in agitated accents.

And then suddenly they heard her uncle burst into a laugh.

"My dear Selma, what nonsense! Put it out of your mind, my dear! It's impossible—just utterly impossible—of course! You were just imagining things!"

The voices died again into a mutter. The chums, a little uneasily conscious that they were listening to something not intended for their ears, coughed. But Babs wondered. Selma, obviously, had been telling her uncle about the face at the window. Selma, for some reason, seemed to be agitated because of that face.

Why?

Mystery of a Message!



BUt despite her uncle's reassurance to whatever question she had asked him, Selma

Gideon did not return to her normal spirits for some time. She seemed restless, uneasy, Babs thought. And that in spite of the fun which waxed fast and furious after tea, and in spite of the part she played in it.

For Cliff House, at last, began to get some of its own back on Whitechester. Challenged by Whitechester to a table tennis tournament, Selma was pressed into the Cliff House side. Whatever shortcomings Selma might possess in other respects, she was certainly a champion when it came to table tennis. Whitechester, for once, bit the dust.

"Hah!" Clara sniffed. "Just shows you what we can do when we try it! This morning we were only playing with you——"

"As," Hazel Brent giggled, "we were playing with you this afternoon! Who didn't catch the ghost?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All right," Babs said. "All right. Just you wait. If you jolly well think you're getting away with that, just watch out! Well, having beaten them at table tennis, what else can we show them?" she added. "Any ideas for games?"

"I know!" Linda cried.

"What?"

"Let's have a competition for pulling the funniest face! But no!" she added, with a frown. "Better not! Cliff House, of course, would win it hands down—and without trying!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But in any case, there was no time for more games or competitions then. For at that moment Miss Trevlyn came in to remind them that dinner would be served in half an hour's time—and that meant a hurried scamper at once to bed-rooms to change. Cliff House, for its own part, was content for the time being to rest upon its laurels. En route up the stairs, Babs caught Selma's arm.

"Enjoying it, Selma?" she asked softly.

"Oh, y-yes!" Selma added uncertainly.

"You're worried about something?" Babs suggested.

Selma bit her lip.

"No, not—not really. I—I'm just a goose!" she said with a shamed little laugh. "Sometimes you do get rather silly ideas in your head, don't you?"

"Such as what?"

But Selma shook her head, not replying to that question. She seemed just a little relieved, indeed, when her bedroom door was reached, to say au revoir to Babs, and Babs went on into her own room pondering the girl's evasiveness. What silly idea had Selma got into her head? she wondered. And if it was a silly idea, why was it worrying her?

Babs gave it up. She did not want to be inquisitive. At the same time, she did—very much—want Selma to be happy, especially as this was the first Christmas she had ever spent away from the grandfather she loved so much.

With her chums she dressed, putting on her new oyster silk. Very pretty Babs looked in that dress, and so did Mabs in her new dark green, which made a glorious contrast to her cream colouring and her glistening gold hair. Even Clara that Christmas Eve looked distinguished, for Clara had put on for

the first time her new turquoise blue taffeta.

They went downstairs again, there to meet Selma. She jumped as she saw Clara, and Clara jumped as she saw her, and then both went off into a gurgle of laughter.

"My hat, your frock!"

"And yours!" Selma exclaimed.

For the two frocks in colour, in cut, in material, were practically identical.

"Great minds," Clara grinned, "think alike, obviously! Although," she added, "you and I are about the same height and colouring. This is a copy of a model from Langs in London. Where did you get yours?"

"This," Selma smiled, "is a copy of a model from Langs in Exeter—the same firm, but a different branch. My grandpa bought it for me. But I say, it does suit you!" she added admiringly.

"And yours!" Clara laughed. "But come over here, Selma. Take this seat next to me!"

Selma laughed again. Babs laughed, pleased to see her happy.

Clara sat down; then, with a cry, jumped up, as from her seat came a shrill "me-ow!"

"My hat! There—there's a kitten or something under the cushion!" she cried.

She swept the cushion aside, and up from Whitechester went a howl of laughter as the kitten was revealed to be nothing more harmful than a concertina sort of pad which gave out the meowing sound when depressed.

"All right, ninnies!" Clara snorted.

"Just wait!" she added with a sniff, and sitting down took up her roll, making to break it in half. "Here, I say, this is jolly stale!" she said indignantly. "I can't break it!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" tittered Eve Clavering.

"Well, what is there to laugh at?" Clara glared.

"Ho, ho, ho! You're not sitting where I am!" Eve gurgled.

Clara sniffed. She made a really vicious attack on the roll. But the roll, though it bent, did not break, and suddenly Clara had a glimmering of suspicion. She put it back.

"I see, a rubber roll!" she said.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A rubber roll it was. Whitechester gurgled. But they gurgled still louder when, during the soup course, a toy frog came jumping across the table, to land, with a splash, right into Bessie Bunter's soup. And they laughed again when an astonished Babs, reaching for the mustard, picked up the pot, leaving the mustard itself on the tablecloth, the mustard turning out to be a solid block of some yellow substance, which, of course, was just another practical joke.

Even Cliff House were forced to laugh at the jokes against themselves, and the rest of the table was in an uproar. Too late Babs regretted that she had not brought a box of similar jokes along, but Whitechester should pay—and pay with a vengeance.

A jolly meal it was, a happy meal, though Babs noticed, with a slightly anxious frown, that Selma, for all she was in the centre of the fun, did not seem to be enjoying it.

But at last it was over, and then came a new excitement in the shape of the post—late to-night because of the difficulties the snowstorm, during the day, had made in maintaining communications. They all had letters, some of them a sheaf of greeting cards, and there was an imposing-looking cable-gram for Selma.

Selma read it. And at once, to Babs'

astonishment, she burst into an excited, happy laugh.

"Babs!" she cried.

"Yes, old thing?"

"Look!" Selma said, and looked as if the greatest thing in the world had happened to her. "This is from my grandfather—in Italy."

Babs smiled as she read the cable-gram.

"Greetings to my dearest granddaughter," it said. "Regret that I shall not be with you. All my love and the very, very merriest of Christmases.—GRANDFATHER."

"It's that," Selma said, "which has been worrying me, Babs. You see, he went away so suddenly—without my even seeing him. All he left was a verbal message with uncle, who was with him when the business call came. And—and"—she gave a shaky little laugh—"I—I suppose it's been on my mind all the time, making me think the silliest things."

"But it's all right now?" Babs asked.

"Oh, Babs, yes! I—I feel ever so much happier. Come on," she added eagerly, "let's go and do something!"

And, with a zest and lightheartedness that Babs would not have believed possible an hour before, she threw herself into the fun.

And such fun there was, too! Such games and such pranks! What howls during a game of blind man's buff when Gwen Cook lured blindfolded Linda Gay to embrace a cloaked but marble bust of Julius Caesar, who Linda shriekingly declared was Barbara Redfern! And what a roar when Bessie, exercising her ventriloquial powers, sent Hazel Brent frantically swiping at an imaginary bee.

And then, after that, the band in the ball-room struck up, and at Babs' suggestion a mistletoe dance was held. The dance was an old and tried favourite of Babs' invention, and always at Christmas parties immensely popular. Practically every light in the gleaming ball-room was decorated with mistletoe, and when the band, at a given signal, stopped playing all couples caught under the mistletoe were supposed to honour the event in the usual Christmas way.

It was always great fun. Fun from the first eager scramble of the boys and young men to grab partners; more fun in the scrambling for positions near mistletoe sprigs; and greater fun and many girlish screams when, immediately the band stopped playing, all lights went out for five seconds in order to hide the blushes of the caught couples.

So off the instant the dance started they went, Clara floating away in the arms of Selma's uncle, Selma herself pounced upon by a good-looking boy from Pellabay Village. Babs herself took no part in the dance, for, as Babs was M.C.-ing, it was her duty to give the signals to the conductor of the band. With mischief in her eyes, she watched Clara. She saw Clara just gliding under a bunch of mistletoe. Then—

"Right!" Babs said, and nodded to the conductor. "Lights!" she called.

And out went the lights. And what screams went up out of the darkness then! Then suddenly a window was thrown open near Babs; a gust of icy wind and a scurry of snowflakes flew in. Up went the lights again, and Babs, rather annoyed by rushing to the window, banged it to. Really, somebody should have seen that the catches were secure!

She paused as, beneath the window, she saw an envelope. That envelope had certainly not been there before. She picked it up.

Printed on the front of the envelope in block capitals were the words:

"PRIVATE.

"TO BE DELIVERED TO THE GIRL IN THE BLUE DRESS."

Babs blinked. Then she understood why the window had blown open—no fault of the catches, but the fault of the unknown writer of this letter who had

were standing together then, and Mr. Withers, a smile on his face, was bowing gallantly before his partner.

"I say," Babs said. "Clara—Selma, were either of you expecting a letter?"

"Why, no!" Clara said.

"Certainly not!" Selma agreed.

"Well, what do you make of this?"

They both stared as she showed it to them. Clara shook her head.

"Well, obviously it's intended for one

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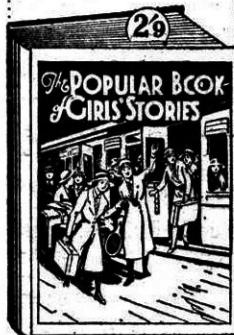
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chosen this mysterious way of delivering it. But the girl in the blue dress. Who was that?

She stared round as the dancers went on. Only two girls in blue dresses were present—Clara and Selma. Intended, obviously, for one of them—but which?

She waited till the dance came to an end. Then she crossed the floor. Selma and Clara, both red-faced and laughing,

of us," she said. "I say, what a lark! But wait a minute," she added. "This is Whitechester's doing, perhaps. Linda—I say, Linda!" she called to that girl. And Linda, with a smile, came hurrying towards them. "Do you know anything about this?"

But Linda didn't know anything about it.

"Well, who owns it?" Clara asked.

"Oh, my hat! What the dickens does it mean? Well, here goes!" she added, with a grin, and, too excitedly intrigued now to wait for further discussion, slipped her finger under the flap. She drew out a sheet of paper, on which again was a line of writing in block capitals.

"Meet me on the fourth landing in the west wing at 9 p.m.," she read out. "My hat! But come alone—please."

"That's where I—"

Clara cried. "That's where I—"

And then, receiving a sudden warning look from Babs, she bit her lip, realising that she was on the point of blurting out her adventure of the afternoon. "Ahem! Well, it seems we're no forrader," she added. "Which one of us was it intended for?"

Charles-Withers frowned.

"I think," he said, "the best thing would be to ignore it. Don't you, Barbara?"

"Oh, but, uncle!" Selma protestingly broke in. "No, please! It's absolutely thrilling! Look here, I'll go!"

"No, you jolly well won't; I will!" Clara said firmly.

"I really think—" Charles Withers said again.

But no one was listening to him now. Everybody in the group felt thrilled and eager. They all felt that it would be a crying shame to throw away the opportunity of such a gorgeously romantic adventure. It was Babs who made the suggestion.

"Well, don't argue, for goodness' sake!" she cried. "It's nearly nine o'clock now. Look here, what about tossing for it?"

"Good idea!"

Clara, with a grin, fished out a coin, flipping it in the air.

"Tails!" called Selma, and then gave a whoop. "Tails it is! I go!" she cried.

"Selma—no!" And suddenly Charles Withers' hand was on her arm.

"Selma—no!" he repeated firmly. "I am sorry, my dear, but you do not know what this may lead to. You are not going!"

"But, uncle—"

"I am sorry. Selma—no!" he said, and there was that in his voice which brooked no protest. "And I advise you, Clara, not to go, either," he warned.

Clara grinned.

"But I," she said cheerfully, "am going! Dash it, we can't both fail the writer of the message! It will be fun, anyway, to see who it is and what she wants—that is, if it is a she. I'm off, kids!"

And Clara, before anyone could say a word more, was flying up the gallery.

She was tingling then. Her eyes were alight. Anything that promised adventure was meat and drink to Clara Trevlyn, and perhaps there was hope in her heart that this might explain the mystery of the old man in white which had baffled her all the afternoon. All the same, she gave a little shiver when, plunging through the door at the end of the gallery, she found herself alone in the haunted west wing.

Too late she regretted that she had not brought a torch with her.

For here it was dark. This wing, though fitted with electricity, only used the current on spring-cleaning occasions, and the switch she pressed answered with no gleam of light. Clara shivered.

But she was going to see it through. Nobody was going to scare her this time.

Up, up she climbed. Now she halted under the faint glimmer of light which filtered through the gloomy window on the circular landing of the fourth floor.

Nobody was here. No sound except the howling of the wind outside and the soft fluff-fluff of snowflakes being blown against the tiny panes. Nine o'clock, the message had said. It must be about five to nine now.

Clara, not without uneasiness, settled herself by the window to wait.

Then suddenly along the corridor there came the soft swish-swish of slipper-shod feet. Almost with a gasp she spun round, peering into the darkness. She saw nothing.

Nearer, nearer, the steps came. Then they halted. Two or three yards ahead of her Clara made out a dim, dark figure in the gloom, with a blackish-grey patch where its face should have been. A deep, sepulchral voice spoke.

"So," it said, "you have come! Thank you! Follow me!"

"But who are you?" Clara breathed.

"Follow me!" the voice repeated.

Clara hesitated. She wasn't at all sure, now that the critical moment had arrived, that she was keen on going on with the adventure. But she steeled herself. Not twice in the same day was she going to make a laughing-stock of herself—and a full account of her adventure would be expected of her when she returned. If only it was a bit lighter, though!

The figure shuffled off. Clara followed. Who was the man? Why, now, was he wearing black, instead of the white she had seen him in this afternoon—that is, if this person and her ghost of the secret room were one and the same? Then she noticed that he had paused. There was a sharp click.

"Follow!" the voice commanded again.

Clara braced herself. She guessed now that she was being led into another secret room. Not the one she had visited before, to be sure, for that was on the opposite side of the landing. She stepped in, halting in impenetrable blackness.

"Well, what now?" she asked.

There came a sharp click.

"What now?" Clara repeated, and stood staring, made aware by some inner sense that she was no longer in her ghost's company. "Here, I say, where are you?" she cried, a tremor in her voice.

But her cry was echoed back, and Clara, suddenly frightened, stepped towards the door through which she had entered. Frantically, her heart in her mouth, she flung her hands out before her.

But the questing fingers of those hands only touched cold, hard stone. A feeling of icy chilliness overwhelmed the Tomboy as she realised what had happened.

She was a prisoner—in a room of which she knew neither the secret of getting in or out!

A Very Queer Rescuer!



"Twenty past nine,"

Barbara Redfern said anxiously.

"Look here, I think we ought to go and see what's happened. Clara should be back by now."

The faces of the chums in the ball-room were grave; a little uneasy, too. Twenty past nine—which meant that their tomboy chum had been absent for nearly half an hour.

"Oh, she'll turn up all right," Mabs said.

But she said it with no deep conviction.

"I—I think," Selma Gideon said, shaking her head, "we ought to go. Oh,

there's uncle!" And she called to Charles Withers, who, having vanished in search of a drink just after Clara had disappeared, was now seen hurrying in from the direction of the lounge. "Uncle, I say, you—you haven't seen Clara?" she asked.

His face betrayed consternation.

"What? Hasn't she come back?"

"No."

"I haven't seen her." He gazed towards the stairs. "Silly, silly girl!" he muttered. "I warned her not to go. Still," he added, "we can't just stand around here doing nothing—"

"No," Babs said, and stared at the sleeve of his coat, wondering vaguely how he had come by the red rust stain which now showed vividly near the elbow, but too mentally concerned about her missing chum to think of pointing it out to him then. "We were just suggesting a search party," she added.

"And the sooner we start on it the better."

"A very, very good idea," Withers said quietly. "But I don't think, girls, you had better go alone. If you don't mind, I'll come with you. There may be nothing wrong, but after all, you are only girls."

Babs nodded.

Selma, who had dashed off for a torch, now came back with one.

"Thank you," her uncle said. "Now, who is coming? Barbara, you, I think. Leila, Jemima, Janet, and Gwen. No sense in taking the whole crowd. Selma, you had better stop behind."

"But oh, uncle—" Selma disappointedly pouted.

"Please!" he added. "Come on, girls!"

And putting himself at the head of the search party, he anxiously led the way towards the stairs.

WHILE CLARA— In the darkness of the secret room Clara Trevlyn was bitterly regretting that spirit of high-spirited adventure which had brought her here.

Why the trick had been played on her, what mysterious person had played it, she did not trouble to ask herself in those moments of frantic terror which succeeded the discovery that she was alone in the darkness of some secret room. Frantically she banged upon the wall with her hands; frantically shouted.

"Let me out! Let me out!"

But only the resounding echoes of her own voice gave answer.

Clara gasped. What could she do?

Then, with some hope that she might stumble upon the spring which operated the secret door, she frenziedly ran her hands over the cold stone in front of her. Nothing happened.

With a little sob, Clara desisted at last. Downstairs, she knew Babs & Co. would presently come searching for her, but how were Babs & Co. to find her? Obviously the walls were thick. Obviously her voice would not carry. But surely there must be a window here, some sort of ventilation—something—

She stumbled across the room, only to crash into the wall at the opposite side. Bruised, she staggered back, gasping for breath, feeling her nerves jumping. Then suddenly there came a slithering sound beneath her feet. What was happening there?

No sooner had she asked herself that question than she gave a piercing shriek.

For, treading back, Clara trod on nothing. One desperate effort she made to right herself. Too late! With the shriek still shrilling on her lips, she plunged down—down!

How far Clara did not know. Her out-flung hands, pawing helplessly at the air, touched smooth wall on either side of her. The next second her feet thudded on a floor. Gasping and a little dazed, but otherwise unhurt, she scrambled up.

Where was she now? She looked upward. Blackness there. She felt around. Smooth walls within finger-touch on every side! An icy hand clutched at her heart as she guessed what must have happened—what sort of place she was in.

Dark and grim the age-old secrets of Pellabay Castle—who could tell why this ancient shaft had been constructed? Stories of the torturing of victims now flitted across Clara's mind—here might have been an old well, now dry, into which unfortunate victims had been flung. Upstairs, in the secret room, her foot must have touched the hidden spring which released the mechanism covering the opening of the well.

She raised her voice. "Help!"

No answer. Oh goodness! What now? Frantically she felt round. Could she climb back? But the walls, to her touch, were smooth and slippery. Certainly no foothold there. Clara was beginning to give herself up for lost.

Then—Her heart gave a sudden bound.

For above her had come a click. Now she saw a flickering beam of light. She shouted again. "Help!"

The beam strengthened and a lighted lantern appeared over the opening of the well above. A face stared down at her—a face at the sight of which Clara received a shock.

Very dim, very blurred the face was in the gleam of the lamp. But it was a face she had already seen that day—the face of the old man dressed in white. It was her ghost.

For a moment it stared down, regarding her, and Clara shuddered to see the distance she had fallen.

Then, without a word, it withdrew, leaving the lamp burning on the edge of the well.

"Oh, please—please don't leave me here!" Clara entreated.

There came to her ears the sound of shuffling footsteps, and after a minute those shuffling footsteps returned. Once again the face peered down at her. Suddenly something came whizzing towards her. The ghost spoke.

"It is safe. Come!" he said.

And Clara, catching the thing which snaked down, almost sobbed her thankfulness to find that it was a rope ladder.

The ghost—bless him!—had saved her.

She pulled on it. It was firm. By the aid of the lantern's light, left upon the edge of the well, she began to climb upwards. Unsteady and fumbling she was, but there was a terrific thankfulness in her heart now, a choking sob of gratitude on her lips for that strange ghost which had so oddly treated her on their two encounters. Now she had reached the top; now she was clambering over the rim of the well.

And she blinked. For of the man in white there was no sign.

But the lamp was there, and Clara, looking round, saw that an oblong section of the wall was open. She caught up the lamp. Even as she swung it, stepping towards the secret opening, there came a clatter of footsteps farther along the corridor, followed by Babs' voice.

"Clara—"

And Clara, almost tottering, reeled through the doorway, the lamp in her hand, while Babs & Co., with the

anxious Charles Withers at their head, stopped almost with a shriek as she fell among them.

Sleepwalking Ghost!



"WELL, there's the door, and there's the well," Clara Trevlyn

said grimly. "And there's the rope ladder, proving that the ghost did rescue me, undoing the work of the rotter who trapped me in the first place!"

"You mean," Charles Withers asked incredulously, "there were two of them?"

"I mean that," Clara returned. "Do you think so?" And Withers looked dubious. "It seems to me rather that your first ghost and your

Anyway, let's get out of this place," she added with a shudder. "I've had enough of it for the time being."

And they got out of it, to join the excited crowd of boys and girls downstairs.

For the next half an hour Clara found herself the focus point of attention; found herself weary of answering questions. The one girl, indeed, who did not seem to want to know the whole details of the adventure from A to Z half a dozen times over was Barbara Redfern.

For Babs was looking, with queer and with keen curiosity, at a certain red rust mark on the bodice of Clara's dress, which most certainly had not been there prior to her adventure in the secret room. And she was looking, though he did not see her, at a very similar mark on the sleeve of Charles Withers' coat. And she was remember-



BABS looked at the mystery letter, and then at Clara and Selma. The letter was obviously intended for one of them, for it was addressed "to the girl in the blue dress." But as Clara and Selma wore practically identical dresses—who was to have the letter?

second were one and the same. Possibly he never intended you to fall down that well, but because you did fall down the well he was forced to rescue you."

Clara looked stubborn. "But I tell you," she insisted, "they were two different ghosts."

"How do you know?" Clara shrugged impatiently.

How she accounted for it she could not have told, but there was, to her, something vitally different in the personality of the first unseen stranger in black and her rescuer in white. In any case, if her first assailant had been the man who rescued her, what need for him to have inspected her in the well before rushing off to get that rope ladder? Had he been her assailant, knowing what had happened, he would have come already prepared.

"Well, I do know!" she answered defiantly. "Anyway, I'm jolly grateful to the second one."

"I'm sorry," Withers bit his lip. "I didn't intend to offend you, Clara."

Clara blushed. "Well, I'm sorry, too. I—I didn't mean to be such a blunt old chump.

ing, too, that during the whole of the time which had passed during Clara's absence, Charles Withers had been absent as well.

And queer, almost startling, thoughts were working in Babs' brain. An odd, almost breath-taking, suspicion was stealing upon her. For if the clue of the rust marks and the coincidences of the absences were anything to go by, then the ghost must have been Charles Withers himself!

But because it was a suspicion and only a suspicion, Babs said nothing, not even to her chums. In any case, it was rather difficult to see what could have been Charles Withers' object.

All the same, there was no doubt that Clara had been through a rather terrifying experience. And no doubt, either, in the minds of the girls who heard the story, that the ghost in black and the ghost in white were one and the same—and that, despite Clara's own protestations.

But before long, with the Christmas Eve fun in full swing again, even the ghost was forgotten. Once more there

were games and dancing; more leg-pulling between Cliff House and Whitechester, ending finally in the bursting of a bag of artificial frost by Linda Gay right over the Cliff House party as it stood in a group below the gallery after refreshments. And what a howl from Whitechester then!

"All right," Babs breathed. "Our turn will come? But wait a minute," she whispered to her chums, "I've got a glimmer of a weeze! Supposing," she added, her eyes dancing, "we kidded Whitechester to hang up their stockings to-night—"

"Well?" Mabs questioned.

"And then supposing," Babs went on, "that two of us, dressed as Santa Claus, went and filled them—"

"Hey?" Jemima exclaimed, staring.

"Not with presents, chump! But with orange peel, paper—any old stuff we can lay our hands on, and with, of course, a note sending them the compliments of the Christmas Season from us—"

"Oh! Ha, ha, ha! But how," Gwen Cook wanted to know, "are we going to do it?"

"Oh, but we must do it—somehow!" Selma Gideon laughed, her eyes dancing with fun.

"And," Babs gurgled, "we can do it. At least, our Bessie can. Bessie," she explained to Selma, "is a ventriloquist, you know."

"Yes, rather! And a jolly good one," plump Bessie Bunter beamed. "But how can I do it, Babs?"

"Well, see—" And Babs pointed.

"There's Linda, Hazel, and Eve Clavering over there. Notice? Behind the palm-trees near them Miss Trevlyn is standing talking to Miss Eldridge. Now, Bessie, if Miss Trevlyn suddenly says, so that Linda can hear, that it's a custom at Pellabay for the younger guests to hang up stockings on Christmas Eve, you can bet Whitechester will cotton on to it—"

"Ha, ha!" giggled Bessie. "What a jolly good idea, you know! But then I always do think of good ideas, don't I? Watch me."

The chums, grinning, watched her as Bessie stepped forward a few paces. They saw her lips move. They saw the Whitechester party suddenly stop talking, listening, and then they saw Linda pointing to Miss Trevlyn, who, all innocent that her voice was being used for the entertainment of Whitechester, continued her conversation with Miss Eldridge. And they saw, to their unbounded delight, Linda & Co. hurriedly rush off.

"It's worked!" Babs said. "Ha, ha, ha! Now, what about bagging Santa Claus costumes—Clara, you and I will be the Santa Clauses. Grab hold of a couple of old pillowcases, somebody. Everybody else rush round and collect any old rubbish you can."

Hurried and gleeful activity then in the Cliff House camp. The pillowcases were secured; the Santa Claus disguises borrowed. By and by, armed with pieces of orange peel, cigarette-ends, nutshells, dead flowers, and goodness knows what else, the girls collected in a gurgling body in Babs' room. There they wrote out the greetings cards.

"Oh, what a sell for the old Whitechestnuts!" Jemima breathed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Impatiently they waited for bed. Midnight was approaching and outside could be heard the sweet chimes of the village church bells and the tuneful voices of the carol singers making merry as they ushered in the great day. Then bed-time came—with Selma and Jemima helping to dress Babs and Clara, with the rest of the chums

feverishly making up the odds and ends into exciting looking little parcels.

Half-past twelve chimed.

"Ready?" asked Babs.

"What-ho!" grinned Clara.

"Then grab your pillowcase."

Secure in their disguises, the two chums quitted the room, swishing along the corridor with their Santa Claus robes sweeping the floor. They had a fairly long journey before them, for Whitechester's sleeping quarters were in a different and an older part of the hotel which had rather hastily been equipped only a week or two ago. Fortunately, however, they met no one as they trailed off, and without incident reached the corridor in which Whitechester slept.

"O.K., we're here!" Babs breathed. "You take this section of the corridor; I'll take the other. But keep your face hidden!"

"Trust me!" Clara chuckled. "Good luck, old Babs!"

"Same to you!"

And Babs, with a gurgle, pushed open the first door—not, however, without some trepidation, because it occurred to her now that Whitechester might have found out something—or that Whitechester, disdaining the idea of Santa Claus, might not have hung up their stockings. But that idea was immediately dispelled when she entered the room.

For Whitechester, as keen, apparently, as any younger girls, were not going to miss the treat they believed to be in store. There were three beds in the room, and on the rails of those three beds were four stockings. Somebody was being greedy, evidently.

Babs, with a look at the sleeping figures, filled them. Then she left. She entered the next room with the same success, and then the third. In the corridor she and Clara met again, stifling their laughter.

"O.K.?" Babs asked.

"O.K., except that greedy Eve had hung up three stockings! I ran out on the last one, so I filled it with soap, face-cloths and nail-brushes from the washstands!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Chuckling, they stepped back along the corridor, reaching the head of the dim flight of stairs which led into the corridor below. Then all at once Clara gripped Babs' arm.

"I say, who's that?" she breathed.

They stood still, for a moment knowing the queerest of tremors. For down there, moving slowly along the passage with a slow, jerky, automatic movement, was a figure—a figure in a white cloak. Clara felt a sudden excited glow.

"Babs, it—it's the ghost!" she cried.

"No!"

"It is! Come on!"

"Clara—no!" Babs anxiously caught her arm as the impulsive Tomboy would have plunged down the stairs. "Wait a minute, you chump! Don't you see?" she breathed. "It—it's someone walking in his sleep!"

Clara paused. But she saw that Babs was right now. Slowly, stiffly, with movements slow and weird, the figure went on.

"Come on," Babs whispered, "let's follow it. No noise, though."

They tiptoed downstairs. On, on the figure went. Now it had reached the end of the passage which terminated in a junction from which two other passages ran off at angles. Thrilled, intent, forgetful now altogether of their strange attire, the two chums watched, keeping the figure just in view. A soft electric light glowed at this point. Then suddenly Babs gave a sharp cry.

"Clara, look! It's stopping; it's turning. Is—is it—Clara—"

"It is!" Clara said grimly. "The old man who rescued me from the well!"

They stopped, staring. For now they had full view of the "ghost's" profile. An old man it was to be sure, and though Clara had never seen his features as clearly as she saw them now, she knew. He had turned, facing the wall, inclining his head as he stared fixedly.

"Well, what the dickens is he doing?" Clara muttered.

"Shush!" Babs said. "We mustn't do—"

And there she broke off, twisting to look at her chum with sudden excitement in her eyes. For while the old man stood there, staring fixedly at that wall, a voice spoke. It was not the old man's voice, and from whom it came, or precisely whence it came, neither of the chums could be sure. It came in a hiss—a sort of impatient hiss. It said:

"Well, find them, you old fool! You know—"

There came a sharp cry from the old man. With a jump he wheeled round. Then his hand went up. There came a snick.

Followed complete blackness. And by the time Babs, racing forward, had switched on the soft electric light again, there was no sign of the old man to be seen.

"Well," Clara breathed, "of all the rum things! I didn't dream that, did I, Babs?"

Babs laughed a little shakily.

"If you did, I did, too!" she said. "B-r-r-r! This place gives me the shivers somehow. Let's get back to the others."

And to the others they quickly scooted—the others being the rest of the chums and Selma Gideon, who were gleefully awaiting news in Babs' bed-room. As they entered, they all surrounded her.

"It went O.K.!" Babs told them. "But, my hat, what a funny experience we had coming back! We met old Clara's ghost!"

"Walking in his sleep!" Clara added.

Selma gave a sudden, queer start. She looked at her sharply.

"But how," she protested, "can a ghost walk in his sleep?"

"Well, this one did!" And Clara related what had happened. "Funny the old buffer should stop staring at that wall," she said. "I wonder what he was dreaming about? Here, I say, Selma, where are you going?"

But Selma, suddenly pale and agitated, was walking to the door. With a frightened glance that faintly mystified Babs, she caught the handle.

"I—I think I'll go to bed, if you don't mind," she said unsteadily. "I—I don't feel well."

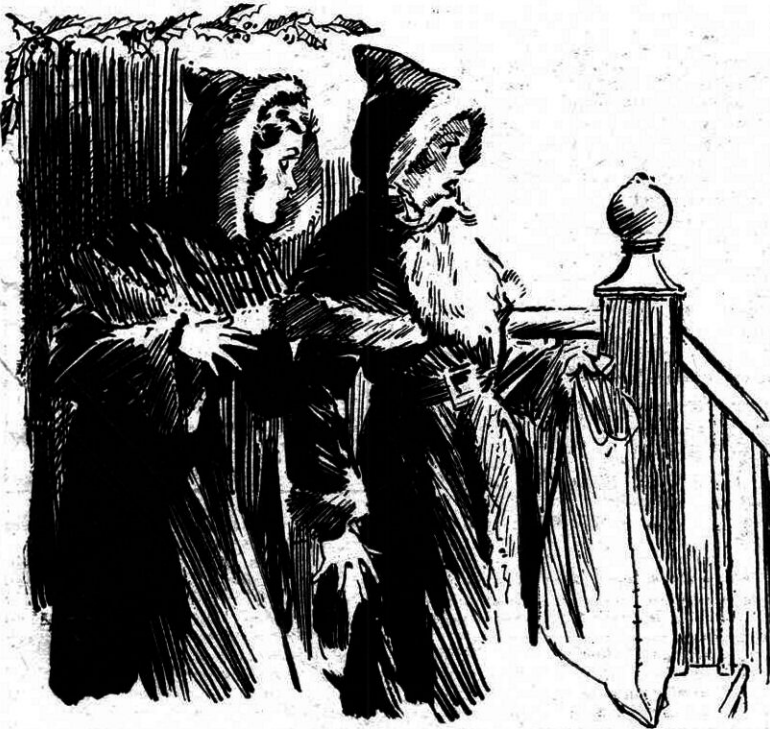
And before anybody could stop her, she had left.

The Cliff House Chums Japed!



NOT until after breakfast on Christmas morning did they see Selma again.

But in the interval what excitement—and what a loud howl of laughter from Cliff House when Whitechester, looking sheepish, came to join them at the breakfast table, the expressions on their faces showing very plainly the mortification which had been theirs when that morning they had unpacked their presents from the Cliff House Santa Claus! Decidedly, Cliff House was one up on Whitechester, then, and for once Whitechester had to admit it.



"I SAY, who's that?" breathed Clara. She and Babs stood still, gazing down the stairs. And then, as they saw the figure more clearly: "Babs, it—it's the ghost!" Clara cried.

And what further excitement, during breakfast, when the chums unpacked their presents—which had arrived by post the previous day. What cries of greeting and exchanges of good will as the chums thanked each other, and admiringly held up the festive gifts from fond parents and relatives to be just as admiringly examined. The most exciting present of all, however, was that which Bessie Bunter received.

This arrived in the form of a large box, exciting much curiosity and attention at once. It was done up neatly in brown paper, with a somewhat mysterious typewritten label which gave no clue whatever to the identity of the donor.

"But, of course," Bessie said, her fat face superior and lofty, "this is from one of my titled relations, you know!" (The dear old duffer hadn't any titled relations—but she loved to pretend she had). "Lord Dilwater de Beer, I bet—he generally sends me a boxful of five-pound notes, or something like this at Christmas!"

"Or perhaps," Jemima suggested solemnly, "it's a box full of gold bars?" "Oh, no!" Bessie said seriously. "It's not heavy enough for that, you know!"

Beaming, she cut the strings. "Now!" Bessie said. "I sus-say, you know, don't crowd me!" And carefully, her fat hands shaking with excitement, she at last removed the string and turned down the brown paper wrapping, disclosing a very exciting looking square box, with a little catch attached. Then, while the chums crowded round, even more intrigued, she took hold of the catch and slipped it back.

"Now—" she said. And then: "Wow! Wow! Ow! Help!"

And back with a crash went Bessie. Back with a jump went Cliff House, faces miraculously turning white as a great cloud of confetti and flour jumped out of the box, and among the flour the black face of a jack-in-the-box grinned

out at them. And while Bessie lay on the floor and roared and Cliff House frantically spluttered, a great shout of mirth went up from Linda Gay & Co.

"Ha, ha, ha! What price surprise-presents now, Cliff House?"

"You—you wait!" choked Clara. "Oh, my hat! Just wait. We'll pay you out for this!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" And with Whitechester's peeling laughter ringing in their ears, the Cliff House party—or, at least, those of them who had fallen victims to the latest jape, tramped off upstairs to their rooms to re-wash their faces and brush flour from their clothes.

And it was as she was coming out of her room that Babs, accompanied by Mabel Lynn, met Selma for the first time that morning.

"Hallo, Selma! Merry Christmas!" she greeted brightly.

Selma smiled—it was rather a wan and worried smile, however.

"Merry Christmas!" she answered. "I'm sorry I didn't get down to breakfast. But—but—" and she looked nervous all at once. "Babs, I—I wonder if you'd show me where—where exactly you saw the ghost last night—when it was sleepwalking, I mean?"

Again Babs glanced at her, sharply reminded of the Selma who had been so agitated yesterday when that strange face had been seen at the window of the lounge. Once again Selma looked depressed, nervous, agitated. What had happened?

And why this extraordinary interest in the ghost?

But it was not Babs' way to ask questions which plainly would only be a source of embarrassment to the questioned, and, since she could hardly refuse such a simple request as that, off she and Mabs and Selma went at once. Clara, coming out of her room, joined them.

"But why," she demanded in that

blunt, unthinking way of hers, "are you so jolly keen to know, Selma?"

"Oh, just—just a matter of interest!" Selma answered, colouring.

Babs wondered what interest. It seemed a rather vital one to her. They went on. They reached the head of the stairs from which Babs and Clara had witnessed the strange behaviour of the sleep-walking phantom, and then again stopped; for at the end of the passage, somewhere near the spot where they had seen the ghost pause to stare at the wall, a young man was standing. It was Charles Withers.

He seemed just faintly disconcerted when he saw them.

"Oh!" he said. "Cheer-ho! Merry Christmas, all of you! Quaint old place this," he added, with a nod.

Just having a look round. Er—Selma told me, Clara, what you and Babs saw last night. Was the spot somewhere about here?"

"It was," Babs said, "exactly here."

"And I suppose," he asked, "you've come along to try to solve the mystery?"

"Well, no; we're just showing Selma," Clara answered.

"Selma?" He frowned. "Selma, my dear, why do you mix yourself up in this business?" he asked. "I have told you, haven't I, that the idea of a ghost is just a lot of ridiculous nonsense? No, I'm not doubting now that there is someone in this hotel—playing ghost; but the man, whoever he is, is an utter villain who means a great deal more harm than fun. Look what happened to Clara last night."

Clara frowned a little.

"If you're talking about the ghost in white—"

"What else should I be talking of?"



"Well, I don't believe it," Clara answered sturdily. "He did me a jolly good turn, anyway; and if ever I had the chance to do him one I'd be glad. I don't believe it was he who shut me in that room—"

"But everybody else does," Charles Withers said, and shook his head. "I am sorry to disagree with you, Clara, but the thing is just as plain as a pike-staff. Anyway, Selma, I don't want you to get mixed up with this ruffian. He sounds to me more like a dangerous criminal than a harmless old ghost. I think," he added, "you had better come back with me."

And he caught Selma's arm, and, with a decidedly disapproving look at the chums, went off. Clara clenched her hands.

"Do you know," she said to Babs, "I

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In Merry Christmas Mood

"Out of School Hours" is changing its title this week in honour of the Festive Season, and your friend PATRICIA is in a gay, joyous mood—a mood which only Christmas can bring.

A GAIN, my dears, I can only open my letter to you in one way, and that is to wish every single one of you

A Happy & Joyous Christmas

May you have many of the presents you have longed for, and all the good times you have planned for. But above all, may you be surrounded by all those who love you best, in this the best-loved season of the year.

Heath's Presents

At the moment, I expect you're all so busy and excited that you can hardly find time even to read this. Your minds must be filled with so many lovely things.

I know I, your Patricia, am terribly thrilled.

But my young brother, Heath (whose full name is Heatherington, as you know) is almost ready to explode with high spirits.

He goes bouncing and carolling around the house, mixing up "Good King Wenceslas" with the "Lambeth Walk," with complete disregard for the family's feelings—and ears.

All this joy is because his youthful Christmas present problems have been solved, I'm thinking.



What he was to give father, looked like being a hefty problem, for Heath had ideas ranging from the Queen Mary to a humble racing car.

But finally, with my help, that present has now been bought at a cost of a shilling. (Mother insisted that he must buy presents from his own money, you see.)

We went to our shop-of-many-counters and bought a sixpenny tobacco pouch. Then we bought a pair of shoe laces, 2d.; a pencil, 1d.; a rubber, 1d.; a packet of pipe-cleaners, 1d.; and a box of matches.

All the penny treasures have been tucked into the tobacco pouch, and wrapped with great ceremony, ready for Christmas morning.

This present, consisting of such useful odds and ends, seemed such a sensible one, that I suggested a similar present for mother would be a bright idea.

So we bought her a little sixpenny toilet bag—that will be very useful for holding stray powder puffs and so on. In this we placed a packet of hairpins, 1d.; a packet of needles, 1d.; a bodkin (mother's always losing hers), 1d.; a bath cube, 1d.; and a bar of chocolate marshmallow, 2d.—which she likes as much as your Patricia likes whipped cream walnuts.

What Heath has planned for his big sister is still a surprise—or, at least, supposed to be. I have an idea it's a bar of pink soap—but he'd not be above changing his mind at the last minute, especially if he takes mother into his confidence.

Christmas Morning

This year, for the first time, Heath is to have the honour of distributing the family Christmas presents.

We are going to place them all round the foot of the tree on Christmas Eve, for him to hand out on Christmas morning. And, as he can't read much yet, all are going to have tie-ups on them in different colours. Red for father, pink for mother, green for me, silver for Heath, and gold for brother Brian.

So Heath will know at a glance for whom each present is intended.

Cable Decorations

My Christmas Day duty—though perhaps duty is too stern a word for it on such a day!—is to set the table for all meals.

There will only be the family, but I shall pull out both leaves of the table, to make it as large as possible. Then in the centre I arrange my decoration.

This really is going to be a surprise. I have begged and commanded that no one is to enter the dining-room while I am engaged on my secret tasks.

For breakfast, I have planned a centre-piece consisting of a layer of cottonwool. This will be fluffed up to look like snow, and have holly leaves arranged round the edge.

A piece of mirror will make a lake of ice. (This is merely a mirror from my handbag with cottonwool fluffed round the edges.)

Some frisky young Eskimo babies shall frolic over it. These "babies" I bought from the cake decoration counter of our

favourite shop. They were a penny each.

The fir-trees were also a penny each, and the "igloo" Eskimo home was threepence. I'm going to stick a twig in this, labelled "North Pole," and then another twig is going to have some silvery icicles draped over it.

With some silver "frost" sprinkled over the whole decoration, I think it should look very cheery, don't you?

At dinner, my centre-piece will consist of a load of red and green crackers with pieces of holly, and vivid cellophane "paper tucked in the centre.



Then for supper, I have planned a variation of the breakfast scheme. The cottonwool layer will be there again, with a few perky robins (penny each) standing on it.

The fir-trees will be there again, but instead of the igloo, I have bought a cottonwool snowman, into which I shall stick a piece of holly.

Crackers will be arranged round the "snow," and snowballs of cottonwool will be dotted about—which can be hurled at brother Brian if he gets too frisky.

If you're going to try out either of these two ideas, don't forget that packet of silver frost, will you? It does make such a difference—and lends such a sparkle to the table.

Christmas Evening

In the early evening we shall play some thoroughly kiddish games with young Heath—then off he'll go to bed. After that, I expect we will play "Spelling Bee," and save up all our noisy fun for the next day, Monday.

My Thanks

Again let me thank you all for your wonderfully kind wishes and Christmas cards to me. I do appreciate them so. And let me again wish you

A Happy Christmas

Your friend,
PATRICIA.

AT YOUR PRETTIEST FOR CHRISTMAS

No very serious do's or don'ts this week, but just some suggestions for looking your gay and happy best.

IT'S Christmas Day! From the moment when you wake—very early—in the morning, to when you go to bed—rather late—at night, the day will be one long round of happiness.

So you'll most certainly be looking as pretty as a picture, without any advice from me—for a happy face IS a pretty one.

Start the day off with a bath, if possible. Don't have it too hot, but be reckless with the bath-salts. Even if they are your big sister's—she won't mind. (Don't, for goodness' sake, wash your face in that water, though, will you?)

If someone has given you a bottle of eau-de-Cologne, be thoroughly rash and splash this on your feet. Add a fluffing of talcum powder, too, if you feel that way, before you slip into those lovely new stockings. You'll have dancing feet all day then.

AS GAY AS YOU PLEASE

Perhaps you'll be wearing a new dress—a present from mother—at Christmas

dinner. So select the gayest of your new hankies from Auntie Maud, to go with it. Sprinkle it with perfume, if Cousin Mary gave you some. If not, ask mother for a spot of hers, as it's Christmas time.

Try doing your hair in that fascinating new style you envied, but didn't dare attempt before—and crown it with a perky bow, or a posy of flowers sewn on to a hair-clip.

Wear your new bangle on one wrist—and your watch on the other, if you feel like it. In fact, wear three bangles if you have them—for the more, the gayer.

Just do all those things you've always meant to do at Christmas, and have a lovely RADIANT time!

Happy Christmas!

P.S.—In spite of my resolution not to be serious, I simply can't resist mentioning, that if you SHOULD eat just a spot too much, and feel a bit uncomfy for it, sip a cupful of hot water very slowly. It's not pleasant, but it's certainly magic!



ROUND-THE-FIRE GAMES

As Christmas Day is on Sunday, here are some quiet, restful games to play.

YOU'RE so cosy around the fireside, roasting chestnuts, peeling oranges, and passing round the chocolates, that you simply won't want to move.

So here are some games you can play in complete laziness and comfort.

FILM EXPERTS

Beforehand, go through a film magazine and cut out portraits of well-known stars. Then cut these up again, leaving just well-known features. For example, Greta Garbo's eyes, Joan Crawford's hair, Carole Lombard's legs and feet, Joe E. Brown's mouth, and Jack Hulbert's chin. Paste twenty of these "features" on to a large piece of paper and then pass it round. The object is to identify the owner of the particular feature.

PERSONALITIES

One person must place her hands over her ears and promise not to listen. The others must all whisper together, and each make a personal remark about the "deaf" person.

Then the remarks are hurled out loud at the "deaf" one, after she has removed her hands, and she has to guess who was responsible for each remark. (So that means no one person should say the remark she herself made, you see.)

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Slips of paper and pencils are handed round again. Each player must write a question on the paper, fold it and pass it on. Then on the slip she receives she must write the answer to her own question. It makes very funny reading when the slips are read out after the papers come back to the original owners again.

WORD MAKING

First player thinks of a word and says the first letter. Next player thinks of a word beginning that way and says the second letter—and so on. But the player who finishes a word must lose a life, and next player starts again.



Just five minutes of fun for you to share with other members of the family. With a pencil you start at the bottom of the picture and each travels along a ribbon to see which of you is first to reach the Fairy Doll at the top of the tree.

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thought when I first met that chap I was going to like him—"
 "And now?" Babs asked slowly.
 "Now," Clara answered, "I jolly well don't! Anybody would think he had a grudge against the ghost in white!"
 She missed Babs' sudden swift glance—a glance which might have suggested to Clara, had she seen it, that she had started a rather startling train of thought in her chum's mind.

The Ghost Again!



"CHARADES," Barbara Redfern said thoughtfully. "What price charades?"

"Good egg!" Linda Gay eagerly laughed. "Word charades—eh?"

"That's it!"
 The time was three o'clock on Christmas afternoon, and—for the time being, at least—Cliff House and Whitechester had called a truce so as to combine more enthusiastically in the fun that was going on.

"We'll do the acting," Mabs said; "you be the guessers. We'll use the billiards-room and the reading-room next to it; both of them are empty at the moment, because I've just come through them. All agreed?"

All agreed it was. And while Whitechester crowded off to the reading-room, the Cliff House faction, including the Eldridge twins and Selma Gideon, bundled into the billiards-room. There at once an animated discussion began as to what word should be acted.

"I know," Mabs said. Mabs was always good at these sort of things. "What about car-pen-try? Jimmy, you can act with a car that won't go. Jolly funny, too! Clara and some others can pretend you're trying to get a pig into a pen. Now 'try'?" Mabs said, and cudgelled her brain. "What's the suggestion for 'try'? I know! Let's suppose—"

But what Mabs supposed was never known; for at that moment from the reading-room, where the Whitechester faction was gathered, came a sudden commotion.

There was a shriek; a shout in Linda's voice:

"Stop him! Stop him!" A choked gurgle. "Oh, my hat! Switch on the light, somebody! It's one of those Cliff House jaspers!"

And then, amazingly, followed a series of coughing and gasping, such a welter of frenzied and frantic sneezing, that Cliff House stared at each other wondering what had gone wrong. Then suddenly the door opened. Linda herself—her face red, her eyes streaming—glared at them.

"I— Oh! Atishoo!" she said. "Ba-Babs, you awful thing! Atishoo! A—a joke's a—atishoo!—joke. But don't you think—atishoo!—that's rather too thick? Atishoo!"

"What's happened?" Babs cried. "You know jolly well what's happened!" Linda said, the tears running down her cheeks. "Who— Atishoo! Oh, my hat! You pitched an electric-snuff bomb among us!"

Babs jumped. "We did?"

"Well, who else? Who came in the reading-room dressed as a ghost, and then put out the lights and hurled the snuff bomb among us? Oh, my hat! We've all nearly blown our heads off. Listen!" she added, to the chorus of

howls and sneezes that floated through from the other room.

"And you think," Clara snorted, "that we did it?"

"Well, didn't you?"

"No, you jolly well didn't!"

Linda wonderingly stared.

"But—but somebody did! Somebody dressed in a white cloak came into the room. We thought it was one of you playing ghost. He switched out the lights; then, when we made a dash for him, chucked a glass electric-snuff bomb on us, and caught the whole lot of us."

"What—what sort of ghost was it?" Selma faltered.

"Oh, I don't know! His face was covered. But, come to think of it," Linda added, "it couldn't have been one of you, because it was taller. I say— Oh! Hallo!" she added, as Charles Withers came into the room.

"I'm sorry! I couldn't help but hear what you said," he said. "I fancied I saw the figure you were talking about in the corridor just now. It was an old man, wasn't it?"

"Well, we didn't see," Linda replied.

"But I did—yes." His face grew grim. "I think, Clara, even you will have to admit now that your old-man ghost is no gentleman. Apart from the highly dangerous nature of this trick—and electric snuff at close quarters is dangerous stuff—the man acted like a cad."

Clara's lips compressed. But the consenting nod with which that little speech was received showed that the chums agreed.

"Well, jolly well let me meet him!" Linda threatened, wiping her streaming face.

"I hope," Withers said grimly, "that we shall all have the pleasure of meeting him—sometime. The man is little better than a criminal. In the meantime, however, I advise you girls not to go hunting around to try to find him. What happened to Clara yesterday shows that he is a pretty desperate man. I'm sorry I didn't grab him just now—he was just too quick for me. By the way, Barbara, if you see Selma, tell her I'd like to speak to her, will you?"

And with a smile at the girls, he walked off.

Linda Gay breathed deeply.

"And that," she said, "is that. But if Mr. Ghost can get away with it as far as Cliff House is concerned, he's jolly well going to find out what he's up against when he tries it on Whitechester! Leave it alone indeed!" she snorted witheringly. "I'll jolly well teach it! Look here, who says a ghost hunt—now?" she added eagerly.

"Good idea!" supported Mabel Lynn. But Babs shook her head.

"No, wait a minute. Just rushing about on the off-chance won't do any good," she said. "If we're going to have a ghost hunt let's have one—but for goodness' sake, let's go about it with some method!"

"Such as?" Linda asked.

"Well, Clara and I had an adventure last night." And Babs told Linda and the other Whitechester girls who, still wiping their eyes, had joined them from the reading-room. "It may just lead to nothing," she said, "but whatever that old ghost came to do last night he didn't do—which means, perhaps, that he'll try the stunt on again. Now, there's a room near that wall. Supposing, to-night, we keep watch—"

"And if," Linda questioned, "the ghost does appear, we collar it?"

"That's the idea. But—hallo, here's Selma!"

Selma it was, looking still a little

worried, who came in at the door at that moment.

"I say, Selma, your uncle—" Marjorie Hazeldene began.

"I know, I've just seen him." Selma smiled a little. "But what's the conference?" she asked. "Can anyone join in? I—" and then she stopped, and they all stopped suddenly, listening, as from somewhere faint and far off the strains of a violin was heard.

"Shucks, listen!" Leila Carroll cried. "Where's it coming from?" Mabs asked.

They stood still. Sweet, low, as from a great distance, the strains of the music came to their ears—"God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen." It seemed to come from above somewhere.

"Well, I guess whoever's playing can play," Leila said admiringly—Leila being something of an amateur expert on the violin herself. "But, shucks, Selma! What's the matter? Are you ill?"

For Selma, listening too, had turned white.

"I—I think I'll go," she said in sudden agitation.

"But, Selma—" cried Babs.

Selma, however, with a strangely strained look, had bolted through the door. And that, until Christmas dinner that evening, was the last they saw of her.

Protecting the Phantom!



PALE still, but somehow happier and more contented,

Selma looked, when they all met round the table for that merriest of meals, and in reply to Babs' anxious question as to whether she was all right now, gave back a bright smile. Yet it was obvious that something was still on her mind.

And during intervals, Babs found her own mind straying back to the rather puzzling mystery of Selma Gideon's conduct, and more than ever now was she thinking of the ghost in white. Was there any connection between that strange, sleep-walking phantom and Selma Gideon?

Not indeed, that there was much time to think of anything. For Christmas dinner was such a happy, boisterous, full-of-fun meal that it was difficult to talk, never mind think.

In carnival hats, all the guests sat down to the meal, all in merry good humour, all full of the true Christmas spirit. Each guest had been supplied with a variety of toy musical instrument, and deafening indeed was the noise. And what fun, too, when somebody released a crowd of blown-up balloons.

Back and forth those balloons went during dinner, and backward and forward, too, went the little cottonwood snowballs which had been provided—a particularly lusty battle in that respect ensuing between Whitechester and Cliff House.

What a scream when Bessie and Gemma, pulling a cracker between them, produced a long, toy snake which, shooting across the table, hit Linda Gay fairly and squarely on the nose!

And what a cheer when, the main courses finished, the lights were dimmed and in came the chef carrying the most enormous Christmas pudding the chums had ever seen, all lit up by the flickering blue flames of the ignited spirits which had been poured over it. And after that what a scramble for the silver

sixpences and other charms it contained. And what a feed in itself!

Babs noticed that Selma, although joining in the fun, seemed somehow not to be part of it. After dinner she took the opportunity to vanish, and the chums themselves, too exhausted for the time being to do anything else, sat around and talked and played games of Stak-a-Stik.

After that, there was a most exciting treasure hunt, followed by the Christmas concert which Babs and Mabs had organised and in which both Whitechester, the Eldridge twins, and other guests took part.

Nearly midnight then. Outside the bells were pealing, the carol singers singing. Carols became the order of the night, and for ten minutes all guests joined in singing the favourite ballads of Christmas. Then midnight.

"And Christmas Day," Babs said breathlessly, happily, "is over!"

"But," Linda Gay replied, "the

"Bow-wow! Who's funky? Come on, where do we hide ourselves?"

Babs led the way. Near the junction of the corridor was the room to which she had referred last night. There were, in fact, three rooms, but the one on the left gave the best view of the wall which had been the object of the sleepwalking ghost's concentration, and in that they took up their positions.

It was dark and chilly in the room; scarcely less dark in the corridor outside. With the door opened just a crack, they stationed themselves.

Five—ten minutes went by. Jemima sighed.

"Pretty tough if there's no old ghost, what?" she asked.

"It's just a spoof!" Linda Gay said.

"I say, I'm cold!"

"Shush!" Babs said again.

"But what's the good of shushing? If you ask me—"

"Shush!" Babs hissed.

For clearly she had heard something—

"Go on! Find it, you old fool! You know where you hid it!"

"Geel! Who's that?" Leila breathed.

"Quiet!" Babs hissed.

She was thrilling now. Some inner sense told her that she and her chums were on the brink of drama.

The old man slowly lifted one arm. His fingers, caressing the stone wall, suddenly pressed forward, and then the watching girls almost cried out as one stone, smaller than the rest, slid back, revealing a small cavity.

Into that cavity the old man's fingers groped, extracting a roll of legal-looking papers tied around with ribbon. Again the sleepwalker touched the hidden spring. With soundless sureness the stone slipped back into place. Then he turned.

Babs drew in a deep, deep breath.

"Steady, girls!" she muttered.

"Don't—"

The instruction was never given, for



"NOW," said plump Bessie eagerly, and opened the mysterious box. The next second it wasn't mysterious any longer. Back staggered the Cliff House chums, showered by flour and confetti. "Ha, ha, ha! What price surprise-presents now, Cliff House?" yelled the rival schoolgirls, triumphantly.

ghost hunt is on. Meet you on the landing in half an hour's time, Babs."

Babs nodded. She looked round for Selma. But again, most mysteriously, Selma had disappeared.

In Babs' room the excited Cliff House faction gathered, to be joined in a few moments by the Eldridge twins.

"Well, I sure guess," Leila chuckled, "that there's enough of us to deal with a dozen ghosties! Bessie, are you coming?"

"No, I'm jolly well not!" Bessie said. "I prefer my bed, thank you! It's not, of course," she hastily explained, "that I'm afraid of ghosts—"

"Oh, no!" Gwen Cook chortled. "Well, everybody else coming?"

Everybody else was. And leaving Bessie to explain to the desert air how plucky she really was, they all crept out of the room. Thrilling a little, they made their way to the spot decided upon, to be joined in a few moments by Linda Gay and half a dozen of the Whitechester girls. Linda shivered a little.

"I say, this doesn't seem to be half such a good idea now!" she said.

"B-r-r-r! It's cold!"

"Well, of course," Clara sniffed. "if you're funky—"

a soft, swish-swishing sound from farther up the corridor.

"It—it's coming!" she breathed.

They tensed then, looking out with staring eyes. They saw the corridor, dimly grey, spreading before them, with just a glimpse of the bottom steps of the stairs. Now distinctly to all their ears came the soft swishing of slipped feet.

Near, nearer—loud, louder.

Hardly anybody breathed then. Then suddenly a figure came into view—the figure of an old, bowed man it was, his face very white, staring in front of him with a strange, glassy expression in his eyes. From his shoulders descended a white cloak, richly embroidered.

"Shucks!" Leila breathed.

Near, nearer. Easy to see now that the old man was asleep. But though he was dressed in those strange garments, he was obviously no phantom. Breathlessly tense they watched as he shuffled nearer. Now he had stopped opposite the spot at which he had stopped last night. Now, slowly, he was turning round to face the wall. And as he stood, once again a hidden, unseen voice spoke.

They all jumped as it fell upon their ears.

at that same moment something utterly electrifying and unexpected happened. Opposite them a door was suddenly thrown open. Between them and the now retreating sleepwalker another figure appeared—a figure in evening dress, a black handkerchief masking his face, a short stick in his hand. In three silent, stealthy paces he had reached the old man. Up went the stick above his head.

And then Clara shrieked.

"Look! Look! He's going to hit him! Rescue!"

And crash! went the door as Clara leapt through it. The assailant turned, glaring. Quite undaunted, Clara rushed forward and caught his arm.

"You—you scoundrel!" she cried.

"Hang you!" the man snarled, "Hang you!"

There came a cry from the sleepwalker—a suddenly wondering, reed-like cry. With a jump he wheeled, no longer asleep now, his eyes wide and surprised. Then, in a united rush, Cliff House and Whitechester piled on the scene. The masked villain found himself floundering, found himself flattened under the combined weight of fifteen athletic girls. Babs, reaching forward, plucked away the black handkerchief which hid his features. And then she almost shrieked.

"Mr. Withers!"

For Charles Withers, a look of baffled, hateful fury on his handsome face, it was!

"But the other man—" cried Clara. And she darted forward to the old man, who, standing there with his roll of papers in his hands, was regarding the scene in a trance-like amazement. She caught him by the arm.

"Oh, my hat, you!" she choked. "I—I've been waiting to see you and thank you. But who are you?"

The question was answered dramatically, but not by the old man himself. For immediately from the stairs came a rush of feet. The flying figure of a girl, dressed only in pyjamas, came rushing towards the scene. One look she gave at the girls on the floor—so many of them that they completely covered the villainous Charles Withers. She took one look at the old man, and then with a cry flung herself into his arms.

And Babs, Clara, and all of them jumped at the choked, emotional word that came from Selma Gideon's lips.

"Grandfather!" she sobbed.

EXCITING THAT Christmas Day had been; but how much more exciting the night which followed it, when the chums, after their electrifying experience in the gloomy corridor, and the capture of Charles Withers, sat in the lounge, never thinking of bed, but facing a now happily radiant Selma and the gentle-faced old man, who, most astonishingly, they had all thought far away in Italy. Then, and only then, was the whole puzzle explained.

It was Selma, a soft light in her eyes as she held the old man's hand, who explained.

"It all goes back to the summer, when grandfather, my Uncle Charles, and myself were here on holiday," she said.

"Well, yes?" Clara said.

"Grandfather is a solicitor. He handles a great deal of money, and is trusted by many people. He was rather rushed with work at the time, but in order not to delay the holiday he brought some of it away with him, and among it was a pile of valuable bonds which become negotiable on December 27th. Because the bonds were so valuable, grandfather kept them locked in his luggage."

And then she went on to tell the wide-eyed chums what had happened—how one night she had caught her grandfather sleep-walking in the haunted corridor—how she had watched him disappear with a packet of papers in his hands, and still walking in his sleep, return. Ignorant of her grandfather's business, however, she had invested that fact with no significance at the time. Nor, for fear of disturbing the old man, had she told him of his sleep-walking exploit till long afterwards.

"Well, the summer holiday came to an end," she said. "We went home. Grandfather thought that the bonds were safely locked up in his luggage, and not till some time later did he discover his loss. And if," Selma said at this juncture, turning severely towards the old man, "you had only told me then—"

"My dear," Mr. Gideon said mildly, "I did not want to worry you. Though I was frightfully worried myself," he added.

"And then, at last, the worry became too much for him," Selma went on. "One night when he and I and Uncle Charles were talking about Christmas plans, he broke down and told us about the missing bonds. It was then I remembered the sleep-walking business, and then, for the first time, I told him,

and it was with the idea of trying to reconstruct the sleep-walk and find out where the missing bonds were, that we decided to come back to the hotel to spend Christmas."

"Aha!" Jemima said. "Methinks I begin to see daylight!"

"And so it was all planned up," Selma went on. "Neither of us guessed in the meantime, of course, that my scoundrelly Uncle Charles had his eye upon those bonds—"

And Selma went on to tell the rest of the story. How, with a greedy eye upon those bonds, Charles Withers had informed Mr. Gideon's client that Gideon himself had stolen them. How, just before they were all due to come to Pellaboy Castle Hotel, a warrant had been issued for Mr. Gideon's arrest while he was presiding at a meeting of his local masonic society, the Ancient Order of Silburnians. Knowing that he would be unable to prove his innocence if arrested, he had fled from the meeting-place of the society at once.

"Dressed in his robes?" asked Babs.

"Dressed in his robes," Selma agreed. "He had no time to change. Naturally he came here, expecting to meet me later on. Uncle, however, thought he had bolted from the country altogether—the last place he expected him to come was the place which he had already decided to go to. As you know, he told me a cock-and-bull story of grandfather having been called abroad on urgent business, and apparently wired a friend of his in Italy to send that cablegram to put me off the scent."

"Phew!" whistled Leila.

"And so—well, perhaps you can guess now why I wasn't the happiest of girls when I arrived here," Selma went on. "To dodge off like that was so unlike grandfather. I cheered up a bit when the cablegram came, but when Babs, you, and Clara told me about the old man you had seen sleep-walking in the haunted corridor, I suspected again that grandfather was here. The first time was when he looked through the lounge

window. All the time grandfather was trying to get in touch with me, you see. This afternoon he succeeded—by playing his favourite tune on the violin."

"And—and you found him?" Babs asked.

"Yes, I found him," Selma nodded. "Uncle, meantime, had also got the idea he was here, and was rather desperate. I think he got the idea when that note came in through the window during Babs' mistletoe dance, and it was he, not grandfather, Clara, who met you in the west wing and shut you up there—in order, you see, to blacken the name of the real ghost. It was uncle who played the snuff-bomb trick on Linda & Co., too—"

"To make us afraid to tackle him—and to get the real ghost a bad name in case he was ever laid low?" Babs added.

"That's it."

"But," Clara grinned, "it didn't pan out that way, did it? Because," she added, "I had a feeling from the time the real ghost rescued me from that beastly well that he was true blue. And I hope, you ninnies," she added, turning on Babs & Co., "that you'll jolly well apologise to me now for saying that the black ghost and the white ghost were one and the same being. And you, sir—I haven't thanked you yet for saving me."

Mr. Gideon smiled.

"Well, and I haven't thanked you," he said. "I'm sorry if I scared you on occasions, but now you understand, I hope you'll forgive me. Meantime, thank you, all of you. It is thanks to you that I have regained my bonds; you I have to thank for befriending my dear granddaughter. And if," he added, rising, "it is not too late, may we all send for ginger wine and drink to our friendship together?"

A suggestion which, despite the late hour, was most heartily and enthusiastically carried out!

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.



New Year fun and revelry for the Cliff House chums! Great excitement planning the most glorious celebrations on the ice, and doing all they can to help a new young friend to achieve her heart's desire. And then—shock! Enter the Firebrand of Cliff House School; lordly, supercilious, high-handed Diana Royston-Clarke, crossing Babs & Co.'s path at once and, for her own selfish reasons, threatening to ruin all their hopes. Don't miss this superb **HILDA RICHARDS** story, which appears next week.

Are You Reading This Wonderful Romantic 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 NAJDI**, 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 has Paul outlawed. Pamela visits him in secret, and later hides in a room where the grand duke and some of his confederates are plotting. Pamela is not wearing her wig. Suddenly she is discovered.

(Now read on.)

The Race to the Palace!

HER face averted, Pamela sped for the door. Behind her the voice of the Grand Duke Bernard rang out. "Stop that girl! After her—after her!"

There was the clatter of chairs, the hubbub of startled voices, the thud of feet.

Pamela was desperate. To be caught like this, in the room where the grand duke was plotting with his hired spies; to be captured, not wearing the wig that made her so like the real princess, but with it actually in her pocket—that would be utterly disastrous! The grand duke would know she was an impostor!

Dragging open the door, she hurried herself through, slammed it in the faces of her angry pursuers, then swiftly glanced up and down the passage.

To her right was the staircase. But guarding it was the caretaker. It would be too risky trying to get past him. Roused by the disturbance, he'd need only an order from one of the plotters to seize her. She'd try the other direction—anything that gave her a hope of avoiding capture.

Her luck was in. A short way down the passage was another flight of stairs, leading upwards. Heart pounding, she mounted them until she was hidden by a curve. Then she dropped to her hands and knees, waiting, torn with suspense, hardly daring to breathe.

She heard the door being wrenched open. Now the plotters were streaming

out. She pressed her hands to the stairs, ready to spring up if her fears were confirmed.

But—no!

Wild elation surged through her. The shouts and stampings were going in the other direction. Her scheme had succeeded. Jumping to the very natural conclusion suggested by the other stairs, her determined pursuers were rushing below.

Now was her chance.

She ran on up the stairs. Finding herself on a wide landing, which, like the hub of a wheel, had several corridors branching off it, she chose the nearest. It was studded with windows.

THE GRAND DUKE AT LAST SUSPECTS THAT PAMELA IS AN IMPOSTOR!

And he lays plans to un-
mask her!

At the first she paused, peering out. And then—

"Oh, goody, goody!" she breathed, her eyes sparkling. "My luck's in."

There before her lay a way of escape, as simple as it was unexpected.

The building in which the plotters had been holding their meeting was composed of two stories, the first of which jutted out from the upper one like a giant step. No more than four or five feet below her was the roof of the first story, smooth and flat. Easy enough to reach it; easier still to traverse it to the edge and drop the eleven or twelve feet to the cobbled street.

But—not at the front of the building. At any moment the plotters would arrive there.

Pamela, therefore, having landed on the roof, crouched double and scurried for a wing of the building, meaning to reach the back. But suddenly she dropped prone and lay there, listening intently.

The grand duke and his henchmen had emerged into the street. The

former's voice clearly reached the un-seen fugitive.

"Confound the girl! Where on earth has she got to?"

There came a faltering reply from the caretaker.

"B-but, your Excellency, she has not come this way, I swear it. I should have noticed her."

"Quite right—you *should* have noticed her!" The bitter sarcasm in her enemy's tones made Pamela smile, despite herself. "You should notice a good many things, only you're invariably snoring, you old fool!"

"Oh, but—but, your Excellency—"

"Shut up!" The caretaker did so promptly. The grand duke's voice resumed: "I'm going to the palace. You others stay here—search everywhere. Find that girl if you have to rouse the whole village. She's got to be caught. And when she is—let me know at once!"

"Very well, your Excellency!"

Pamela, heart throbbing, heard the shuffle of a horse being brought forward. Then came the clatter of its hoofs upon the cobblestones; a clatter that grew fainter and fainter in the distance until it had died away altogether.

Pamela, turning her head, stared in the direction.

"Oh golly! The grand duke racing for the palace. He'd find her missing; might put two and two together, and—an icy hand seemed to touch her spine—and if he did he could come to only one conclusion. Sonia had an impersonator!

That, as it happened, was precisely what the grand duke himself was fancying. It was an incredible suspicion, almost too fantastic to be taken seriously. And yet that girl in the cupboard had been Sonia's living image, features, clothes, carriage, everything—except her hair! And that *could* have been made like Sonia's with a wig—

Madly, the grand duke tore on through the twilight.

And meanwhile Pamela, with the vital wig in a pocket of her riding jacket, was lying full-length upon the roof of the plotters' meeting-place, filled with dread.

By

DORIS LESLIE

From the street came sounds—that told her the plotters were splitting up into groups, under instructions from their leader.

Now was the time to get away.

Crawling across the roof, she turned the corner, slowly got to the back of the building, and then stood up. For a moment her heart stood still. She was exposing herself to discovery. But—no. The alley that ran below was empty.

Ten seconds later she was speeding down it; a minute after that, choosing other passages and alleyways between the low, squat dwellings, that took her away from the searchers, she had reached the dusty road beyond the village.

Then she ran as she had never run before. She ran pell-mell across open downland for Tolari Forest. The hollow oak—that must be her objective. Its secret tunnel connecting with the palace was the only thing which could get her back, safely and soundly inside her boudoir, before the arrival of the grand duke.

And as she ran, so her thoughts, turbulent and chaotic at first, began to sort themselves out.

The note to the peasant chief written by the outlawed Paul and exonerating her from all blame for his plight, would have to be delivered some other time. She felt for it in a pocket, then bit her lip.

"Gone!"

Yes, gone. Possibly it had fallen out on the roof; might even be in one of the alleys. Oh, well! It didn't matter much. She couldn't give it to the peasant chief now. And Paul could write another.

Her face set as she thought of him, alone and wounded in the arm, up there in the distant mountains. She could see them for just a fleeting moment between some trees as she lowered herself into the hollow oak.

Driven into hiding by the treachery of the grand duke! And she labelled with the blame, so that the peasants were turning against her once more!

She descended the crude steps. In the darkness she plunged on her way, and her hands were clenched with fierce resolve.

The grand duke's bid to turn the people against her and seize the throne himself had come within an ace of success. Some of the people were against her; Paul, her only helper, on whom she had once relied for so much, was now a fugitive who dare not leave the caves where he hid; and now she was facing exposure as an impostor.

Presently she felt the ground begin to rise. She was nearing the end of the tunnel. Ah, here she was at last!

With eager hands she operated the sliding canvas which was the back of a picture in Tolaria Palace Art Gallery. It opened, and she stepped through. Swiftly she moved the painting back into its frame. Then, with the secret cavity completely concealed, she flitted around the gallery for the nearest exit.

Five minutes later, having dodged three Civic Guards, resplendent in their white and crimson uniforms, and her own personal maid, Rowena, who was hurrying down the main staircase with some discarded flowers, she reached her boudoir.

Inside, and with door locked, she heaved a sigh of relief.

"Golly, what a—what a rush! But I daren't stop! I've simply got to change!"

She changed like lightning. The first thing she did was to whip the wig from her pocket and pull it into place over her own golden waves. Amazing the

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 toyshop to let you see them to-day.

difference it made! She was transformed by it. One moment herself—Pamela Courtney; the next, Sonia, princess of Leiconia!

Having made sure the wig was secure and hiding every hair of her own, she removed her riding clothes, dumping them in the large wardrobe-room, and changed into a dainty green evening gown.

Seated before her dressing-table, with the mirrors in the room so arranged that she could see herself from a dozen different angles at once, she speeded through her toilet, heart racing.

It was a step outside the door that warned her at last. Came a rap on the panels.

"Sonia, are you there, my dear?" inquired the tones of the grand duke.

Pamela raised a scent-spray, fighting to appear perfectly at ease.

"Hallo, uncle!" she called cheerily. "Come in!"

The door opened. The grand duke appeared. For a moment a scowl masked his face—a scowl of baffled rage; then, with the most friendly of smiles, he stepped towards her.

And Pamela, also smiling, turned to greet him.

A Scheme for Pamela's Downfall

"HALLO, uncle!" Pamela said again, having decided that attack would be the best form of defence. "Seen Juanita?"

Juanita was the grand duke's hypocritical young niece, whom he had brought to the palace to wheedle her way into Pamela's confidence and learn all she could about Pamela and Paul. And so successful, both as an actress and spy, had Juanita been that it was mainly due to her that Paul had been compelled to flee. But Pamela, unfortunately, did not even begin to suspect the girl. She had been utterly deceived.

"Juanita?" said the grand duke. "Er—let me see now!"

He stroked his chin. Truth to tell, as Pamela could discern, he was non-plussed. She knew a momentary qualm then, for it suggested that he had raced back here expecting to find her absent, and that could only mean he had half-recognised her in the village—began to suspect.

"Yes," she went on. "Poor old Juanita and I lost each other in the forest. We were going to have a picnic, you know—"

And, without giving him a chance to say a word, she rambled on, all about that afternoon's unfortunate affair—unfortunate because she had been compelled to give Juanita the slip. When at last she permitted the grand duke to insert a remark of his own, he came to the point of the visit, though in a veiled sort of way.

"You weren't in the village by any chance?" he asked.

"What, for a picnic?" said Pamela, and laughed. "What a place to choose! What ever made you think I had been?"

"Oh, I didn't, my dear—I didn't!" was the smooth reply. "I merely wondered if you had, that's all. One—one of your aunts was there. I believe. Dear woman, paying a call on one of the peasants—with gifts, you know. Well, I'd better be off. I've quite a lot to attend to. Oh, and by the way," he added, halting midway to the door, "I forgot to tell you! We're holding a ball to-morrow night—various foreign dignitaries will be there. Good-night, Sonia!"

"Good-night, uncle!"

Smiling most benevolently, he withdrew. And, smiling with every bit as much friendliness, Pamela watched the door close.

Then, when it was between them, seeming to separate their twin deceptions, her smile broadened. She hugged herself, squirted scent in every direction, and soundlessly clapped her hands with excitement.

She'd done it, she told herself again and again. Even if the grand duke had come here prepared to suspect that she was an impostor, he didn't know. How could he? He knew nothing of the secret way from the oak-tree. To him it must seem utterly impossible for her to have got back from the village and changed like this before he arrived himself!

But then Pamela did not realise exactly how strong the duke's suspicions had been, did not realise that he had obtained such a good glimpse of her.

Savagely he stamped downstairs to his study. For half an hour he stayed there alone, turning the position over in his mind, at one moment dismissing his thoughts as being too far-fetched, the next moment gnawing his lip, tugging his chin, wondering—could it be so?

Eventually he rang for one of the guards.

Juanita, still seething at the way Pamela had tricked her that afternoon, was deciding to go along to see if she had returned, when someone tapped on the door of her room.

"Come in!" she snapped, helping herself to a chocolate. "What is it?" she added curtly, as one of the Civic Guards appeared, saluting. "My un—his Excellency wants me?" she corrected herself quickly. "Oh, all right! I'll come at once!"

Uncle Bernard back already. Strange! The meeting had been very brief. And what did he want with her?

When she entered the grand duke's study she halted in astonishment, for her usually immaculate, debonaire uncle looked the picture of utter dejection.

"Oh, here you are!" he said in a sort of sigh. "Come in, my dear! Sit down." He gestured limply to another chair opposite his. "I want to talk to you."

Juanita stared at him as she seated herself.

"What on earth's the matter, uncle?" she exclaimed. "Had a shock, or something?"

"A shock—yes!" He roused himself and leaned towards her. "Juanita, the most extraordinary thing has happened, so extraordinary that even now I don't

know whether I'm on my head or my heels. I have an idea, Juanita, which, if it is right, means that the girl we look upon as Sonia is not Sonia at all, but—an impostor!"

He drew back, studying her face as if watching for the effect of those sensational words. It produced an effect at once, but by no means the kind he anticipated. Juanita regarded him blankly for a second, and then, flinging her head back, roared with laughter.

"An impostor? Oh, my giddy aunt! Why, that's—that's perfectly priceless, uncle!"

And she was still giving noisy vent to her amusement when the duke seized her arm.

"Stop it, you little fool! Stop it!" he snapped angrily. "This isn't a joke. It's serious—confoundedly serious. I'm telling you the truth."

Juanita's laughter ended abruptly. She looked at him again, and gaped. No mistaking his sincerity.

"But—but, uncle," she burst out, serious now, "that's absurd. I mean, it's just—just too silly for words. An impostor? Oh, but it can't be true! Do you really mean you think—"

"Listen!" said the grand duke.

And in tones that alternated between savage rage at the escape of the mysterious girl from the village, and bitter chagrin at his own uncertainty about her, he recounted what had happened, concluding with the startling suspicion that had leaped into his mind and how it had received a setback when he discovered the princess at the palace.

"My—my goodness!" Juanita breathed. She was quite shaken. "And you think someone may have been taking Sonia's place for some time? Weeks, perhaps?"

"That's just what I can't make up my mind about," was the almost frantic reply. "That girl was like Sonia. No doubt about it. With the same hair she'd have been her living image. And yet—"

"She was here when you raced back. She hadn't been out apparently," Juanita murmured, staring into space.

"But what about the hair?"

"An impostor," said the grand duke slowly, "could wear—a wig!"

Juanita stared.

"A wig? Oh!" She bit her lip. "Oh, yes, I—I hadn't thought of that. I suppose it could be a wig," she added thoughtfully, and then shook herself in quite an irritable fashion, as if annoyed at being so credulous. "Oh, but it can't be right, uncle! I'm sure it's Sonia. Look how I've stuck to her! No girl could have done the things she's done, taken part in receptions and meetings of the council. And there's another thing, too. If this girl isn't Sonia, then where is Sonia?"

"Exactly."

"And—and what's the impostor up to? What's the idea? Why is she taking Sonia's place?"

He nodded.

"And what of your excellent Uncle Alphonse?" he said, with a sneer which suggested he was recovering his composure. "He'd have known if this—this colossal impersonation was taking place. Unless—"

The grand duke looked up sharply, his eyes narrowed.

"Unless he's a party to it!" he added keenly.

"What? That doddering old fogey?"

And Juanita proceeded to laugh the suggestion right out of court. To her, Prince Alphonse was too staid and unimaginative to be a conspirator in such a gigantic hoax as this. The bare idea was even more fantastic than the other.

"It's hard to credit, I know," said

the grand duke. "But, at any rate, there's one way of testing this theory about an impostor."

"I understand, uncle," Juanita's eyes glittered. "You mean, her hair?"

"Yes—if it is a wig," said the grand duke, a note of suppressed excitement creeping into his voice, "it can so easily be removed. To-morrow night you and this girl will be attending the state ball. Contrive to dress in her boudoir with her. And when she is unprepared just do that!"

He moved a hand in a caressing gesture across his head.

"You understand, Juanita?"

Juanita did—and she didn't. She understood the implication of that gesture, but she didn't fancy the method.

"What's the good of stroking her hair?" she protested. "I'm not going there to admire it. Why can't I grab it straight away?"

"And make a fool of yourself?" snapped her uncle. "Don't be ridiculous, Juanita! A fine idiot you'd look, tugging at the princess' hair, if it isn't a wig at all. You are going there to admire it; at least, so far as she's concerned. You'll soon tell if it's genuine. It'll move—"

"Oh, yes!" said Juanita, and her eyes lit up. "I'd forgotten that."

"Now run along. Keep an eye on Sonia in the meanwhile, especially during the early part of to-morrow, but remember—no attempt until the evening. You can make it seem more natural then. Good-night!"

"Good-night, uncle!"

And Juanita, exulting in this sensational new mission, went.

The grand duke, alone again, lapsed into another bout of gloomy doubts and

didn't mind a beating at tennis once in a while—especially when, on the quiet, she had cleverly allowed Juanita to register her very first win since they had met—vaulted over the net and hugged her opponent's arm.

"I—I think it must have done," Juanita said, with breathless delight. "I've never got anywhere near beating you before."

"Your service is must better, you know," Pamela said. "Come on! Let's have some ices."

Reaching the broad stone terrace of Tolari Palace, Pamela approached the nearest Civic Guard. Would he mind seeing that deckchairs—with sun covers, please!—were put on the lawn, together with a small table and—most important of all—some chocolate ice-cream. Lashings of it, she said, only in more princessly language, and some cool drinks?

"Very good, your Highness!" he said, and, saluting, briskly hurried off.

Within three minutes table, chairs, ices, and drinks were ready. Gaily Pamela and Juanita settled down. They chatted, too, about all manner of things—the ball that night, the dresses they would wear, the international



"SEARCH everywhere!" came the grand duke's voice. "Find that girl if you have to rouse the whole village!" Heart pounding, Pamela crouched on the flat roof. If she were caught with the incriminating wig in her pocket, her role as princess would be ended for ever.

uncertainties. If only he could be sure. The whole idea was so fantastic. He wanted to believe it, it would put triumph right into his hands, and yet—and yet—

"Oh, well, to-morrow night will prove things, one way or the other!" he comforted himself, and stretched out his hand for a cigar.

The Greatest Peril of All!

"GAME, set, and match! Jolly well played, Juanita! Your game's improved like anything!"

And Pamela, just to show that she

tennis tournament to be held in Tolari at the end of the summer, the visit of a Hollywood film company to shoot exteriors of a bandit picture in the rugged regions to the north of Leiconia.

As though both were perfectly, gloriously happy, they chatted away. But neither of them was really happy. Both had secret thoughts, both were forcing themselves to be lighthearted.

Juanita was impatient for to-night, longing to learn if that shining, sleek hair of her companion was or was not a wig. But for her uncle's warning, she might have risked it now. As it was, she must wait.

And Pamela, she was thinking of Paul. He'd be wondering how she had fared last night. Of course, he'd

imagine she had delivered that tremendously important note.

She must try to see him—to-day, if possible. He could write another note; she could give it to the chief at the peasant encampment. It would mean running another risk of being unmasked, but any risk was worth while if it prevented the people from turning against her.

She would have gone this morning, only Juanita had clung to her too tenaciously. And it would scarcely be possible to give the girl the slip in the same way two days running.

"Perhaps I'll be able to get away to see Paul this afternoon," Pamela mused.

But she wasn't. A foreign ambassador arrived for lunch. As a result, the meal was a long-drawn-out affair, with speeches of welcome from the grand duke and herself, and speeches of greeting and thanks for the speeches of welcome from the bearded, aristocratic little ambassador and a seemingly never-ending succession of minor ministers.

With a sigh of relief, Pamela was free at last. At any other time she would have been thrilled by it all, such honour being paid to her. But not now. She simply must get away and see Paul.

But still she had no chance to leave the palace. The court dressmaker arrived. A gown, commissioned some weeks ago—by the real Sonia, of course—which had necessitated the purchase of special material from Paris, required a fitting.

Pamela, growing more impatient every second, submitted. It would take ten minutes, she thought. It took precisely an hour and a quarter!

Every time she expressed herself as being thoroughly satisfied with some tiny adjustment, the conscientious dressmaker found something else wrong with her own handiwork; then one of the half-dozen ladies-in-waiting, who, for some unknown reason, were required on the spot, would point out where another improvement could be made. And so it went on, while Pamela fumed and fretted, until she could endure it no longer.

Jolly things every Schoolgirl can Knit

How would you like to knit a lovely present for daddy, mummy or your school-chum? Well, even a very little girl can make a "pixie" hood for herself, a scarf or shawl, a "Dusky Sue" tea-cosy, and "Bunny" bedroom slippers, and there are such hosts of other jolly knitted things.

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"Excellent!" she exclaimed, posing before one of the mirrors.

"Oh, but—but your Highness, that little frill at the back—"

"Magnificent!" Pamela cut the dressmaker short. "Madame Cigna, I congratulate you!" She bowed. "And you others I thank for your help." She bowed to them. And then, while they were curtsying in return, she seized her chance to back towards the wardrobe-room. "Thank you all! Good-afternoon!"

Two minutes later, having dismissed even her personal maid, Rowena, who had taken charge of the dress, she was alone.

"Phew!" she breathed. "Who'd be a princess? How long have I got? Just about time to get there and back."

She locked the door against the possible intrusion of Juanita, whose absence was, unknown to Pamela, explained by the fact that she was herself being fitted for the ball, and hurriedly put on some suitable clothes for her journey.

Then, unlocking the door, she sped over to the balcony. As she reached it someone tapped. Pamela darted outside and pressed herself flat against the wall. Peering through the curtains, she was just in time to see Juanita look into the room, register surprise, and then withdraw.

"Goody! Tricked her! Poor old Juanita's always being tricked. Oh, well, I'll make things up to her—one day."

And Pamela clambered over the balcony, slithered down the ivy, and raced for the secret entrance in the palace wall, the other way of reaching the underground tunnel that led to Tolari Forest.

An hour later she was at Paul's retreat in the mountain cave. To her relief, his wounded arm was considerably better. He greeted her quite jovially, until he heard her story. And then he looked grim indeed, for Pamela kept nothing back.

She told him of what she had overheard the grand duke and his spies discussing, that the peasants in different parts of the country, stirred up by the lying stories of the duke's agents, and believing she had ordered Paul's arrest as a traitor, were almost on the verge of revolt; how she had been discovered, chased; how she had lost the note; how she had managed to reach the palace before the grand duke, and so allay his suspicions.

That was a grain of consolation to them both, but they were agreed on two things. She'd got to be extra careful from now onwards. One slip might be fatal. And, above all, another note must be given to the peasant chief. Her name had got to be cleared—as soon as possible.

"To-morrow," Pamela said resolutely. "I'll come again then. I'll manage it somehow, Paul. You have another note ready. I'll take it to the chief. To-morrow—early in the morning—I'll slip away."

Paul gave a little sigh then and clasped his knee, looking at Pamela with thoughtful eyes.

"I wish you hadn't got to take so many risks, Pam," he said. "You don't know how mean it makes me feel. I'm the one who ought to be running into danger. You've danger enough at the palace without—"

But Pamela, gently putting a finger to his lips, wouldn't allow him to continue.

"We're in this together, don't forget," she said, smiling. "We're doing everything for Sonia. And I'm not

afraid—honestly! But I'd better hurry along now, Paul. I'll be back as early as I can to-morrow."

"Good-bye!" Paul said quietly.

"Good-bye!" Pamela said more brightly. "And keep your pecker up!"

That was all. Scarcely ten minutes after entering the cave she left it, then went slithering down the rocky mountainside, back to the palace and the state ball.

SUCH a pother and excitement in Pamela's boudoir. Rowena, even more ladies-in-waiting than had attended the trying-on of the frock, and Juanita, as well, all gathered round while Pamela was being arrayed in all the splendour of a princess. Beautiful, shimmering gown, jewels, scintillating tiara.

Pamela, seated before the dressing-table, with everyone clustered about her, regarded her own sparkling eyes. They were really sparkling, too, for she had decided that worrying about to-morrow morning would not help it to arrive any sooner. Far better enjoy herself—or try to, anyway.

Why, the more she did enjoy herself the sooner to-morrow would be here. To-morrow—Paul—and the vital message that would abruptly check the grand duke's cunning scheme!

"May I come in?" inquired a familiar voice from the doorway.

And there, debonair and magnificent, in the uniform of a field marshal, stood the grand duke.

"Certainly, uncle!" Pamela called over her shoulder. "Just finishing. Thank you, Rowena," she added, as the maid clipped a string of pearls around her neck. "That's all, I think."

Curtsying, Rowena and her assistants backed from the room. The grand duke, closing the door, adjusted his monocle.

"Two pretty little pictures this time," he observed.

"I don't know about me, your Excellency," said Juanita, dimpling. "Sonia is. She looks lovely. Her hair's so beautiful, so soft and—and silky. However do you keep it so nice, Sonia?"

Pamela glanced up. "Oh, I'm lucky," she said, with a smile. "It just seems to stay like it. Of course, I have to—"

She broke off to a feeling of the most stunning shock. Juanita's figure, standing right behind her, was reflected in the mirror. Fixedly Pamela stared at it; not at the girl's hands, now reaching out to stroke her hair, but at her face. And she felt astounded.

What ever was the matter with Juanita? Her expression—Pamela had never seen anything like it before. It was as though a mask had been removed, revealing the true girl beneath—an indescribable expression, a blend of hatred, excitement, and fierce intention.

Dazed at what she saw, Pamela could not move. And yet, somehow she knew, with a chilling certainty, that Juanita meant to discover whether her hair was genuine!

And while she sat there as if hypnotised Juanita's fingers alighted on the sheeny wig!

THE most critical moment of Pamela's impersonation! And no one to aid her against the two plotters. You must not miss the continuation of this incident in next Saturday's SCHOOLGIRL.

Thrills and Adventures Galore come to Hilda Farrel & Co., those intrepid

Guests at Mystery Manor!



FOR NEW READERS.

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, who suspect her, are sure the mystery is connected with an old mill, 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. Later, Lavender disappears—kidnapped by a hooded woman and kept in a secret room. She is rescued by the chums, but has lost her memory. Thelma Harkness makes it seem that Hilda & Co. are trying to steal the treasure, and they are ordered to leave!

(Now read on.)

Hilda's Clever Plan!

"COME on, pack, girls!" urged Hilda. "We're going!" But Judy and Beryl sat on the bed and did not move, for they had not grasped Hilda's reasons, and they had no wish to leave the old manor house.

"Hilda, you don't mean it? Think of Lavender," said Beryl, quite shocked. "Why, we practically promised her to stand by and see that things went on well and smoothly. How can we go?"

"Yes, I agree," said Judy. "You know we follow you as leader, Hilda, and we've never failed you yet, only—well!"

Hilda dumped some frocks on the bed. "Now, listen!" she said quietly. "You think I'm crazy?"

"Potty!" said Judy candidly. "Well, in a temper, perhaps," admitted Beryl. "And really, dear, I don't blame you. Thelma Harkness has been horrid!"

"More than horrid—she's been beastly," supplemented Judy. "And I don't think that Mr. Mortimer behaved too well, if you ask me."

Hilda shook her head. "Don't blame him," she said. "He came in here and saw us with the gold—obviously gold from the treasure. What could he think? Just that we had found the treasure and kept quiet about it."

Hilda felt rather sorry for Mr. Mortimer, being quite sure that Thelma Harkness had talked him round to



agreeing that they must go. Desperately anxious to have peace in the house so that all the guests could be happy, he took what seemed the best way out. And, after all, as Hilda reasoned, how was he to know that Marcus had brought that gold cup to them?

"He didn't ask," said Judy. "Oh, well, no use arguing, I suppose! But it does look as though we've lost—been beaten to a complete fizzle! Thelma Harkness wins."

Hilda sorted out her clothes.

"Come on, get your things packed. We've been ordered out, and we're going," she said. "It'll surprise Thelma a bit, if you ask me. All she wants is

played her cards. She had lost nothing—not even the gold cup! "But," said Hilda, as she shut down a suitcase, "we do know one thing we didn't know before—and that is that she's on the track of the treasure. She had the clues; but henceforth we'll be on the spot. We're only pretending to go. Actually we're staying around."

Judy and Beryl gave in. Even though they still felt that they ought to stay to help manage the house, they knew that finding the treasure was all-important to Lavender and her father.

With no more ado, they started to pack their things.

"Lucky it's evening time and dark," said Hilda. "But play up—look upset, tearful—"

They all played up well, and, with some of Beryl's powder, managed to look pale.

Hilda, in silence, stood in the hall, while Bertram looked on, and his parents exchanged whispers. Next came Mildred Bates.

TURNED OUT OF THE MANOR HOUSE,

HILDA GOES BACK—IN SECRET!

to scare us into not looking for the treasure."

"But she thinks we've found it," argued Beryl.

Hilda closed one eye in a wink. "Children, listen to Aunt Hilda spilling wisdom," she said. "Thelma Harkness found that gold cup—and she gave it to Marcus to bring to us!"

Judy and Beryl gaped at her. If she had said that Marcus had made the gold cup in an idle moment they could not have been more staggered.

"But—but why—why?" asked Judy. "Because, my dear chicks," said Hilda, "she wanted to make us look thieves. It was her trump card, so to speak; the one sure way of turning Mr. Mortimer against us and getting us out of the house. Savvy? And another thing—she's got the cup back now, of course."

Judy whistled, and the puzzled frown melted from Beryl's brow as they began to see how artfully the detective had

"Are you going?" she asked. "Going, yes," said Hilda in heavy tone.

"Turned out," added Judy. "Expelled from the house."

"Finding buried treasure, not reporting it, and maintaining possession of it," said Bertram, "is a form of theft."

Bertram's frowning solemnity made them giggle; but their giggling died as Mr. Mortimer appeared and beckoned them to go into his study.

"Not a word of our suspicions," whispered Hilda.

Mr. Mortimer bade them a solemn farewell with deep regrets. He thanked them for the kindness they had shown and the help they had given in the management of the house. But he was cold and reproving deep down; he believed that they had indeed been guilty of taking the treasure secretly.

Hilda very nearly blurted out her suspicions then; but she knew that it would do more harm than good.

By
ELIZABETH
CHESTER

"I'm sorry it has ended this way, Mr. Mortimer," she said sadly. "And I do want you to believe that there is a terrible misunderstanding. Marcus brought us that gold cup, but where he got it we don't know."

"He bowed his head gravely. "If you know where the treasure is, please tell me," he said. "We don't know," said Hilda. "Honestly, we don't."

She saw that he was impressed, but she did not want him now to change his mind: that could come later, when they had trapped the artful detective.

They shook hands, said good-bye, and the taxi being at the door, they got into it.

"Now what—when do we stop?" asked Judy eagerly.

Hilda did not stop the taxi until they were at the station. And there, asking for the luggage to be stored in the office, they waited on the platform until their train had gone. Only then did they walk out.

"Now we walk," Hilda said. "And straight to the mill. Thelma will waste no time."

All that Hilda reserved of their luggage was a suitcase apiece, small, yet large enough to hold immediate necessities, such as night clothes, change of underclothes, flannels, soap, toothbrushes, and change of shoes and stockings.

For if, as was quite probable, they had to remain in hiding for days, they would need those things.

It was a dark night, and the darkness added to their sense of adventure, for now they were quite alone, just three girls and a very intelligent dog, battling with a grown woman, playing her at her own game.

Hilda was thrilled, excited, and Judy ready for any adventure, but Beryl was just a little nervous, and when at last they came to the dark wood, she hesitated.

"Where shall we sleep the night?" she asked.

"The Old Mill," whispered Hilda. "It was not burned very much, remember."

They could see well enough in the wood, for all that it was dark, though Hilda now and again used her flashlight, putting a dark silk handkerchief over the lens, so that only just enough light for their purpose filtered through.

Twigs cracked underfoot; occasionally they stepped into mushy ground, and once Beryl, putting a foot into a puddle, squealed. But Marcus was the best guide of all, and seemed to feel his responsibility, marching ahead, growling now and then to warn off any loiterers.

"The mill," said Hilda suddenly.

They had arrived. In the darkness they could just discern its romantic outline. Badly marred though it was by the fire, the Old Mill still achieved dignity, as though proud that it had been built in the days when King Charles was on the throne.

Above the ground floor were two others, and it was those that Hilda meant to explore.

Using her torch now, while her friends kept watch, Hilda climbed into the mill. The fact that it was built cone-shape had saved it from being gutted completely, and the two upper floors were almost intact.

The first thing Hilda saw when she climbed in was a ladder, that led to a trapdoor. The ladder had not been there before, and the trap-door in the ceiling had been closed.

Someone else had explored the upper portion of the mill.

Climbing the ladder, Hilda flashed her torch about her, finding a room that had recently been swept and tidied. This was the old grinding-room, and the hopper from which the grain was fed to the stones could still be seen in one corner, while the old stones themselves were under a wooden platform.

For the time being, this room would give them shelter until the lights went out in the manor house, and they could creep through the tunnel.

"All right!" called Hilda.

Judy's voice answered.

"Someone coming along the tunnel, Hilda."

She meant, of course, the tunnel that led from the open air into the Old Mill: "Then up here—quickly!" breathed Hilda.

Judy came first up the ladder, helping Beryl, but it was not easy to make Marcus climb, nor to help him. Game, intelligent dog that he was, he succeeded at last, and stood beside the three girls in the first-floor room of the mill, listening, waiting.

A door below creaked, and then a dimmed light shone.

None of the girls breathed, but warily all three, gathering round the trap-door, peered down.

Taking a Risk!

IT was a cloaked, hooded figure that walked softly into the lower room of the mill, carrying a torch, and Hilda & Co. hardly breathed.

At last they were watching the mystery woman at work—watching her unsee. But there was nothing in her appearance to tell them if she were Thelma Harkness or not. They only knew that she was of middle height, hooded.

Under her arm she carried a bundle. Putting the torch on the ground, she shook out that bundle, and they saw that it was a dark blanket, in which were a hammer, and nails.



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

Between Ourselves

MY DEAR READERS.—Although a week has gone by since you had our Special Christmas Number—and I do so hope you all enjoyed it—there's still time for me to wish you once again

The Very Happiest, Merriest Christmas Ever

on behalf of everyone associated with the SCHOOLGIRL.

I feel I simply must repeat these wishes. You see, I'm gazing about my office as I write, and it's the loveliest sight you could imagine; simply dazzling with the most glorious array of Christmas cards which you, my readers, have sent from all parts of the world.

Thank you so much for those little tokens of your loyalty. I only wish I could send each one of YOU a Christmas Card in return.

But if I can't do that, at least I can perhaps help you to enjoy the festive season in other ways, by making the present numbers of our paper as seasonable as possible. While on this fascinating topic let me remind you of those four wonderful story-books—ideal Christmas gifts—you can buy at all big news-agents and bookstalls. They are:—

THE SCHOOL FRIEND ANNUAL, price 3s. 6d., which is YOUR very own Annual, and features Babs & Co. again and again.

THE GOLDEN ANNUAL, also 3s. 6d.

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

THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN ANNUAL, 8s.

You will find further particulars of these topping presents on page 7 of this issue, but hurry, won't you, before it is too late!

I said just now that I wanted to make our paper really seasonable, didn't I? Well, I wasn't the only person to have that ambition, for it was Hilda Richards herself who suggested that we should follow the actual Christmas stories of the Cliff House chums with a New Year story.

Now that was a fine idea, wasn't it? But I realised it was even finer when I had read it, for Miss Richards had produced a story which is full of all the gaiety and glamour of the New Year, and yet features probably the most remarkable character in the whole of Cliff House—Diana Royston-Clarke, Firebrand of the Fourth Form!

And, as the title suggests, it is a case of

"1939—and STILL the SAME DIANA!"

Diana the reckless, the hot-tempered, the impetuous, trampling roughshod over all who stand in the way; but at the same time exploiting that queer streak which so often makes her sacrifice her own desires in order to help someone less fortunate than herself.

Roughly the theme is this: Babs & Co. have planned a wonderful New Year's Carnival—on the ice! Tremendous excitement, of course, with everyone rallying round, determined to make the affair a terrific success, and to have the time of their lives.

But—there's a shock for the Cliff House Chums. Who should they come into conflict with but their own Diana. And Diana, for her own selfish reasons, is determined to do something which will not only ruin the chums' arrangements, but cheat a little friend of theirs out of her heart's desire.

You'll revel in this magnificent story. Don't miss it.

As usual, our next issue will contain further thrilling chapters of "Princess to Save Leiconia" and "Guests at Mystery Manor," and more of Patricia's Bright and Useful Pages.

"Guests at Mystery Manor" will end next week, I'm sorry to say. But don't be too disappointed, for also next week I shall have exciting news about the most unusual and intriguing series of stories which is to take its place. There's another announcement about this on page 4, by the way.

And now—Merry Christmas once more!

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

The fire had made a large gap in the wall, and it was to cover that that she had brought the blanket, as her actions made quite clear to Hilda & Co.

In methodical manner she tacked the blanket to the remaining woodwork, evidently to make sure that even the light from her torch did not betray her presence to anyone outside the mill.

She did not once glance up, but the girls were keyed up, ready to dodge back if she should look their way.

When the blanket had been arranged the woman knelt on the ground, taking something from the inner folds of her cloak. It rustled, and the torch revealed to Hilda & Co. that it was faded parchment. Spreading it on the floor, she leaned over it, studying it with great care, word by word, and now and again muttering to herself.

Hilda nudged Judy, just as Judy nudged her, and Beryl tried to speak without making a sound. Sheer excitement made them want to convey their thoughts; yet there was no need. They all had guessed that this was a plan—a clue to the treasure!

So near to them, and yet so far! For they could not act quickly enough to rob the woman of the plan. She could escape before they were half-way down the ladder.

All that Hilda, Judy, and Beryl could do was to watch and wait, soothing restless Marcus as well as possible. And it was worth watching. The woman, shining the torch right on to the parchment, was wrestling with its mysteries.

Suddenly she sat up and gave a sharp exclamation.

"Ah!"

She had guessed something! She had made sense of that strip of parchment, had solved some part of its mystery. But when she had sat up sharply, the girls had drawn warily back from the trap-door.

"Upstairs!" they heard her murmur. "It must mean that."

And the rays of her torch shone through the trap-door.

Hilda, hardly breathing, beckoned her friends away from the opening, and they crawled over the floor.

If this woman had indeed solved the riddle of the hidden treasure, then they did not want to interrupt her; they wanted to let her search, so that they would know where the treasure was. If she left it, they could remove it themselves; but if she started to take it away, then would be their time to pounce.

Beryl crept behind the hopper; Judy, flat on the ground, hid behind the grinding stones; while Hilda, urging Marcus with her, went to the corn chute on the far side, where there was hiding-room enough for them both.

They heard the woman's foot on the ladder; they heard her mounting it—and hardly breathed, so great was their excitement. Their pulses raced; every nerve, every muscle was tense.

The old ladder creaked under the woman's weight, and in a moment her torch would be searching the room, or else she would climb straight into view.

But just as the top of her hood showed there came a soft whistle from below, and the woman climbed no more. Moving down a step, she gave an answering whistle.

Hilda crept forward slowly, as she judged by the creaking that the woman was descending the steps. Flat on her chest she went, keeping her feet clear of the ground to make as little sound as possible.

A voice came from the room below, and Hilda paused, for she knew that voice. Thelma Harkness!



TENSE with excitement, Hilda waited as Thelma Harkness hurried up. The woman detective thought Hilda was her accomplice—and Hilda meant to play up and trick her into revealing what she knew about the treasure!

"All right," muttered the woman detective. "Those girls have gone; went like lambs—went by the train they were told to. We've nothing to fear; but we must work quickly, in case Lavender should recover her memory and know you."

"Yes—but she won't. And we shan't take long now. I've discovered a clue. Look!"

Hilda crept to the trap-door and looked down. There were two cloaked and hooded figures now—one, the woman they had seen before; and the other, Thelma Harkness.

After all, there was a mystery woman. Thelma Harkness was in league with her; was not the only seeker after the treasure.

There was whispering below now in too low a voice for Hilda to hear, then audible words followed.

"Put the light out. I'll leave my cloak up on the next floor. We can take the ladder away and hide it in the trees."

It was Thelma Harkness speaking; and next moment the ladder creaked as she began to climb, but as no torch shone Hilda did not move. She could hear the woman's breathing as she came nearer, and a moment later something soft dropped to the ground near her. More creaking followed as the woman detective went down the ladder, and then bumping as the ladder was removed.

"At midnight, yes—"

That was the only other phrase that Hilda heard, then a door closed. There was silence.

Judy spoke shakily.

"My golly! We're certainly hearing things. That was our Thelma—"

"Shush! They're not far away; hiding the ladder," breathed Hilda. "Go to the window."

The windows had no glass and were boarded over, but there were gaps between the boards; and the chums, peering out, could see a torch amongst the trees.

Five minutes passed, ten, and as the silence persisted Hilda decided that it was safe to talk.

They talked excitedly, although softly, even Marcus whining his excite-

ment; for he, too, was thrilled by all these mysterious movements.

Shining her own torch through the dark handkerchief, Hilda found the hooded cloak, shook it out, and examined it. But her hope that the parchment might be there was not fulfilled; there were no pockets to the cloak, and nothing was hidden in it.

"But we've got this!" said Hilda excitedly. "And I could impersonate Thelma, or her friend, by wearing it, and perhaps trick the truth out of them."

"And they think the treasure is up here," breathed Judy. "For goodness' sake, let's search!"

Using the torch, they searched in all the likely places; but without tools they could not pull up the floorboards, nor part the horizontal boards that formed the inner section of the mill walls.

It was a search soon ended, therefore, and Hilda led the way to the next floor above. Its walls tapered steeply, and above was the eerie sight of old rusted machinery, an enormous cog-wheel, and a trundle—the latter fitted to the central driving shaft that ran right down through the mill.

There was no means of climbing to that machinery, and it did not seem a likely hiding-place for treasure in any quantity.

"The more I think about it," murmured Hilda, "the more puzzled I am. How much treasure is there, I wonder? If it's a good deal, then the hiding-place must be pretty large."

"But the only clue we had said the mill—at least, it hinted at what could only be the mill," murmured Judy.

"No use worrying yet," advised Hilda. "Let's keep quiet for a bit. I'm getting hungry; it's dinner-time, and—Golly! The one thing we haven't thought of—food!"

Blankly the girls looked at each other. They were hungry. If they had not realised the fact before, the knowledge that they had nothing to eat put a keen edge to their appetites now.

For a while they discussed whether they should go down to the village to buy things; but then Hilda, realising that everyone at the manor house would

be at dinner, decided to do something which, though risky, was likely to be successful.

"I'll put on the cloak and creep along the tunnel to the house," she said. "You wait here and keep Marcus."

They had paid for their food, since the week was not up yet, and they were really entitled to it. Hilda had no moral qualms about taking it, and she felt that she could manage this little adventure quite easily.

Dressed in the hooded cloak, Hilda was quite unrecognisable; and even if seen, provided she could escape, no one need guess that the chums had not really left for home.

With her friends wishing her luck, Hilda went to the trap, and, lowering the ladder which was in their own room, climbed down by it, groping her way to the tunnel entrance.

"Then speak!" said everyone eagerly. The supposed detective, after a glance at the door, lowered her voice.

"There is no possible doubt," she said, "that the house is haunted!"

There was a sensation at the table. Mrs. Bates dropped her knife and fork with a clatter; her husband paused in the act of breaking bread as though petrified, and Bertram's father and mother exchanged looks.

"Haunted! Are you sure?" said Mr. Bates. "It was not just those girls pretending, then?"

Thelma Harkness shrugged her shoulders.

"They pretended—they played at ghosts," she said. "But that does not alter the fact that the ghost of Sir Godfrey still walks this house. According to age-old legend, he should walk

the pantry—" she choked. "It menaced me! It's the spectre—"

Confusion reigned in the dining-room, voices babbled, but Thelma Harkness rushed from the room, colliding in the corridor with Lavender's father, and sending his tray crashing, but not pausing for him.

Thelma Harkness did not go to the pantry, but to the corridor in which was situated the secret passage leading to the Old Mill.

Round the bend of that corridor, Hilda, dressed in the hooded cloak, and carrying cold chicken, sausages, bread, some butter, knives, and forks, stopped short.

The woman detective gave a soft whistle, and Hilda, putting down the prizes she had won from the larder, whistled in response.

Greatly daring then, she turned the corner, and came face to face with Thelma Harkness.

The woman detective was deceived. Not for a moment did any suspicion enter her mind that it was not her own ally who stood there.

"Judith—you fool!" she muttered, as she hurried up. "What were you doing in the pantry? I told you that the plan would be in my room if you wanted it. You know where that is!"

Hilda, thrilled, could hardly repress her joy; for those few words had given her a secret she could not have guessed—the whereabouts of the precious plan.

But she could not risk talking. Her voice might give her away.

"Sssh—sssh!" said Hilda, backing, and pointed over the detective's shoulder.

Thelma Harkness turned, and hurried away down the corridor; for the guests were in the hall now, all talking at once, and she had no wish to be caught with a hooded figure!

But no sooner was Thelma Harkness gone than Hilda dumped the provisions into the tunnel. Then, listening, she waited until the hubbub had died, and crept out.

She did not wish to scare anyone; and she hoped that she would not meet Mrs. Bates, Miranda, or someone else nervous.

Stealthily, Hilda crept to the woman detective's room. She turned the handle of the door, opened it, and stepped in. But there she paused.

Sitting at the table was another hooded and cloaked figure, studying the parchment plan by the light of a torch; and as the door opened, she glanced up.

"I've solved it—I think I've solved it," she said softly. "At last!"

Hilda dared not speak, for fear her voice betrayed her identity. She wanted that plan, but also she wanted to learn the solution if the other had indeed found it.

"Quick! Come in and shut the door! I'll show you, Thelma," the other hooded figure went on, turning back to the parchment. "You see this here?" She swung back to Hilda, pointing. "I'm quite sure—"

But Hilda lifted a warning finger. "Sssh!" she whispered, and stepped into the room.

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Mistaken for a Plotter!

IN the manor house, all was peace. The Bates family and Bertram's people were discussing the ghost at dinner, while Miss Thelma Harkness listened with a somewhat sneering expression.

Now and then, fulfilling his duties as butler, Lavender's father came into the room; but as the house was so short-staffed, he did not linger, but helped in the kitchen with the dishing-up.

"If this place is indeed haunted, then I shall leave," said Mrs. Bates.

"I, too," said Bertram's mother.

"I'm not afraid of ghosts," said Bertram. "Are you, Miranda?"

"No," said Miranda, in low tones; for since her guilt in the matter of firing the mill had become known, she had been in sullen, sulky mood, and spoke but little.

"What do you think, Miss Harkness?" asked Bertram's father.

"If I could be assured that what I say is said in confidence," Miss Harkness murmured, "I might speak."

this very night. At midnight. But— She gave a short laugh. "Who ever is afraid of ghosts? They're quite harmless!"

But her glinting eyes, surveying them mockingly, noted the qualms and uneasiness. Ghosts might be harmless, but these people had no desire to meet one.

"There is nothing to fear," said Thelma Harkness.

As though in denial of her words, there came a shrill cry from some distant part of the house. A moment later, the heavy front door could be heard opening.

Thelma Harkness jumped to the dining-room window and opened it.

"Who's that?" she shouted. "What's wrong?"

It was the daily woman, who was temporary cook in the manor house, and she appeared at the window, her face deathly pale, her eyes wide and staring, while her breath came in short gasps.

"A hooded figure—a hooded figure in

S.C.L. 15

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