

Extra Special Christmas Number

The Schoolgirl

Incorporating
SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN

2^D
EVERY
SATURDAY



THE STRANGE HORSEMAN OF CHRISTMAS EVE!

A thrilling incident from
the superb Yuletide story
of the Cliff House chums
inside.

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A most unusual Long Complete Christmas Day



Her Yuletide Quest

A Strange Reception!

"CLARA, what's that old place on the hill?" Barbara Redfern asked curiously. "We haven't been there yet. Looks a most awfully intriguing sort of place to me!"

The rest of the party looked inquiringly at Tomboy Clara Trevlyn.

Eight girls there were in that party—eight enthusiastic, fresh-faced girls gleeful with the triumph which had been theirs that night. The gusty wind which blew from the downland hills had set them all warmly glowing as, with snow underfoot and a golden moon pouring brilliance from above, they crunched their way back to stately old Trevlyn Towers.

Each of them was snugly and warmly wrapped up, and some of them carried sheets of music. Barbara, as leader of the party, carried an unlighted lantern.

For Barbara Redfern, Tomboy Clara Trevlyn, plump Bessie Bunter, monocled Jemima Carstairs, American Leila Carroll, Janet Jordan, golden-haired Mabel Lynn, and gentle Marjorie Hazeldene had been on a carol-singing expedition.

These girls—all good chums from Cliff House School—were the Christmas guests of Mr. Trevlyn at Trevlyn Towers, and to-night was Christmas Eve.

No doubt that the carol singing had been a success. Every farm, every little homestead, every cottage had welcomed the young carol singers. They would, indeed, have a rich haul to deliver up at the church when they

went there for Christmas morning service on the morrow.

A good night—yes, following a most happy and successful day at the Towers, when their own great friends, Dick Fairbrother and Berry Osborne, had become engaged and left for Dick's home.

Flushed with victory, it was perhaps no wonder that the chums longed for one more world to conquer before returning to Trevlyn Towers. It was, indeed, almost inevitable that Barbara

by old Joshua Bracewater himself, his great-granddaughter Lucy, and an old manservant. Nobody ever goes there, and nobody for years has ever seen old Josh Bracewater off the premises. He hates callers at any times, but most of all round about Christmas."

"Sounds queer, I guess," Leila Carroll said. "What's the story, Clara?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Clara said. "The old man had a row with his grandson one Christmas—I'm hazy about details, because it all happened when I was a kid. But I remember the grandson—Noel Bracewater—jolly nice fellow, too! Anyway, Noel and his grandfather quarrelled, and one Christmas Day the row boiled up, and old man Bracewater expelled his grandson from the Hall—"

"Oh dear!" breathed Marjorie Hazeldene.

"And Noel, so they say, buzzed off with all the family bonds and valuables, leaving old man Bracewater practically penniless," Clara went on. "From that day to this the old squire's been just an old grouch."

"A real old sort of Christmas Scrooge—what?" Jemima asked thoughtfully, polishing her monocle. "But what about the great-granddaughter, forsooth? Pretty sad life for her—what?"

"Fraid so," Clara said. "Anyway, perhaps you can see now how hopeless it would be to sing at the Hall. Let's push on."

But Jemima shook her head.

"Christmas, old sport—time of good will, friendship, and all that sort of merry old stuff," she demurred.

By

Hilda Richards

Illustrated by T. LAIDLER

Redfern should have asked her question.

But Clara Trevlyn, pausing, did not look happy about her reply.

"That's Bracewater Hall, Babs," she said.

"What, the squire's house?" Mabel Lynn cried.

"Yes."

"Then why on earth haven't we been there already?" Janet Jordan wanted to know. "It's not shut up or anything, is it?"

"Well, no, not exactly. But—" And Clara shook her head as she gazed at the great, rambling, creeper-covered house half-way up the hill, yet even in the bright moonlight seeming to wear an atmosphere of lonely aloofness. "The house is occupied still—but only

adventure of the famous chums of Cliff House School.

with *Mystery Mask!*

"Rather a duty left undone, what, not to give the squire a look-in? Maybe," Jemima went on, "all that is needed is a jolly old spark to set the fire of happiness rekindling, comrades—"

And Jemima broke off, beaming invitingly at the chums.

Clara flushed a little. Marjorie's eyes shone—Marjorie did so love shedding happiness where happiness might be shed.

"Well, no harm in trying," said Babs, with a smile. "Good idea, Jimmy! Who'll follow your Auntie Babs?"

There was an instant nodding of heads.

Cheerily they tramped after Babs as she led the way up the hill, arriving at the outer gates of the rambling old Hall. Except for one meagre spiral of smoke which drifted out of one chimney, there was no sign of life about the place.

That did not deter the chums, however. Minds made up, they marched along the drive, finally reaching the darkened porch. There, just away from the shadow cast by the porch, Janet dragged out the small concertina which was the carol singing party's one and only instrument, and commenced to play.

"Let it go," Babs breathed, and, nodding to her followers, brought down her hands.

"Good King Wenceslas looked out—"

Eight clear, girlish voices mingled with the strains of the concertina. "On the Feast of Stephen—"

Crash!
The door violently flew open. A flickering storm lantern was raised on

high. In its yellow glow they saw the white, lined face of an old man, bushy brows overhanging glittering little eyes which furiously glared at them.

"Get away!" he rapped.
"My hat! It's old Bracewater himself!" Clara breathed.

"Get away! Get away! How dare you come making the air hideous!"

"Oh kik-crums!" stuttered plump Bessie Bunter nervously. "I sus-say, you girls—"

"But, Mr. Bracewater—" Clara cried.

"Hey? Who's that knows my name?" And the fierce old eyes

young girl who came forward—a pretty face, a gentle face, very much like Marjorie's, but infinitely sadder. "Grandfather, please don't lose your temper."

"Temper?" Irritably the old man turned. "Lucy, go back with you!"

"Yes, grandfather. But—but—" Lucy shook her head. "Oh dear! I—I heard the name of Miss Trevlyn called, and if she's here—"

"I am," Clara said.

"Then—then, grandfather, couldn't you ask her in?" Lucy faltered pleadingly. "Couldn't you ask her friends

What a dashing, intriguing young fellow "Mystery Mask" was! And how the chums wondered who he was, and why he insisted upon remaining disguised and masked! Only Babs knew—only Babs knew that he had returned to Bracewater Hall to clear his name of a callous crime. And although Babs promised him her aid, she could not help wondering—was he to be trusted after all?

fastened on the Tomboy. "Who are you, girl?"

"I'm Clara Trevlyn, from Trevlyn Towers," Clara answered steadily. "And—and, Mr. Bracewater, it's Christmas."

"Christmas? Christmas?" A sort of choke came into his voice. "And that's your excuse for making young nuisances of yourselves? Christmas—bah!"

But at that moment a new diversion occurred. From behind the now shaking shoulders of the angry old man a girl's voice spoke.

"Grandfather—" In the light of the lantern they all saw the face of the

in, too? You did say when you read in the paper that Jack Trevlyn had won the Distinguished Flying Cross in France that you'd like to shake the young man by the hand. Surely, grandfather, you won't turn his sister away now she's here?"

The old man grunted. He paused. But it was evident, however embittered he might be towards the outside world, that Lucy's pleadings had the power to move him.

"Well, hum—er—" he said. "No—yes. Oh, well, dang it, as it's a Trevlyn, let 'em come in! But none of that Christmas nonsense! I won't stand it! Well, come in!" he barked.

"Don't keep me shivering in this cold!"

"Hardly," Jemima Carstairs murmured, "what one would term a hearty invitation, what, comrades? But come on."

They passed over the threshold. Before them was a great wide hall, lit only by three candles and the dying embers of a good fire. Actually it was darker in the hall than outside it. So gloomy, in fact, that one could not see the high-raftered roof.

Behind them the old man closed the door.

"Well, get in!" he said irritably. "Don't bunch up like a flock of sheep! Dash it, where's Griggs? Lucy, ring for Griggs and tell him to bring faggots for the fire!"

"Yes, grandfather," Lucy said. "And—and may we have the electric light?"

"No!" the old man growled. "What do we want electric light for when we have candles? Oh, well well—" he added, as Lucy's lips quivered. "All right, then; just this once. Is that Griggs?" he added to a dim figure which appeared on the outer rim of the darkness. "Faggots, man—and hurry about it! Oh, ay, and cocoa!"

The chums looked at each other. Surely this was the queerest welcome they had ever experienced! They felt inclined to wish the old squire the compliments of the season and retire. But because they all sensed that their presence meant something in Lucy's lonely life, they banished their own feelings.

"Please, will you—will you let me have your clothes?" Lucy asked timidly. "It—it will be so cold for you going out afterwards. And please," she whispered to Babs as she sidled near her, "humour him—please!"

"Trust us!" Babs breathed, with a warm smile.

The old man had hobbled to the fire now. Without another word, he sank into a chair.

Lucy turned to the electric light just as Griggs, the mahservant, looking as old, as bowed, as careworn as his master, appeared with the faggots. Light and faggots went on at the same time, and the chums blinked in the unaccustomed brilliance.

And interestedly they looked about them.

Certainly the old hall of Bracewater, in its day, must have been magnificent indeed—but how drab, how life-lacking, somehow, it looked now!

The suits of armour which stood about it were dull; the furniture lacking polish. High up on the walls cobwebs could be seen, but nowhere a single splash of colour, a flower, a sprig of holly.

"Come and get warm," the old man grunted. "Cocoa will soon be served. Lucy, get chairs for the guests. Come and talk. Where've you been?" he asked irritably. "Carol-singing," Babs answered.

"Fool's work!" he grunted. "What do you get out of that?"

"Well, lots of fun, you know," Babs ventured, "and quite a lot of money, which we shall give to-morrow to the church for distribution among the

parish. Besides, it's rather nice out. Haven't you ever been carol-singing, Mr. Bracewater?"

He grunted. "Haven't you?" pressed Marjorie Hazeldene's gentle voice.

"Ugh! Don't talk of such things!" he growled.

"But when you were a boy?" Marjorie insisted.

"Oh, ay, ay, I've been carol-singing—as a boy!" he was irritably forced into confessing. "And we collected money—heaps of money," he added fiercely, "for the villagers! My father was the richest man in these parts then, and my father— But, ooch!" he added disgustedly. "What am I talking about?"

"Oh, grandfather, it's lovely to hear you talk!" Lucy said, her eyes beginning to shine. "Grandfather, what was your favourite carol?"

"Oh, don't talk nonsense!" "But," Marjorie urged, "you must have had a favourite, Mr. Bracewater?"

"Humph! Well, yes, I had one—'Come All Ye Faithful.' But that was years, years, years ago!"

Babs, seized with sudden inspiration, nodded to Janet Jordan, who still carried the concertina.

"All Ye Faithful—quickly!" she whispered. "Strike up, Janet. We're getting him!"

Janet grinned. She saw the idea. The old man started as, without warning, the concertina played the first notes of his favourite carol. Before he could voice objection, eight girlish voices in tuneful harmony had taken up the old tune:

"Oh, come all ye faithful—"

"Dang it!" the old man cried.

"Joyful and triumphant—"

the chums cheerfully sang.

"Look here—"

"Come on, Mr. Bracewater, join in!" whispered Babs.

The faggots flared up, seeming to cheer the atmosphere with sudden gaiety and warm good will. The old man quivered. And then, despite himself, his lips began to move. Louder the chums sang, making the rafters ring.

"Grandfather, join in!" Lucy cried in tremulous joy. "Second verse. Come on. Oh, look!" she breathed rapturously, as though beholding some miraculous wonder. "He's singing!"

And that was so. For old Squire Bracewater, his hatred of Christmas pierced at last, his mind flung back by the old familiar tune he used to sing in boyhood days, had allowed himself, momentarily at least, to forget. His lips were opening and closing, words were issuing from them. Sparkling-eyed, the chums looked at each other.

"Oh, fine, fine!" Babs beamed. "Fine! Rippling, in fact! Now, 'While Shepherds Watch' girls. Come on, Janet!" she urged, and before the old man knew where he was, the other old melody was sweeping through the hall.

Griggs, bringing in the cocoa, almost fell down.

"Mr. Bracewater—" he cried.

"Put the cocoa there, man!" the old squire cried. "Dang it, what's happened to me? I'm feeling years younger! Bother me if I couldn't even dance!" he cried. "If some of these harum scarum girls of the modern day knew the Roger de Coverley, by gum, we'd have it!"

Marjorie at once sprang up.

"Mr. Bracewater, I know the Roger de Coverley!"

"What, you do? Dang me!" the

old man cried. "Hey, Griggs, bring out the harp! Eh, Griggs, you played that harp in your younger days, didn't you—come and twang it now!"

"Sus-certainly, sus-certainly, sir!" stammered the dazed Griggs, and with eyes agog with wonder, vanished.

Lucy laughed—a happy, ringing laugh. The chums grinned at each other delightedly.

And how the old squire, now that he had broken down his own restraint, let himself go! And what really astonishing vitality he showed.

"Dang it, I'm going daft!" he chuckled, when, after the third breathless Roger de Coverley, he stood sipping his wine. "Something's happened. I don't know what, and, dang me, I don't care. I feel young again to-night. And look at Lucy laughing there! What have you done to me?"

"It's Christmas, sir," Babs laughed. "Christmas Eve!"

"But nothing till now," Lucy said, with a little falter, "to show that it is Christmas at Bracewater Hall."

"Lass, I'm sorry," the old man said contritely. "Maybe, though, we could get something even yet."

"Perhaps," Clara put in eagerly, "I can make a suggestion, Mr. Bracewater?"

"What's that?"

"At the Towers we've got heaps and heaps of Christmas food, decorations—everything, Mr. Bracewater. Now this is the idea," Clara enthusiastically bubbled. "Supposing, instead of spending Christmas Day at Trevlyn Towers, we all spent it here—at Bracewater Hall? My father and you are neighbours, and I'm sure my father would agree. If he does agree, will you—can I—suggest it?"

For a moment the old face overshadowed.

"But, dang it, lassie, it's a lot of trouble—"

"Well, if it can be worked, shall we do it?" Clara cried, and Lucy waited in trembling excitement for his answer.

"You can tell your father from me, Miss Trevlyn, that I'll be pleased to see him," the old man answered. "Ay, I'm daft—or have been. For the first time in twelve years I'm feeling the old longing again. Suggest it—and let's see how it works. Meantime, can any of you dance a quadrille?"

"Rather!"

"Let's get going, then! Griggs, the old tune, please!"

Was it a miracle? It was! At least, Lucy said so when, overwhelmed and almost dazed with joy, she at last saw them to the door, with the old squire, tired and exhausted by his unstinted efforts, dozing in front of a now blazing log-fire.

"Oh, it's wonderful—wonderful of you!" Lucy gratefully breathed, as she faced them radiantly. "It seemed there was nothing—nothing at all—in Christmas until you came. I can't never thank you enough. Miss Trevlyn, you—you think your father will agree?"

"Trust me!" Clara beamed. "And gosh, the things we'll bring! Keep grandpop in a good humour, that's all."

"I will," Lucy promised. "I will! But—but just one word, please. Don't mention his grandson—Noel. Don't mention anything about—about what happened years ago. And, oh, please don't—don't touch that," she whispered.

For Babs was just about to turn a small picture which hung with its face to the wall.

"But somebody—" Babs began puzzledly.

"No," Lucy quickly shook her head. "That's—that's a painting of Noel,"



she breathed. "Every Christmas it's turned to the wall like that. Grandfather says that the sight of it at this time of the year is more than he can bear. Please, please don't touch it! If he saw you, it would destroy—everything. Now, please, go," she added hastily, as the dozing figure of the old man stirred. "And—and do come to-morrow," she urged. "It will all be so dreadful now without you."

Chorusing their cheery good-byes, the chums tripped out and down to the gates. Overhead the moon still shone, the snow lay deep and crisp before them. What an end to their triumphant evening—what a greater triumph to have melted that old man's heart, than all the money they had received from their carol-singing efforts!

From the distant village of Bracewater Bridges the church clock began to chime out the hour of ten.

"My giddy aunt, listen to the time!" Clara chuckled. "But who's that?" she added, with a start.

They all stiffly tensed, each one of them seized with the queerest of thrills.

From somewhere came the pounding of horse's hoofs crunching the snow.

"I sus-say—" stuttered Bessie Bunter.

"My hat!" gasped Clara.

"Look!" Babs cried.

For around the high wall a vague shadow had suddenly emerged. Gigantic it looked for the moment in the moonlight—unreal, too. They held their breath as they saw the silhouette of a horse, and on the back of the horse an upright figure, seated as motionless as stone. Bessie gave a gasp.

"It's a gig-ghost!" she stuttered. "It is a ghost! Look!" And then suddenly her voice rose to a shriek. "It's the gig-ghost of a highwayman!"

And Bessie, in terror, turned, starting to run. But the chums stood by the gateway, eyes wide.

The horseman was, in fact, that of an old-fashioned masked highwayman. For a moment they saw the moonlight glinting on the pistol butts in his holsters.

Then, startlingly, the figure reined in. There came a pause, and in that

pause, Babs recovered her scattered wits. She called:

"Who—who are you?"

With a cry, the highwayman reined in. Like a flash he whirled his horse.

And while they stood, lost still in amazement, the mysterious figure galloped madly away.



A Surprising Rescuer!

A STOUNDING and inexplicable, that incident. The

more the chums discussed it, the more baffled they felt by it. Only on one point were they all agreed.

And that point, despite Bessie's convictions to the contrary, was that the mysterious highwayman was no ghost!

That was very obviously proved when, going back, they discovered the deep hoofprints in the snow.

Some masquerader, bent perhaps on a Christmas joke; but flesh and blood, most undeniably. And yet, what had that highwayman been doing, lurking outside Bracewater Hall? Why, if his motives were honest and above board, had he taken such fright when they had called out to him.

"Just," Jemima Carstairs sighed, "another of life's little mysteries, what? Still, who cares?"

Nobody did, really. As soon as the subject of the mystery highwayman had been exhaustively discussed on their way home, it was almost forgotten. Far, far more breathlessly important events than a chance meeting with a mystery masquerader were afoot. How they all looked forward, on the morrow, to cheering up the gloomy old Bracewater Hall, of bringing at least one day's joy and happiness in the friend-hungry heart of little Lucy.

Their one and only anxiety now was—would Mr. Trevlyn adopt the impetuous suggestion which Clara had made?

Mr. Trevlyn would—and did! No

less enthusiastic than themselves was he when he heard about their adventure. There and then, despite the lateness of the hour, he went off to see the old squire, and coming back shortly before midnight, triumphantly announced that all details had been settled.

To a girl the servants of the Towers were to leave early to-morrow morning, laden with food, with holly and mistletoe, and decorations. Mr. Trevlyn and the rest were to follow on later in the morning. Mr. Trevlyn, indeed, was as excited as themselves.

"Brighten my buttons, but it's something of a miracle you've wrought," he chuckled. "For ten years I've never had a word with Josh Bracewater, though before that rascal Noel departed with the family fortune we were almost chums. To-night he was the old man I knew then—and that little great-granddaughter of his—well, I don't think I've ever seen a child looking so happy!"

He told the chums then the full details of that Christmas scene at Bracewater Hall so many years ago. The old squire, as they could readily believe, was one of those gentlemen who would not entrust his valuables to a bank or lawyer, but believed in keeping it intact and safe under his own eye. When Noel Bracewater had gone, Noel had taken practically all the Bracewater possessions, leaving the old man to exist only upon the meagre rents to be gained from his property in the village.

"And so poor is he," Mr. Trevlyn concluded, "that he's only got one servant now, and even had to sack his secretary—a fellow named Gilmore. What happened to Gilmore is as big a mystery as what happened to young Noel. Nobody has ever seen either of them from the day they departed."

"And—and Lucy?" breathed Babs. "Where does she come in?"

"She is the daughter of Noel's sister, who died five or six years ago," Mr.



THE old grumbling squire shifted restlessly as Babs & Co. cheerfully sang the carol. "Come on, Mr. Bracewater, join in!" whooped Babs. And then, wonder of wonders, the old fellow's lips parted and he began to sing! It seemed, after all, that the chums were going to brighten up Bracewater Hall.

Trevlyn answered. "It was because the old man took Lucy in that he was forced at last to sack his secretary. Things had reached such a pass by that time that there was not enough money to feed even one extra mouth at Bracewater Hall. It will be a real treat to give him and the little girl a Christmas that shall remind them of old times."

That was what all the chums were looking forward to. They were all living now for the morrow at Bracewater Hall.

Soon after dawn they were up, gurgling with delight as they saw the snow falling outside, and gasping with rapture when, on going down to breakfast, they found their Christmas presents on the table in front of them. What excitement then! What a riot of fun around that breakfast table!

They all had presents, of course— heaps of them. Presents from parents; from relatives; presents from each other.

And apart from the Christmas presents, what a host of Christmas cards!

And then came breakfast, and afterwards, Mr. Trevlyn burst in jovially with the announcement that the sled to take them to Bracewater Hall was ready.

There was a joyous scramble at once. Outside the chums all bundled, where Mr. Trevlyn's magnificent sled, its rear containing Christmas presents for the old squire and Lucy, was waiting, its four horses pawing the snow.

With many laughs, with many cheery waves of the hand for the villagers they met en route, the Cliff House chums skimmed swiftly over the snow towards Bracewater Hall.

Any trepidation they might have had about the lasting good humour of the old squire was banished when they reached the Hall. Dressed in a rather ancient, out-of-date morning suit he, with excited Lucy, was waiting to welcome them in the old hall—and what a difference had been wrought there with the advent of the Trevlyn servants! Now it shone! Now it gleamed and winked and sparkled, and holly and mistletoe seemed to be everywhere.

"Like old times," the old squire chuckled. "Gad, Trevlyn, what a lot I've missed these last few years. But let us have a drink," he suggested.

"A toast," Mr. Trevlyn proposed, his eyes twinkling, "to Christmas!"

"Ay, to Christmas!" the old squire laughed, and tinkled a bell. "Griggs, bring in the glasses."

Griggs, looking like a man who had awaked from a long dream, skipped off. In a few moments bottles and glasses were produced.

Babs laughed, winking at Lucy, whose face was one big smile. She glanced on past Lucy towards the photograph which hung on the wall near the door, and saw that it still remained with its face turned.

What was this Noel like? she wondered.

Lucy, who saw her curiosity, moved forward anxiously.

"Oh, Babs, don't mention Noel, please!" she whispered. "If you do, it will spoil everything. Last night, after you had gone, I—I happened to say I wondered where Noel was, and—and grandfather flew into a most terrible rage. Please—"

"Hey; what are you two whispering about?" the old squire asked suspiciously.

"Nun-nothing, grandfather!" Lucy said in confusion.

"Come, come!" the old man cried.

"Girls don't look like that when they're talking about nothing. "If—"

"Well—we were talking about the ghost we saw last night, Mr. Bracewater," Babs replied with quick inspiration. "I—I was wondering if Lucy had seen it, too. It was the ghost of the highwayman—"

"Yes, rather! On a whacking great horse, you know!" Bessie impressively put in. "He—he looked fearful! All these girls were dreadfully afraid and ran away, of course. Only me, brave Bessie, stood my ground—"

"Well, of all the fibbers!" Clara gasped. "But, Mr. Bracewater, is there a highwayman ghost at Bracewater Hall?"

The old man frowned.

"There is," he said, and the chums were startled. "The ghost of old Roger Bracewater. Roger was one of the daredevil Bracewaters—a good enough fellow in one way, but reckless—utterly. Bracewater Hall had fallen on evil times in his day, and one of the big Christmas customs of the time was for the squire to give presents to the villagers at morning church on Christmas Day—"

"Oh! And—and does that happen now?" Bessie asked.

"It does not," the old man said, for a moment looking sour. "It cost Roger his life. Rather worried one Christmas because he could not hand out the usual presents, and determined his villagers should not be disappointed, he turned highwayman and robbed the coaches of the rich on their way to Chichester. Well," he added grimly, "Roger got his presents all right, but the soldiers got him. They shot him in the Star Room at the top of this house, and 'tis said you can see the marks of the blood where he fell on the floor to this day."

"Poor, poor Roger!" murmured Marjorie Hazeldene feebly.

"But I say, what a marvellous story!" Babs breathed. "Can we see the room Mr. Bracewater?"

The old man made a gesture of indifference.

"See it if you like—sometime," he said. "You'll have to wait, though, till Griggs can take you up there. My old bones won't allow me to climb all those steps at my time of life. The room's easily found by the dome in the roof—another crazy idea of an old Bracewater, who went in for astronomy. Trevlyn, my friend, perhaps now you're here you'd like to look at the Hall's armoury—the one thing I have managed through all these struggling years to preserve intact. If you girls would like to come along, too—" he added courteously.

"Shucks, I guess I'd love to," Leila Carroll said. "Come on, girls!"

They all moved forward as their host and Mr. Trevlyn walked away. But not Babs. Babs, remembering the mysterious highwayman of last night, was interested and intrigued by the story she had just heard. How, somehow, she would love to see that Star Room!

Well, why not? The old squire said she might.

Babs chuckled, and moved towards the stairs; but before she reached them she paused.

And again, as if magnetically attracted, her eyes wandered towards that back-turned picture on the wall.

Dare she risk—just a peep?

Why not? Babs asked herself again, and, with curiosity overmastering her, approached the picture.

Swiftly she turned it. A handsome, debonaire young face smiled out of the frame at her, and she found herself smiling back. What a nice-looking

young man—so open, so honest, so friendly somehow! And to think that he had decamped with his old grandfather's fortune!

It seemed incredible. Quickly she turned the picture back. Her curiosity satisfied, she went back towards the staircase.

Climbing them, she reached a landing. Another flight of stairs rose before her. Up those she went on to another landing, grimy with dust.

It was decidedly shivery and chilly up here. Not a sound, save the whispers of the wind outside, and the faint, fairy patter of snowflakes against the window-panes.

Should she go on? She went, steeling herself. Another flight of steps, and then she was on the topmost landing of the house.

Along the landing she advanced, pushing open a door. So long had that door remained untouched or unopened that the first turn of the knob brought it off in her hand, and the door creaked inwards.

But it was no Star Room—just a dingy apartment of litter in which had accumulated the dust of ages.

Three similar doors she tried before she found her objective. Then her heart leapt as at last she peered into the Star Room. Large and lofty this room was, dusty and ancient like the rest, but possessing infinitely more interesting features.

High above her, now rendered obscure by grime inside and snow outside, rose the cup-shaped dome, and suspended beneath it a crazy little wooden platform, on which, at one time, the star-gazing Bracewater of ancient times had evidently nightly explored the skies with his telescope.

Leading from the floor to the platform was a ladder.

But on the floor there were certainly no bloodstains, no evidence whatever that this was the room in which Roger Bracewater had been killed as reward for his misguided charity to the villagers.

Babs, gazing at the ladder, at the platform, felt at once an irresistible desire to climb it, to see whatever was to be seen from that height. Acting again upon immediate impulse, she moved towards the ladder; careless of the dust which had formed a layer on each of the rungs, began to climb. It creaked; it shook. But, with a sense of adventurous discovery awaiting her, Babs went on.

Up, up, up! Something beneath her creaked. Up again, another creak, and the ladder swayed. Would it hold? She hesitated for a moment, and then, telling herself that, having gone so far, she might as well complete the journey, crept on. Now she had nearly reached the platform. Now, by reaching up, she could touch its edge. One more step—

Crash!

Like a pistol-shot that crash sounded through the room. Too late Babs realised the ladder had snapped. For one awful, dismayed moment she felt a numbing fear sweep over her as she felt the ladder buckling and twisting beneath her. Then instinctively she had hurled herself upwards, had gripped the edge of the wooden platform, just as the crazy ladder smashed to the ground.

And there she hung, twenty feet above the floor.

Babs gasped. Oh goodness, what was she to do now? She dared not drop. A broken limb or a crushed shoulder-blade was the least she could hope to expect as the outcome of such a course.

"Help!" she cried.

"All right, keep calm," a voice beneath her said. "Just fall."

Babs, in that moment, was too utterly alarmed even to wonder at the voice, or whence it came. But it sounded strong, somehow. It gave her comfort.

"Just drop," the calm voice advised. "I'll catch you."

Babs let her hands slip. A whirling fall, and—

Thud!

Her fall was arrested. Two strong arms fastened round her like warm steel vices. She heard a gasp as her rescuer staggered, but she knew that she was safe. Then gently she was lowered.

"Pretty close—what?" the voice laughed.

And Babs, turning her head, almost collapsed as she saw the young man who had so fortunately arrived to save her from a nasty accident.

From behind the slits of a black mask a pair of dancing brown eyes gazed out at her. Above that mask was perched a wig, surmounted by the hat of an old-fashioned highwayman. And the rest of his garb was of the same period.

Vividly her mind went back to the rider of last night.

For here—here was that highwayman!

In such fascination, in such utter surprise, did Babs regard him that she completely forgot her own peril of a moment before. And he, noting that surprise, perhaps expecting it, laughed lightly.

"Astonishing—what?" he asked. "Fair damsel, I beg you not to be alarmed, or even surprised. I am not, alas! what I purport to be—just a cheap imitation of that real highwayman who might well haunt these premises about this time. I beg you forgive the—er—disguise, but I assure you it is necessary. You are not hurt?"

"Nun-no! Thanks to you!" Babs flushed. "It—it was splendid of you to do what you did!" She looked up at the platform and shuddered. "I—I might have broken my neck."

"And then—what an end to your happy Christmas at Bracewater Hall!" the masked highwayman said lightly. "You're one of the Trevlyn guests, aren't you?"

"Yes; but—" And again Babs gazed at him.

"Enjoying yourself?" he pursued.

"Yes, of course, except for—"

"For nearly breaking your neck?" He smiled. "Too bad! I thought only Bracewaters did idiotic things like that. But I do congratulate you on one thing," he continued, "that is, pepping up the old squire. I've been watching him. He seems really happy for once. But tell me, if you can, fair maid, does this happiness of the old squire's mean that he has forgotten and forgiven?"

"You mean"—Babs stared at him—"that grandson of his?"

"What else—or should one say, who else?"

She shook her head, staring at the firm lines of the chin and the lips revealed below the mask.

"No," she confessed, "it doesn't. I don't think he ever will forgive or forget that rascal. Noel left him to starve."

"Sure?"

"Well, he says so," Babs countered, feeling a little adrift.

"So—he still believes?" The young highwayman gave a gesture of despair. "I feared so, fair maid. 'Twas because of the old squire's conviction that I have adopted this—er—disguise! 'Tis a pity, but perhaps, considering his fears, his bitterness, one cannot blame

him. In his circumstances, mayhap, I should have felt as he does to-day. But that grandson, young lady, was no more guilty of robbing his grandfather than you are."

"How—how do you know?" Babs asked in a stifled voice.

"Because I do. Can you keep a secret?" he asked abruptly.

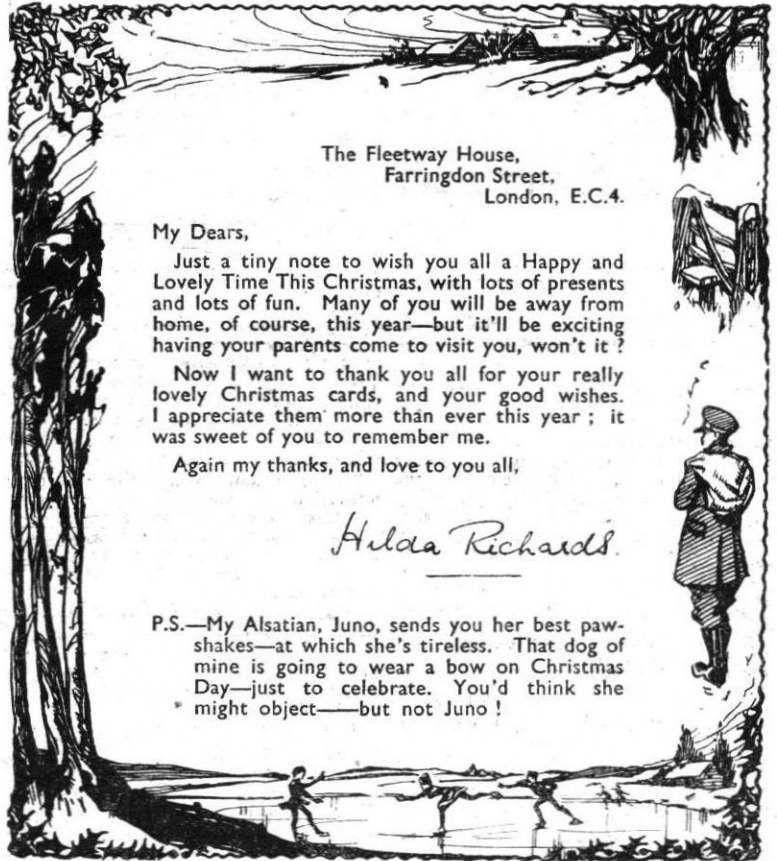
"Y-yes," Babs falteringly confessed.

"Then," the young man said, "I'll tell you one. I'm telling it because I think I can trust you—because I need the help of a friend. That Noel Bracewater who is supposed to have robbed his grandfather, whom that grandfather thinks he hates, has returned." And Babs received the most violent shock of her life as he whipped off his mask, revealing the handsome, en-

allow himself to think kindly of me because of that horrible business of the past. I have come, if 'tis but possible, to convince him of my innocence—to show him that he has been making a terrible mistake all these years. And I can convince him—I can convince him this day—with help. Your help!" he added simply.

Babs flushed a little—in admiration for the romantic action he was taking.

Noel Bracewater, the scapegrace, the thief, the man already condemned. But she knew, even allowing for her gratitude, that from that moment she trusted and believed in him. Those frank, honest brown eyes, that earnest, sincere friendliness could never be found in one guilty of such cold-blooded robbery.



The Fleetway House,
Farringdon Street,
London, E.C.4.

My Dears,

Just a tiny note to wish you all a Happy and Lovely Time This Christmas, with lots of presents and lots of fun. Many of you will be away from home, of course, this year—but it'll be exciting having your parents come to visit you, won't it?

Now I want to thank you all for your really lovely Christmas cards, and your good wishes. I appreciate them more than ever this year; it was sweet of you to remember me.

Again my thanks, and love to you all,

Hilda Richards.

P.S.—My Alsatian, Juno, sends you her best paw-shakes—at which she's tireless. That dog of mine is going to wear a bow on Christmas Day—just to celebrate. You'd think she might object—but not Juno!

gaging features of the young man in the picture downstairs. "I am that grandson," he added. "My name is Noel Bracewater!"



Was "Mystery Mask" Guilty?

BABS, emotionally shaken, for a moment felt the whole room spinning around her.

"But—but why have you come back?"

He shrugged. "A fair question, fair maid!" He laughed. "Perchance, however, you may guess the reason. I love my grandfather. I believe that he still loves me, except that he will no longer

"My—my help?" she found herself asking.

"Your help—yes." His expression was serious now. "But, more than your help, I must have your faith, your trust, your confidence. Oh, I know I'm asking a lot—I, Noel Bracewater, the outcast, already condemned and hated in this house—but I swear to you by everything I hold dear that I am innocent. I only want a chance of proving my innocence—as I can do if I have a friend in the house. Miss—Miss—"

"Redfern," Babs unsteadily put in, "No," she added with impulsive swiftness, "call me Babs!"

"Babs—short for Barbara?" he nodded. "A nice name. Babs, I ask you to trust me. And—you do not look like a girl who would turn down a plea for help."

Babs gulped. "What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"First, do you believe in me?"
 "I believe in you—yes." And Babs nodded. No criminal, this. No thief, no rascal—just the victim of some ghastly mistake. "Tell me."
 "Oh, Babs, what it is at last to find a friend!" he breathed. "You shall never, never regret this. Now listen, and tell me if you can do what I ask. You know my grandfather's study?"
 "No, but I can find it," Babs said.
 "Good girl. In that study is a small, glass-fronted cupboard. In that cupboard, on the second shelf, is a small key. All I want, Barbara, is that key. I—" He turned sharply. "What was that?"

"What? I heard nothing," Babs cried.

"I thought I heard a step—somebody breathing." He went to the door, opened it, and then shaking his head, came back. "Ugh! Just imagination!" he said, with a laugh. "Barbara, will you get that key?"

"And when I have?" Babs asked.
 "Keep it—until you see me again. How and when I will let you know—as circumstances permit—but, Babs, my friend, be surprised at nothing from this moment. Now, perhaps, you'd better go," he added. "But remember the key."

He held the door open, gallantly bowing as she passed through it. Babs, her mind in a whirl, but fiercely made up on one point, tremulously smiled back and went.

Noel Bracewater! Oh, great goodness, whoever would have dreamed of this development?

Was she right to trust him?
 But of course she was, she told herself. Was it likely, if he was a real rotter, that he would have come back? She liked him. She had given him her promise to help. She would help. His quest should be her quest!

Back she raced down the staircases, arriving in the hall just as the party, returning from the armoury, entered by the opposite door. Old Joshua, however, was not with them, though Mr. Trevlyn was, his arm tucked within that of Lucy.

Clara Trevlyn, looking curiously at Babs, strolled up to her.

"Babs, where have you been?"
 "Hush!" Babs said. "Don't talk—now. I'll tell you later, perhaps. Where's Mr. Bracewater?"

"He's gone along somewhere or another to get an old-world miniature he wants to show my father," Clara replied. "Apparently the old boy collects such trifles, and this one has been handed down in the family from the days of Roger Bracewater. I don't expect—" And then Clara, with a jump, broke off. "Golly!"

For suddenly, muffled but clear, came a voice from somewhere in the house—a thin, reedy voice raised in a scream; the voice of the old squire himself.

"You scoundrel—"
 The voice snapped off abruptly. For a moment there was silence. Then, in Lucy's trembling voice, came a cry:

"Grandfather! Grandfather! Something's happened to grandfather!"

"Come on!" cried Mr. Trevlyn.

He darted forward, Lucy at his side. Babs and Clara at once followed him, and with fluttering Lucy scudding on ahead they darted along a gloomy passage. One of the doors which lined that passage was open, and into that Lucy flew. They heard her cry:

"Grandfather!"

Another moment they were in the room themselves. And they gasped at what they saw.

Old Squire Bracewater lay on the floor, his face very white, a tiny trickle of blood oozing from a wound on his temple. Lucy was by his side, her frail arms around his shoulders, her face agitated. Mr. Trevlyn rushed forward.

"Bracewater, are you hurt?"
 "Hurt? Hurt?" The old man looked dazed. Then swiftly, irritably, he disengaged himself from Lucy's embrace and staggered to his feet. "No, I'm not hurt—not a great deal," he said.

"The cowardly young scoundrel lurking behind the door hit me on the head with a pistol-butt as I came in! This!" he added, and Babs received a violent shock when she saw, lying on the floor, a brass-butted horse pistol she seemed to have recognised before. "He only broke the skin, I think, but the force of the blow for the moment knocked me out—"

"But who was it?" Clara cried.
 The old man's eyes seemed to burn. "Never mind!" he said gruffly.
 "But, Bracewater, you have an idea?" Mr. Trevlyn demanded.

"Ay, I have an idea—more than an idea!" The old man's face set. "And such a cowardly attack was worthy of the man I have in mind! I didn't see him, but I heard his quick, active step, and that reminded me of one man—"

"Who?" Babs breathed, and felt her heart stand still.

"My grandson Noel!" the old man muttered.

And for a moment the room seemed to swim round Babs. For a moment she felt shaken and unsteady. Again she stared at the old-fashioned pistol—that pistol, she was sure now, which she had last seen in the holster of Noel Bracewater's belt.

Noel, then—and a feeling of dizziness, of disgust, seized her—had attacked his grandfather in this brutal fashion!

And to Noel she had given her friendship, her faith, and trust! She had promised to help him in his quest, believing in his innocence. Was this the act of an innocent man? Was this the first fruits of the friendship she had extended to her dashing highwayman?



The Squire Suspects!

"BABS, old thing, what's on your mind?"

Clara Trevlyn asked concernedly. "You don't seem to be the same since we found Mr. Bracewater knocked out in his study."

Worriedly Babs shook her head, though she tried to summon a smile.

The time was half an hour later; the scene the cloak-room at Bracewater Hall, where Clara and Babs were dressing in preparation for the Christmas morning service at church. At the moment they had that cloak-room to themselves.

Clara spoke no less than the simple truth. Ever since that incident to

which Clara referred, Babs had been rather silent.

And no wonder, with the doubts, the fears which were tearing at her heart-strings! Though old man Bracewater himself had fully recovered from the callous assault made upon him, Babs was torn by a welter of conflicting emotion she had rarely known before.

Was Noel Bracewater that attacker?

Nobody, of course, believed that the old squire had actually recognised his grandson's step. Mr. Trevlyn said that Noel preyed so much upon the old man's mind at this time of the year that he had just imagined that; and even the squire himself, now that the incident was passed and its memory blurred, was doubting himself. And yet—Babs knew!

Or did she know?

That was what was worrying her. It was so difficult to credit that the young man who had rescued her in the Star Room could be guilty of such an attack.

One thing was certain—until she had seen the masquerading Noel again, and had received some explanation or assurance from his own lips, she could not judge either way.

"Babs! Clara!" Mabel Lynn's urgent voice came along the corridor.

"Buck up! The sled's waiting!"
 "Come on!" Clara chuckled. "Don't tell me if you don't want to—but banish the old blues, Babs!"

Babs laughed. In a moment she was her own cheery self. Doubts, indecisions, were swept away suddenly. This was Christmas, and with her chums she was going to enjoy it. Out of the room she bundled, to join Lucy and her rosy-faced chums, who were already seated in the sled outside the door of the ancient hall.

"All ready?" she cried. "Right-ho! Mabs, got the carol-singing money we collected?"

"What do you think?" Mabs chuckled.

"Right-ho, then! Let's get off! Bye, Mr. Trevlyn! Bye-bye, Mr. Bracewater!"

"Good journey, lassies!" the old man cried; and he and his neighbour stood at the door, smoking long clay pipes specially adopted in honour of the Christmas season. "And good luck go with you!"

The chums laughed as they waved hands. Lucy tremulously smiled. Then away went the horses, smartly cantering.

A wintry sun peeped out from behind a bank of snow-laden clouds, as if to smile upon their voyage. Down in the valleys the bells were ringing, and from somewhere far away the breeze bore back a choir of fresh young voices singing "While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night." The atmosphere seemed to be full of Christmas.

Stinging, exhilarating, the wind came lashing into their faces as the horses cantered along. Louder pealed the bells of the church; and presently the church itself, looking like some picture postcard come to life, with its snow-covered spire and roofs, hove in view.

A great many people were there, some standing talking, others entering the church, but all wearing that fresh, happy look which proclaimed their consciousness of the greatest day of the year.

There were cheers as the sled rolled up, and a crowd of wondering-eyed youngsters gathered round to watch the chums as they alighted. Then suddenly across the fields came a boisterous voice, accompanied by the thunder of hoofs.



"Hola, hola, hola!" the voice cried on a laughing, reckless note.

"My hat, look!" breathed Janet Jordan.

"The highwayman!" squeaked Bessie Bunter.

Babs started. A funny sort of shiver went down her spine as she gazed at the figure now galloping towards them—the figure of the masked highwayman—Noel Bracewater!

And, as he came up, the highwayman, drawing a pistol from his holster, laughingly levelled it at them. With an easy grace which proved his superb horsemanship, he reined in.

"Stand and deliver," he cried—"not your cash, but your good Christmas wishes!"

"My hat, who are you?" Clara cried.

"Ha, ha! Now, wouldn't you like to know?" And the white teeth were revealed in a tantalising laugh as he leapt smartly from his horse. But he looked at Babs, and for a moment Babs saw the glimmer in his eyes beneath the slits of the mask. "Call me Mystery Mask, but I follow in the footsteps of that Roger Bracewater who lost his life so that he might give his villagers a merry Christmas. Mystery Mask brings Roger Bracewater's deeds to life! Behold, kiddies!" he cried.

And they all gasped as, plunging his hand into a hide bag, he brought out a handful of shining shillings. Laughingly, he tossed them among the kiddies.

What a scramble then!

"I sus-say, what a ripping idea, you know!" Bessie gulped. "And, I say, isn't he nice? Who is he, Babs?"

But Babs did not hear. Her eyes had gone to the holster in Mystery Mask's belt. They blinked a little at what they saw. For the brass-butted pistol which she had noticed on their first meeting—that pistol which she believed she had last seen lying on the floor of old Joshua Bracewater's room—was still there.

Then—then—

"Mother, for you!" the highwayman gaily cried, and pressed a handful of silver in the trembling hands of an old woman. "Grandfather, for you!" he added, with a laugh. "In the name of Roger Bracewater, I salute you! In his name, I bring his deeds to life and give you all a merry Christmas greeting!"

"But, look here, who the dickens are you?" Clara cried. "Mystery Mask isn't a name!"

"Ha!" he teased.

"Oh, come on, Mr. Highwayman!" Janet urged. "Take that mask off!"

"Not so—not so, young lady!" the highwayman laughed. "An undone mask reveals much, 'tis said, and 'tis no part of my Christmas plan to reveal myself. Now, kiddies, the last few bright shillings!" he cried gaily, and emptied his bag into the air.

And, as he did so, he swiftly pressed back a letter into Babs' hand.

Then he passed on, laughing, while Babs, torn again by a welter of conflicting emotions, tremblingly opened the envelope and read the note it contained.

"Make your way to the vestry wall," it read. "See you there before church." Babs gulped.

Quietly, while everybody clustered around the gay highwayman, she slipped away. In the belfry the church bells were still merrily pealing their message of good will and peace, and service was not due to begin for ten minutes yet. Without mishap, she reached the vestry wall.

And there, breathing a little heavily, she waited.

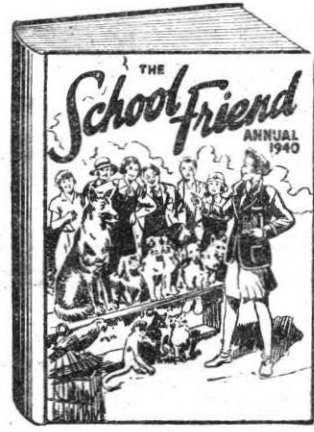


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Presently footsteps crunched the snow near by and Mystery Mask loomed up. Through the slits of his mask he regarded her.

"Good sport, Barbara!" he chuckled. "Did you get that key?"

"No," Babs said.

"Oh! No opportunity?"

"It wasn't a question of opportunity," and Babs faced him steadily. "Noel, I want to talk to you—seriously—before I carry out that promise."

He frowned.

"You sound serious!"

"I am serious." Babs bit her lip. Long and steadily she looked at him—oh, how for one moment could she believe that he had been guilty of that callous attack on old Bracewater? But she braced herself. She told him.

The eyes beneath the mask flickered for a moment.

"Oh, so that's the way of it, is it?" he asked thoughtfully. "H'm! Well, Babs, let me tell you my side of the story now. I never saw my grandfather after you had gone."

"But—but the pistol?" Babs faltered. "There are more than one of these pistols in existence," he pointed out.

"In any case, this is only a dummy. Anybody who visited my grandfather's armoury could get hold of half a dozen like it, come to that. That is of no importance, Babs. As for me"—he shrugged—"just after I had seen you I felt that I was being followed about the house. Remember the footstep I thought I heard when I was talking to you?"

Babs started. "And so," he said, "I cleared out. And now," he added sadly, "I find that you no longer trust me."

"Noel—no! It—it's not that! Noel, I do!" Babs cried, the words tumbling from her lips. "Please, please don't think that—now. Of course, I understand and, of course, I—I accept your explanation. But, Noel, who was following you? Who could have been spying on you?"

Again, keenly, he eyed her. "That, little girl, is something I'd give a lot to find out," he said. "He was too wily to show himself. But it seems evident—with a snap of the lips—"it was the same wretch who struck my grandfather down." He paused, sombrely regarding her. "Perhaps, after all, you needn't worry about getting that key."

"But, Noel, I want to help—"
 "I know. You shall. And I," Noel said, "want to get back to the Hall. But, Babs, don't you understand? I want to get back there—not as a sort of sneak-thief, but openly—with freedom to move about, to come and go. The proof of my innocence is in that house, and only by being able to search in the house can I find it. I thought perhaps if I disguised as somebody—if I could turn up as your brother—"

Babs stared at him, her heart suddenly thumping.

"But why disguised?" she asked, and excitedly laughed. "Why be anything but what you are now? Noel, I've got the idea! It can be worked, I'm sure, and it will add like anything to the fun at the Hall. Suppose you come back to the Hall—as you are. If you wear those clothes and that mask—"

His eyes shone. "Could it be worked?" he asked eagerly. "Why shouldn't it?" Babs' face was



flushed with eagerness, with inspiration now.

"Come back with us after church. I'll explain to the squire what you've been doing, and point out that as you're acting a Bracewater part I thought it only right that he should meet you. It will be easy enough then to

get an invitation to stop the rest of the day."

"By Jove!" he laughed. "What a brain, Babs! Only one thing, little girlie, you've overlooked. That's the fact that my grandfather is bound to want to know who I am."

"Yes?" Babs looked at him. "Take a dare?" she challenged.

"Ah, ha! Now we're coming to something. Who dares to dare a Bracewater! Say on, Barbara, fair maid!"

"I dare you," Babs said steadily, "to keep that mask on till midnight. I dare you to keep up this masquerade until midnight."

He burst into a laugh.

"I see, that's my excuse. I haven't revealed myself, my face, my name, because I've already been dared by a beautiful lady! - Brainwave, Barbara! If I were headmaster of your school I'd make you head girl right away! And if I keep the dare?" he added slyly.

"Well, then?" Babs laughed.

"Then," he said gravely, "I shall claim my reward! To-night, Barbara, when the ghostly hour of midnight strikes, you shall pay forfeit—under the mistletoe! But go now," he added urgently. "The service will soon be starting. And, Babs—thanks again for being such a topping little brick! I'll be outside the church when you come out."

Babs smiled, all her confidence in Noel and herself restored. Into church she went, to be met by the questioning eyes of her chums, who had already delivered up the carol-singing collection.

The service commenced. When it was over, Babs' thoughts flew to the daring young highwayman outside. She thought with alternate thrills and chills of his introduction into the home of that old grandfather who had expelled him so many years ago. Given freedom, he could prove his innocence, he said—and Babs, without having asked for details, believed that. But supposing he was spotted? Supposing he—

He mustn't—shouldn't—be spotted.

In the vestibule after church she told her chums of her invitation, not mentioning, of course, the real identity of the highwayman. They were utterly thrilled.

"And you think Mystery Mask will come?" Marjorie Hazeldene breathlessly asked.

"He will," Babs chuckled. "He'll be waiting for us outside. I thought it was the only right and proper thing to introduce him to a real Bracewater, but what we've got to do, if that is possible, is to wangle it so that he stops at the Hall for the rest of the day. It'll be such fun. All back me up in that, won't you?" she urged.

Would they? Immediately their excited minds had fastened on to the idea. They were all intrigued, all excited about the philanthropic young highwayman.

And sure enough, when they went outside, there he was holding his restive horse by the reins.

He swept them a bow. When the sled trotted off he cantered at his side, keeping up a rousing fire of cheery conversation in a voice specially disguised for his masquerade, and altogether different from that in which he had first spoken to Babs that morning in the Star Room at Bracewater Hall.

Before that journey was finished, the chums utterly adored him.

It was with a thrill and a momentary stab of anxiety that at last Babs found the sled skimming its way up the drive of the Hall, Noel still trotting at their side.

There were the old squire and Mr. Trevlyn waiting at the door to meet them.

"What—what!" the old squire spluttered, as the dusty young highwayman swept his hat from his head. "Who is this?"

"Kind sir, excuse the intrusion," Noel murmured, in his disguised voice. "I am the victim of these fair guests of yours. Since I have had the pleasure on this Christmas Day of impersonating your famous ancestor, Roger Bracewater, your friends insist that I should take a cup of wine with his successor."

"But who are you?" Mr. Trevlyn demanded curiously.

"Good sir, I am afraid that I cannot answer that question with truth," Noel answered. "I dub myself 'Mystery Mask.'"

"Then take off that mask," said Mr. Bracewater.

"That also, good sir, is impossible I should do," Noel said regretfully. "A certain wager lies upon my wearing this mask until midnight to-night—a wager with a young and pretty maiden." And here he looked slyly at Babs, who blushed. "Excuse, I pray you, sir, the excuse, but the idea was none of mine."

"Egad!" the old man said. "Then what was your idea?"

"That, good sir, is a question our friend, Barbara, may answer better than I," the young man murmured, and looked at Babs, who blushed again. "Will you be so good as to inform the squire, fair Barbara?"

And Babs, with the help of her chums, did inform the squire, telling him how the chums had discovered the highwayman distributing shillings among the children at the church. Mr. Trevlyn beamed.

"That's a good stunt!" he chuckled. "A real old Christmas stunt. Well, Mr. Mystery Mask, after that I don't see what we can do, except to invite you in to drink a Christmas toast to the Roger you have brought back to life."

"And perhaps," Babs breathlessly suggested, "to join us at dinner?"

"Yes, rather! And tea!" Bessie beamed.

The old squire hesitated; but it was obvious that he, like the others, was interested and intrigued.

"Well, sir, if you would care to stop to dinner—"

Noel bowed.

"I thank you for the invitation. I am yours to command, squire. I make one condition, and one condition only—that I leave at midnight."

"At which hour," Babs put in, "you will take off your mask and tell us your name—yes?"

"That I solemnly promise," the young highwayman nodded. "Squire, if you have a stable, I would fain feed and rest my horse."

"Thanks, you needn't worry," old

man Bracewater grunted. "My man, Griggs, will see to that. Come in, sir!"

Babs gleed. The chums looked at each other in delight. With solemn dignity Noel marched in with them, and, handing his old-fashioned hat to one of the Trevlyn maids, brushed back his flowing wig. Even in the mask he looked frightfully distinguished and handsome, they all thought.

The toasts were drunk, all eyes upon Noel. Babs breathed relievedly. How marvellously he was carrying off his part! How easily he moved about this house! How right, somehow, it seemed that he should be here.

Then came dinner—that dinner which had been destined for Trevlyn Towers. A great dinner it was, too, with its roast boar's head, its tremendous turkey, and everybody hungry after the trip to church fell upon it with the greatest of gusto. But all through it Noel was the centre of attraction, the life and soul.

It seemed odd to see him sitting there, dressed in that costume, the mask covering the upper part of his face.

But nobody wanted him to take it off. It was a thrill somehow just to look at him. Mentally they were all excited, all curiously looking forward now with a sort of queer thrill to the midnight which would proclaim his identity. Gay his chatter, laughing his banter, Babs marvelled at the effortless way he kept it up. But never once did he falter; never once did he betray himself.

"Oh, he's wonderful!" Lucy breathed. Lucy, bright-faced, was seated next to Babs. "And I'm sure, Barbara, he's just the handsomest man ever. Look how interested grandfather is," she whispered. "He can hardly take his eyes off him. What a brain-wave of yours to bring him here!"

A brain-wave—yes. No doubt that the presence of Noel added immeasurably to the gaiety and the interest of the party.

With his quips and jests, his odd stories, he kept them all enthralled and convulsed by turns during that dinner. After dinner, when games were proposed, and Mr. Trevlyn suggested a great Christmas treasure-hunt—he had already hidden the clues—it was the disguised Noel who entered into the fun as enthusiastically as any of them. With the girls he lined up; with them examined the little slips which contained the first clue.

Babs chuckled as she looked at hers, written in the atrociously bad verse of which only Mr. Trevlyn could have been guilty.

"In the study of the squire,
Is a great old-fashioned reed,
Two feet away is placed the reed,
Which may you to the treasure lead."

She knew the answer to that one almost as soon as she read it. The second clue was hidden in one of the reed pipe spills which rested near the fire.

"All ready?" Mr. Trevlyn beamed. "Ay, ay, skipper!" Jemima Carstairs said burlesquely.

"Then, go!" cried Mr. Trevlyn. And off with a scatter and a laugh they all went. Noel disappeared with Janet, Clara, and Bessie.

Babs more leisurely made her way in the direction of the east wing of the old house, her difficulty being not to locate the clue, but the study itself. But that, she guessed, would not be far away from the hall, seeing that the squire seemed to spend so much of his leisure in that place.

She opened a door, finding herself in a wide corridor. There were three doors in that corridor—two of them locked, the other obviously the room belonging to Griggs, the servant. She went back.

Here was another corridor. Again it contained three doors. She peered into the first room—a tiny room, obviously used as a store place of some description.

She went into the second room. That was as bleak and bare as an attic. The third—

She turned to the door which was partly open, and peered in.

And her heart leapt as she saw an untenanted study, ornamented by a huge old fireplace, near which was a brass box filled with pipe spills. This was it then. And apparently she was first on the scene.

She pushed the door open.

And then, rooted, she halted, all those swift, dismaying doubts rushing back to the surface.

For the room was not unoccupied. Someone else was in it, someone who was standing near a little glass-fronted cabinet let into the wall at the far end of the room. The someone was Noel in his mask and gay finery, and in Noel's hand was a gleaming penknife.

He did not see her as she entered, and Babs for a moment was too surprised to cry out. But even as she stood there the blade of the knife slipped under the lock of the glass-fronted door, the door itself swung open, and Noel had slipped in his hand.

And Babs was aware of a sudden, dreadful, chilling shock.

Noel, then, was a thief! Noel was using the invitation she had secured for him in order to rob the old man!

For a moment Babs felt stunned. Back with hideous vividness rushed her qualms of the morning. Noel, despite his gay, gallant pose, was only an utter ruffian! Noel had tricked her after wheedling from her a promise of help. He—

"Noel!" she cried.

With a jump the young man swung round.

"Babs, you—"

"Me!" Babs cried bitterly. "I've caught you in the act! Noel, you— you traitor! What are you stealing?"

"Babs, I swear—" Noel gasped.

"What is it?" Babs cried.

He opened his hand. On it rested a key. Babs looked at it and then snatched it.

"Babs—"

"Get out!" Babs cried thickly.

"But, Babs—Babs, you don't understand! Babs, you little chump! You utter idiot!" And in his agitation the young man's voice had lost its disguised note; protestingly it was raised.

"Babs, you know I wanted that key! I was just saving you the trouble of getting it. I'm not a thief! I'm not stealing! Everything depends—"

Babs started, too late remembering that conversation in the Star Room when he had asked her help concerning the key.

"But—but—"

"Babs, quickly—listen!" he cried. "Oh, great Christmas!"

And Babs flung round, shaken, confused, as from the corridor came the clump of a stick, another voice. It was the voice of old man Bracewater—crying out agitatedly:

"Who is there?"

"My grandfather!" breathed Noel. "Babs, he—he mustn't know! He

mustn't see! He—he may have heard my voice!"

Babs gasped. Unwittingly she had forced Noel to betray his presence.

In a moment, while the footsteps outside were hurrying to the room, she flung the window up. Noel, seeing her idea, nodded. With one lithe jump he was through, down into the soft snow beneath, and Babs, gulping, had barely closed it after him when the old man appeared.

His eyes were fierce under his bushy brows.

"Who is here?" he rasped.

With an effort, Babs collected herself.

"Only—only me, Mr. Bracewater."

"And somebody else!" Suspiciously



"HELP!" cried Babs desperately. Her fingers were slipping. "All right, keep calm," a voice beneath her said, and the mystery highwayman appeared on the scene.

his eyes roved round the room. "You were talking to someone. I heard your voice, and I heard his—a voice I have learned to—hate. You were talking to my grandson!" he accused. "Where is he?"

"But, Mr. Bracewater, you—you're making a mistake!" Babs cried.

"A mistake, am I? That's what I was told this morning when the young scoundrel hit me over the head! Young woman, don't try to fool me! I may be old, but I've still got my senses, and the one thing in this world I'm not likely to be mistaken about is worthless Noel's voice! You were talking to him here. You have hidden him. Do you admit it?" he barked.

Babs clenched her hand so that the key, hidden in the palm, bit into her flesh. Was she right to defy this old man to protect Noel? Was she, after all, doing the correct thing? But she believed in Noel, and she had promised.

"I—I don't admit anything, Mr. Bracewater. And if he was here, why isn't he here now?"

The old man glared at her. Then, roughly, he brushed past her. In the middle of the room he paused, swung about, and for a moment so absolutely furious did he look that Babs had an alarmed impression that he was going to strike her. Instead, he raised his arm, pointing a shaking hand to the door.

"Get out!" he barked.

And as Babs got out, shaken, numbed, her mind in a whirl still, the door banged violently upon her.



Two of Them!

"BABS—in here!"
Barbara Redfern jumped.

It was perhaps five minutes after the scene in Mr. Bracewater's study, and Babs was walking slowly along one of the great corridors on the upper floor of Bracewater Hall. The treasure hunt, for her, had ceased to exist.

She was still shaken after that scene, still thinking with dismay of its possible consequences. She had saved Noel, it was true, but undoubtedly now the old man knew of Noel's existence in the house, and linking up the scene in the study with the first, had made up his mind that she was helping the treacherous scoundrel who that morning had laid him low.

Apart from that, she had the key—that mysterious key which Noel had declared was the one and only means of proving his innocence. More to get away from everyone to think things out, she had come to this part of the Hall.

But she flung round now as that soft voice floated to her ears, and her eyes widened at sight of the masked face peering out of the door to her right.

"Noel!" she cried.

"Come in!" the young man whispered urgently.

She went in, glad to have linked up with him at last.

"Thank goodness," he breathed, "I've found you! What happened, Babs?"

She told him. He pulled a face. "Which means," he said, "that he knows now. Which means, too, little girlie, we've got to work fast. Barbara, have you still got that key?"

"Yes."

"Can I have it now?"

"But—but, Noel—"

"I know." He shook his head. "You can't altogether believe—and trust, eh? I don't blame you. But, Barbara, I swear I was only trying to save you the trouble of getting that key."

Babs gulped.

"But, Noel, to what does the key belong?"

"It belongs," he said simply, "to a cupboard—a secret cupboard. In that cupboard, if I'm not mistaken, are all the proofs I shall want—proofs which will convince even my grandfather. Barbara, please don't ask me more



A Happy Christmas To You All

Our friends are extra dear to us at Christmas, aren't they? And we believe that you've been looking forward to this special Christmas letter from PATRICIA.

THERE is only one way in which I can open my letter to you this week, my pets, and that is by wishing you all, every single one of you,

A Happy, Happy Christmas!

Whether you are at home with your own dear families, or whether you are separated from them, as I know so many of you are, I do hope you'll have a perfectly glorious time.

Have you quite finished all your Christmas shopping now? I think I've actually completed mine.

All our parcels to be posted have been sent off.

We paid very special attention to the parcel that is off to France for brother Brian, wrapping it as carefully as if it contained precious gold or the most fragile cut glass, instead of just homely and home-made goodies.

The address we did particularly carefully, having heard on the wireless what trouble and delay can be caused through carelessness.

Do you know, there was one woman who addressed her parcel to the BLANK-shire regiment!

It's rather like sending one to Mr. Anonymous, isn't it?

● Preparations



You'll have a nice long week-end in which to complete the home decorations if you haven't already finished them off.

There's Saturday for fun and games and last-minute preparations, then there's Sunday to rest up a bit, all ready for Monday.

I'm going to spend part of Sunday balloon-blowing-up. (Do you think, if I took them along to the men in charge of the barrage balloon, they'd do them for me?)

This is a job that always puffs me. It gives me a huge appetite, as well, so perhaps I shouldn't grumble.

If a balloon proves particularly stubborn and refuses to blow up, you should just squiggle it in your hands for a few moments, to get it soft and warm. Some people put them under the warm-water tap—but if you do this, don't let water get inside, will you?

After blowing up six or seven and tying them, very tightly, with fine string, you

should tie all the strings together and then hang them up over the door, the curtains, or over the mantelpiece.

A bow made either of ribbon or of that pretty crackly Christmas paper, should be fixed to the middle of them, and then they'll look most festive.

But don't do as I did one year—artistically arrange a piece of holly among the balloons. Believe me, I couldn't think for the moment why they popped, one after the other!

● Christmas Plans



Are there plans in your family for Christmas Day itself yet? We've made ours—roughly, anyway.

Father, who is a special constable, you know, will be "on duty" in the morning. He's lucky, really, because this means he'll be home in time for Christmas dinner, which we're having rather late—about twoish.

I shall go out in the morning, with my small brother, while mother and Olive—that's our maid—prepare the dinner—and supper as well.

Olive will trot off about twelve, in order to get to her own home for the rest of Christmas Day, and then we shall have our small family party—with the cat, Minkie, an' all.

And we shan't forget a special "toast" of Christmas wine (lemonade for Heath) to brother Brian and all his comrades both abroad and at home.

After dinner I'm going to make mother have a rest—"put her feet up," as she calls it—and I shall do all the clearing away and then set supper ready for the evening.

There won't be much of an afternoon, as it gets dark so quickly now, so I expect Heath will have a short snooze, and then we'll all have just a "cuppa tea" and a piece of cake round the sitting-room fire before black-out time.

After that, we'll all play silly family games until our guests arrive—for we have friends of all ages arriving about six, to stay the evening.

There'll be Christmas jokes, crackers, and fun, and Heath will stay up considerably later than his usual bed-time.

Then there will be supper, more games, then hot drinks all round before the brave guests venture out, with their torches, into the blackness.

● Looking Our Best

Naturally, we shall all be wanting to look at our very "party best" on Christmas Day, shan't we?

You're pretty sure to be saving a rather special hanky.

Then if someone nice should give you a luxury bottle of perfume, you'll be wanting to use this, as well, of course. Just a whisper of it on a hanky is very sweet and fragrant. But in addition, you might like to dab just a spot across each eyebrow. This is the latest place for "wearing" perfume.

You'll remember never to pour it straight from a bottle on to a dark dress, won't you? Perfume often leaves a stain, you know.

If you like your clothes to smell sweet, you could apply just a little under the collar of a dress, or under the cuff—where it wouldn't show a mark.

Remember also to give your hair an extra-special brushing for Christmas Day, won't you? And after you've "done" it, try smoothing it over with a silk hankie. This trick gives the hair the most lovely gloss.

Isn't it a pity that we've had to lose a colour from the cover of our paper since last week? Everybody connected with the SCHOOLGIRL is terribly disappointed about it.

But, never mind, we told ourselves; the readers will understand and realise that it's just one of those war-time economies that have to be made—and all in a good cause!

● Thank You



Now I have to say a very big "thank you" to you all for (your really lovely Christmas cards. It really was sweet of you to think of me, and I do appreciate them, enormously. Bless you all!

And again, best love and Christmas greetings to you dear young people from your very own friend,

Patricia

P.S.—How do you like the little snowmen? I can't help laughing at the one with the muffler round his icy throat. The complete optimist, he seems to me!



Fun For All

The Family

Popular Games in Which Everybody Can Join.

“NOW what shall we play?” That’s sure to be one of the questions over Christmas, isn’t it? So if you keep this page handy, you’ll be able to refer to it, and be the one to supply the bright ideas, whether the games are already old favourites, or new ones.

THOUGHT READING

This is a very baffling game. For it you will need a “confederate,” to whom you explain how it’s done beforehand. You then ask all the players to select any article in the room, while you are out of it. Then in you come, and your confederate points to one article after another, saying “is it this?” “Is it that?” “Is it the piano?” “Is it the rug?” etc. To all of them you say “No,” until your confederate points to the right article, to which you say “Yes”—to the bewilderment of the audience.

Now here’s how it’s done. You arrange, in secret, with your confederate, that she will point to something containing glass BEFORE she mentions the article selected. Just an example. Say it was the poker that was thought of. Then your con-

federate points to several articles in the room, to which you say “No.” When she points to a mirror (or picture, or vase), you go carefully, for next she will point to the poker, and you will know that article is the one chosen. There’s sure to be a further demand for this game, and to make it more difficult, arrange with your confederate that the article shall be the second, or the third after the one containing glass.

BLOWING OUT THE CANDLE

This is a very simple game, that provides endless fun, both for young people and the grown-ups. You must place a lighted candle on a small table at one end of the room, then you ask people to blow it out. They’ll all think it’s easy—but wait. You blindfold the first volunteer as she stands by the table, tell her to take four steps backwards and four forwards—and then try to blow it out. This seems very easy, but you’d never believe how difficult it is.

THE FLYING FEATHER

Arrange the players in a close circle. Then take a fluffy little feather, and cut off the stem part. A grown-up will let the feather float into the circle. The object of each player is to prevent the feather from touching him or her, so it must be blown away, towards another player.

If it should touch any player, a forfeit must be paid.

HISS AND CLAP

For this half the players go out of the room. Those inside choose a verb (like sing, dance, run, skip, etc.). When the other players come in they are told a word which rhymes with the verb selected (like ring, lance, bun, trip, etc.). The player who has just entered must now perform the actions of the word they think it is. Say “ring” was the word you gave them, they’ll probably make the motions of bell-ringing. You must hiss them. But if they sing, then you must clap them, and the other side now goes out of the room for their turn.

CAT AND MOUSE

This game is an old favourite—always popular with a big party. The players stand in a circle, holding hands so as to make arches. One player, called the “Cat” goes round, outside the circle, and touches any player she pleases. The one touched, becomes “Mouse.” Mouse must immediately dart away, in and out the arches, in any direction she likes. Cat must follow, in exactly the same track, and should Cat make a mistake by going through a wrong arch, she must pay a forfeit later—but she must still remain Cat. Should Cat catch Mouse, then the two players change places.

Don’t forget such good old games as “Hunt the Thimble,” “Nuts in May,” “Please We’ve Come to Learn a Trade,” and so on, will you?

Now for some “art-y lar-ter,” as my favourite, Arthur Askey, might say. (Hearty laughter—just in case you don’t understand my comic spelling of the expression.)

First, here’s a catch to try at the family party.

1. “There was an Englishman, an Irishman and an Italian,” you say, very clearly and deliberately. Then more quickly: “The Englishman was standing between the other two, holding an umbrella. The sun was shining when suddenly, the Englishman put up the umbrella. Which of the three men got wet?”

Answer at the end.

Here’s a puzzler.

2. A man was asked how many pound notes he had. He answered: “If I divide them by 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6, I shall always have one over.” How many notes had he?

Now some riddles for when you’ve tried all those in the Christmas crackers.

3. What is as wonderful as a horse that can count?
4. What is it that goes from London to Brighton without moving?
5. What odd number becomes even when its beheaded?

ANSWERS.

1. None of them. It wasn’t raining.
2. 61.
3. A spelling bee.
4. The railway.
5. Seven. (Behead it by taking off the S and it’s—even.)

CRACKERS



Full of Good Things

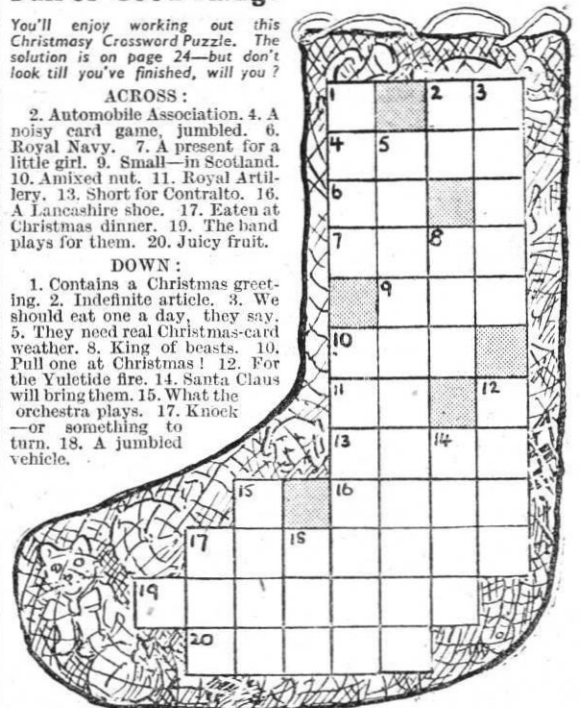
You’ll enjoy working out this Christmas Crossword Puzzle. The solution is on page 24—but don’t look till you’ve finished, will you?

ACROSS:

2. Automobile Association.
4. A noisy card game, jumbled.
6. Royal Navy.
7. A present for a little girl.
9. Small—in Scotland.
10. Amixed nut.
11. Royal Artillery.
13. Short for Contralto.
16. A Lancashire shoe.
17. Eaten at Christmas dinner.
19. The hand plays for them.
20. Juicy fruit.

DOWN:

1. Contains a Christmas greeting.
2. Indefinite article.
3. We should eat one a day, they say.
5. They need real Christmas-card weather.
8. King of beasts.
10. Pull one at Christmas!
12. For the Yuletide fire.
14. Santa Claus will bring them.
15. What the orchestra plays.
17. Knock—or something to turn.
18. A jumbled vehicle.





(Continued from page 11)

questions," he added. "Let me have the key."

Babs hesitated no longer. She handed the key over. Hastily he took it, ramming it into his pocket.

"Thanks!" he said. "Now, Barbara, the game is in my hands. Don't worry any more, little girlie; and thanks, once more, for being such a faithful brick. Now I must go," he added urgently, "and I hope when next you see me that this unhappy business will all be over and done with. Keep a stout heart, Barbara."

He walked towards the door. Babs stood still. Though she had given him her trust, a faint doubt would insist on lingering. The door closed upon him. She heard his swift footsteps disappearing.

She heaved a deep, deep breath. Abruptly the door was thrown open again. A young man in highwayman's mask and costume came bursting in.

"Noel!" she exclaimed. "Why have you come back?"

"Babs, the key!" he gasped. "The what?" She stared.

"The key—key!" he cried feverishly. "Barbara, I want that key! I must have the key! Give it to me!"

Babs stared in amazement. "But, Noel, I've just given you the key!"

"What?"

"I've just given it to you!" Babs eyed him. Oh goodness, was she going absolutely crazy? "Noel, you took it from me—just now—when you said everything would be all right. You—"

She broke off, staring at him, wondering if she were on her head or her heels. She saw his hands clench, heard the swift, hissing intake of breath which came from his lips. Then swiftly he moved towards the door.

"Noel, where are you going?" Babs faltered.

"I'm going," he jerked, "to get back that key. You little chump, Barbara! You've given it to the wrong man!"



Babs Accused!

TOO late Babs rushed to the door as it closed behind the young man she had promised to help.

"The—the wrong man!" she muttered dazedly. "What on earth—"

And then she remembered! She remembered that rather vague story of Noel's that somebody this morning had been watching and spying on him in the house; his protestations of indignation when she had told him of what had happened to the old squire.

Some impostor, looking like Noel, dressed like Noel, was playing Noel's game in this house—bent now, it was obvious, of getting the proofs that would prove Noel's innocence in the eyes of the world.

And she—she had given that man the key!

"Oh golly!" Babs breathed. How now could she be sure ever again that she was talking or acting with the right man?

She burst into the corridor. No one there. She felt strangely reluctant then to join her friends. But obviously that was her only course of action now. Obviously it was among those friends that Noel would come seeking her. But she dreaded meeting the old squire again; dreaded what he might say, might do.

She went downstairs, to find Mabs, Clara, and the rest gathered there. But of Noel or his double there was no sign. Neither, to her relief, was Mr. Bracewater there.

"Hallo, Babs, here you are!" Clara cried. "I say, Janet won the treasure. And look at it!" she gleed, holding up a huge box of chocolates. "But I say, where have you been?"

"And what," Mabs asked, "have you been doing to the old squire?"

"The old squire?"

"Well, he's in his room, you know," Bessie Bunter put in. "He refuses to come out, and—"

And there Bessie paused, for Lucy herself had suddenly appeared. Her face very strained, she joined the group.

"Lucy," faltered Babs, "how—how is the squire?"

Lucy sighed.

"He won't come down," she muttered. "He—he says his grandson is here, and that—that you, Babs, are hiding him. He's just gone back into his old mood." Lucy added, and her lips quivered. "Of course, it—it's nonsense. He's just got Noel on the brain at this time of the year. But—but, Babs, perhaps you could do something? Perhaps you could cheer him up?"

"The very idea!" broke in a hearty voice, and Mr. Trevlyn strode on to the scene. "I've been looking for you, Babs. I don't know what you've done to the old squire, but he declares he's not going to join us again to-day unless you can explain. Come along, will you?"

Babs bit her lip. Her mind was whirling a little. She couldn't refuse. She certainly didn't want Mr. Bracewater to be unhappy. But, oh, where was Noel—the real Noel? If only she could have a word with him!

"Go on, Babs!" urged Mabs anxiously.

Babs nodded, and as Mr. Trevlyn turned away she followed. Up to the squire's study they went. Mr. Trevlyn tapped.

"Now, do your best, Babs!" he whispered.

Babs braced herself. They went in. The old squire, huddled over his fire, looked up.

"Go away!" he cried angrily.

"But, Mr. Bracewater—oh dear! Mr. Bracewater, we're missing you! Please—please come down!" Babs pleaded. "It must be so dreadfully lonely for you up here. Besides, we—we're just going to have tea."

"I don't want tea!" the old man declared. "All I want is the truth! And you only, Miss Redfern, can give me that truth. Where have you hidden my rascally grandson?"

"Oh, squire, come!" Mr. Trevlyn said. "You're just imagining things."

"Imagining things!" He rose. He was shaking now. "Am I a fool?" he rasped. "Do I not recognise a voice when I hear it? I tell you my grandson is in this house—come to do goodness knows what, and that girl there is deliberately hiding him! For the last

time, Miss Redfern, are you going to give him up?"

"But, Mr. Bracewater, I tell you I don't know where he is!"

"Lies—lies!" snapped the old man.

"Bracewater! Bracewater!" Mr. Trevlyn cried half angrily. "Barbara, for goodness' sake, if you know anything, tell him!"

Babs heaved a deep, deep breath. "I'm sorry, I can't!" she said.

"Then go!" the old man rapped.

And even Mr. Trevlyn nodded at that. It was obvious that Babs' departure was the best course. Thankfully she stepped to the door. With a breath of relief closed it behind her. And then she started as she found herself looking into the masked face of Noel. Or was it Noel?

"Oh, Babs, you brick! You little sport!" he breathed. "I heard that! Don't worry, though; everything is coming right."

"But, Noel, tell me!" Babs cried. "If you are Noel—"

"Hist!" he whispered.

And, swiftly turning, he sped away—just as the door opened and Mr. Trevlyn appeared in the corridor.



Treasure From the Past!

TEA at Bracewater Hall.

And after tea, at Mabs' suggestion, there was

dancing—and because Mabs was always sensitive to the atmosphere in which she found herself, the dancing, necessarily, must be of the old-fashioned variety. Lancers, polkas, quadrilles, and what not.

They danced. But it was noticeable through all those hilarities that old Squire Bracewater, by common consent, was left entirely alone.

Perhaps, on the whole, the Bracewater Hall party was not sorry. For it was certain that what they lacked on the part of their host was more than made up for by the presence of the gallant young highwayman, whose real identity was still a deep and closely guarded secret.

As before, Janet played her concertina. Griggs, an altogether different man, sat on the platform and played the harp. Jemima Carstairs occasionally chipping in with softly whistled music on a paper and comb—and it was really astonishing the notes that Jemima could produce with the aid of those simple accessories.

Even Lucy, for the time being, seemed to forget the unhappiness of her grandfather and blossomed out into a radiant little being who was so obviously glad of the company of girls of her own age. While Babs—

Babs, for her chums' sake, enjoyed the fun; Babs, for her chums' sake, threw herself wholeheartedly into the Christmas festivities. She hid her worry, her perplexity, her puzzles, but all the time they were gnawing at the back of her mind.

Was she doing the right thing? Had she done the right thing? Noel, for his part, seemed to be enjoying himself, and Noel, naturally, as the intriguing highwayman of unknown identity, was in the greatest demand. But was Noel Noel? Was he the gallant she hoped he was?

Or was he that awful, treacherous impostor?

For her chums' sake, because it was Christmas Day, because she felt she

owed it to everybody to make up for the morose grumbles of the old squire, Babs mechanically performed her part. No chance had she to get a private word with the young highwayman, though she was aching for the opportunity. It almost seemed, in fact, that he was keeping out of her way.

Supper-time now was fast approaching, and after that the opportunity of getting in a word with him would be lost for ever. Just before supper, something happened.

The something, in the middle of a Roger de Coverley, was the arrival of old Squire Bracewater.

He almost ran into the middle of the dance floor, stuttering with rage and excitement, and holding between his fingers some gleaming thing which Babs, with a sense of numbed shock, recognised at once as the signet-ring which she had seen upon the finger of Noel Bracewater at their first encounter.

Straight up to Babs he strode, and with his aged cheeks quivering, his eyes blazing, he thrust the ring towards her.

"And now," he barked triumphantly, "now, I suppose, you'll go on denying Noel is in this house? This is his ring—ay, the ring I gave him years ago and which I found a minute ago in my study! Now, perhaps," he barked, "you will tell me where he is?"

Babs fell back, utterly dismayed. "I—I—I—" she stuttered. "Oh, grandfather!" cried Lucy agitatedly. "Tell me, Miss Redfern!" vibrated the old man.

"Hem! Excuse me!" It was the young highwayman who stepped forward.

But the squire, utterly beside himself, turned upon him.

"Young man," he barked, "this is between this girl and me! This girl is hiding my good-for-nothing grandson, and I demand that she give him up now! Miss Redfern, you hear me? Where is he?"

"I—I don't know—" Babs faltered. "If you do not tell me this instant I will clear you all out!" the old man blazed.

There was a sudden, deathly silence, broken by a stifled sob from Lucy.

"Tush, sire!" the young highwayman said swiftly. "A word, I pray you! 'Tis Christmas Day! The girls, these people, are guests invited by you to Bracewater Hall."

The old man choked. "Sir, is this your business?"

"Good sir, forgive my intrusion, but I make leave to say that it is my business," the young man imperturbably replied. "I, too, am a guest, even though a rather uninvited one. You have invited this party to remain here for Christmas Day, and surely, sir, it is not the way of the Bracewaters to abuse their own hospitality?"

There was a murmur. Mr. Trevlyn looked gratefully at the smiling young highwayman in the mask. The squire paused abashed.

"I see. Thank you!" he grunted. "You are right—perhaps I am being hasty. But this girl"—and his eyes seemed to flame as they rested on Barbara—"is acting in a way that does not befit a guest. No matter. I will keep my word. Christmas Day, however, ends at midnight, and midnight also ends this invitation. After that," he rapped, "I never, never want to see any of you again! Meantime, Barbara Redfern, don't let yourself out of my sight. I don't, won't, and never will, trust you again!"

And trembling, he stamped back to his chair, where, seating himself, he

glared with fierce eyes upon the party.

There was a silence. Everybody was staring at Babs. There was a great deal of sympathy in the chums' glances. For they, like everybody else, believed that poor Babs was just the victim of the old man's obsession concerning his grandson—yet, also, there was some curiosity. Mabs frowned.

"Babs, you—you don't know where his grandson is?" she asked.

"Oh, Mabs, don't be silly!" Babs replied, but she looked at the man she did believe was his grandson, and wondered: Was this Noel—could it be Noel?

Dancing was resumed. But how could they enjoy themselves to their hearts' content with the old squire suspiciously and morosely scowling out at them from his chair; how, even in spite of the

Was he the young man to whom she had given the key—that wrong man? If so, what had happened to the real Noel, whom she had vowed to help in his quest?

Supper over, they all trooped back into the hall again, and dancing recommenced. Still the old squire sat glaring at them through his overhanging brows. Babs looked anxiously round. Mystery Mask—where was he?

Again, just as she was beginning to work herself up into a state of nerves on that point, the young highwayman appeared. From the direction of the west wing he came this time, clapping his hands.

"Well danced, girls," he applauded. "I fain would have accompanied you, but I had other things which required my important attention." He looked



"MY grandson—Noel!" the old man muttered. The room seemed to swim round Babs. Then it was Noel, the young highwayman she had promised to help, the young man she had trusted, who had struck down the squire!

gallantry of Mystery Mask, could anybody feel gay?

Babs herself, conscious that she was the cause of the change in the atmosphere, bit her lip. Oh, if only something would happen!

She must—must—speak to Noel. And she did speak to him—just for a moment. That was during the last waltz before supper when she deliberately made herself his partner. Waltzing round with him, she looked up into his masked face.

"Noel—are you Noel?" she asked desperately.

"Ah, Babs, wouldst joke with me?" he asked lightly.

"Noel, no—please answer me!" Babs said. "If you are Noel, why haven't you got those proofs you told me of? Why—oh!" she added as Clara, passing, accidentally kicked her heel.

"You clumsy thing!"

The dance came to an end then, and Mystery Mask swiftly excused himself. Babs, feeling nervous and unsure, went into supper with Mr. Trevlyn, noting with a pang that the young highwayman remained behind. Nor at supper did she see him again. Oh, what had happened to him?

at Babs, and Babs noticed the smile he gave her, mechanically smiled back, wondering, wondering. Oh, goodness, who was this man? "And now, if I may have your ears for a while, I have a suggestion to make," he went on.

"Oh, yes, yes!" came an eager chorus.

"Our friend the old squire needs a little cheer, methinks," the young man went on. "Also, having eaten, none of you will be feeling in the mood yet awhile for robust games again. So may we not, until we think of a better idea, while away the time with some sort of impromptu entertainment? I am sure," he added gallantly, "among so much beauty and so much brain, there must be a galaxy of talent."

"Oh, yes, rather, you know! That's a ripping idea!" Bessie beamed. "I'll ventriloquise!"

"And I," Mabs cried, her eyes shining, "will give some impersonations."

"And my friend Barbara, what will she do?" Mystery Mask stammered.

"I—I—" Babs stuttered. "Oh, I don't know! I—I'll watch."

"Very good." He smiled again.

"And I, having some small knowledge

of the art, will give a conjuring performance."

"Oh, really! Can you?" Bessie asked.

"My dear Bessie, you have never seen my magic—and such magic as I will show you!" he promised, with a gay laugh. "But first I must, of course, get my equipment. I bid you au revoir while I depart."

He bowed again, and again he disappeared. But Babs stood staring after him, her mind suddenly whirling. He was going to get his equipment, he said—but what equipment, when he was a stranger in this house, when he had arrived without luggage, without anything? The truth seemed to flash upon her. That man was an impostor. Having got rid of the real Noel, perhaps having got the vital proof Noel sought—was this his method of making his getaway?

Impulsively she flew towards the door. But like a whiplash the old squire's voice brought her to a halt.

"And where, Miss Redfern, are you going?"

"Oh dear! I—I won't be long," Babs gasped.

"Ay, you won't! Because," the old man glared, "you are not going! Did I not tell you you were not to leave my sight. Remain!"

"But—"
"Oh, please, Barbara, humour him!" Lucy whispered entreatingly. "Come on, let's—let's get on with the fun."

Babs stopped, biting her lip, torn this way, torn that. Oh, goodness, what could she do? What should she do, knowing what she knew, fearing the worst?

Should she blurt what she knew, what she suspected?

But supposing—just supposing—after doing that, the man she mistrusted should really turn out to be Noel?

In an agony of indecision and doubt, Babs stood still, her mind whirling. Bessie, meantime, had climbed on to the huge refectory table which was serving as a platform, and had commenced to ventriloquise.

Clever and good was Bessie in that form of art, and it was really surprising how many imitations of girls and animals and such like things she could give. But for once Babs was not heeding Bessie. Noel—where was Noel?

She waited. Oh dear, would Bessie never end? The highwayman who had left the room, must have been the scoundrelly impostor—must, must!

Actually, Babs was in the act of going forward to interrupt Bessie, when from the stairs came a laugh.

"Behold!"

And she jumped, as down those stairs came Mystery Mask, carrying before him a huge tray covered over with a cloth.

"You see, I come," he gaily cried, "with my apparatus, as promised." And while Babs fell back, wondering, while she stared, he looked at her and laughed. "And now, fair Bessie, if you have done, I will proceed. First, however, I shall want an assistant. My good squire, would you care?"

"Ugh! Get on with your foolish game!" the old squire grunted. "I want none of them."

"But your assistance, sire, would be gratefully received." Mystery Mask seriously said. "Also, I am lost without you—and with you only I can carry out this greatest of all my tricks. Sire, be of Christmas cheer, enter with some humour into the spirit of the party, and come forward."

"Oh, grandfather, please do!" Lucy urged.

"Yes, yes! Please, Mr. Bracewater!" the chorus arose.

The old man grunted.

"I protest," he mumbled.

"Do so, sire!" the young highwayman laughed. "But at least help me in this great trick of mine. Now, sir"—and gently he led him to the table—"will you be so good as to remove the cover of that tray?"

"But, dang it—"

"It will not take you a moment."

The old man muttered. The girls and Mr. Trevlyn clustered round. Then, with a shrug, he stretched out one lean, withered hand, with an irritable gesture he pulled the cloth aside.

And then he jumped—literally jumped.

And everybody else blinked.

For what was this?

What they had expected to see, nobody knew. But certainly the queerest things they expected was what they did see. For on that table, what an array—what a dazzling array!

Jewels, golden cups and plates, bags of money, a great stack of blue paper bonds.

From the old squire came a choked cry.

"The Bracewater fortune! This—"

"The MYSTERY of the TOLLING BELL!"



For ten years the old bell had not tolled, but suddenly—clang, clang, clang! Its booming notes rang through the wintry air. Why? Who was ringing it? And for what amazing purpose?

A mystery indeed. And one that led Barbara Redfern & Co. into the most exciting Christmas adventure of their lives. This superb COMPLETE Hilda Richards story appears next week. Don't miss it.

this—this is the fortune which I accused my grandson Noel of stealing! This is the Bracewater hoard which, it seemed, had gone for ever!" He passed a shaking hand across his brow and stared in a strained manner at Mystery Mask. "You, sir—who are you?"

For answer the young highwayman put his hand to his mask. He laughed rather wistfully.

"Did I not tell you, sire, that I would perform my greatest trick first? There lies your treasure which your erring grandson never did touch. Now I will perform my second great trick"—and suddenly he snatched away his mask.

A shrill exclamation from Lucy, a joyous cry from Babs, and the old man fell back.

For laughing at them was the fresh, boyish, handsome face of—

"Noel! Noel!" the old squire choked. "Noel, my grandson! Noel—Noel—"

And as he slumped in a state of collapse, Noel, the highwayman, sprang forward and caught him.

"AND all is forgiven?" Noel asked five minutes later.

The old man, in his armchair, gave a shaky laugh.

"Noel, Noel!" he said. "Ay, lad, I told myself I hated you—but all the time it wasn't true. I hated only that idea I had of you—of Noel, the arch-thief, the callous young scoundrel, who could leave his old grandfather a pauper on Christmas Day. But now, tell me—you must tell me—how did all this happen?"

Noel laughed. He looked at Babs. Then gently he caught Babs' hand.

"All this has happened," he said, "through the friendship, the loyalty, the trust of one girl—Barbara. For to her, good sir, do you owe everything. Thanks to her, both myself and your fortune is restored. As for the rest—" He shrugged. "That is a story soon told. Many years ago, when you expelled me from the Hall—"

"Ay, ay, lad! Fool that I was!" the old man muttered.

"I went. But I did not, as you believed, as I have now proved, take your wealth. That, grandfather, was taken by your secretary, Gilmore, who hid it in the secret cupboard in a certain room in this house, and who kept it there, knowing that some day he would have need of it. Then, sir, as the years passed, it became necessary for you to get rid of Gilmore, and this you did.

"Gilmore went, leaving the treasure where it was, afraid to take it, but planning at some future day to return for it. Meantime, I had practised as a doctor in London. I was house surgeon at a London hospital, and one day I was called to the ward of a man who had been injured in a street accident and was dying. He was that same Gilmore."

He paused, and breathlessly, wide-eyed they all listened—the old man, Babs, the chums, radiant Lucy, and Mr. Trevlyn.

"On his death-bed he told me what he had done. At the last he tried to make amends by revealing the hiding-place of the treasure. Unfortunately we were overheard by a certain other young doctor, very much like me in looks—a fellow of the name of Graves. When I came here, Graves followed me. When I adopted my highwayman's disguise, Graves adopted a similar disguise, and Graves has been in and out of this house since yesterday evening, imitating me, and puzzling my dear Barbara."

"Oh, my goodness!" Babs thrilled, and at last understood. "Noel, why—why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," Noel said, "I had no real chance. Because it was necessary first for me to make sure and catch my thief, and recover the vital key he took from you. That thief," he added, "is upstairs now, a bound prisoner, but do not let us worry about him until the police arrive."

"Meantime," he added, "happiness has come to Bracewater Hall. Also, it is just past midnight, and there is a certain wager I have won which must be settled, Barbara."

Blushing, Babs was drawn forward under the mistletoe. He bent his head, and while they all cheered resoundingly, kissed her gently upon the lips.

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

A Lovely "Seasonable" story of the 18th Century, featuring—



JESS AND HIGHWAYMAN JACK

By

IDA MELBOURNE

The Squire's Threat!

"OH, fun, fun! What lovely snow! How truly wonderful!" And Jess Reynolds, daughter of the landlord of the Rising Sun Inn, gave a glad cry as she saw the earth all whitened over with snow as she stepped from the inn's back door.

Every familiar landmark was gone; the trees bore heavy loads; the bushes were obliterated; roofs, paths, all had a shimmering, glistening winter coat of white.

Taking a firm grip of the basket she carried, Jess tossed her thick scarf about her neck, and then, with sheer high spirits, ran down the path and slid, to go whizzing along at speed.

She went a little too fast, and—crash! Down she went, and the basket twirled away from her, the contents spilling.

The cry that Jess gave then was not of pain, for she was unhurt; fear that the pudding basin in the basket had broken was the cause of it. For in that basin was a Christmas pudding she had made herself for no less a person than Laughing Jack, the highwayman, of whom some people had need to dread. But Jess knew he was no ordinary highwayman; and that he only took back from people that which was by right his own property. He never robbed innocent people.

No wonder Jess was all anxiety about that pudding!

If Highwayman Jack's pudding had been damaged by the fall, she would never forgive herself, for it was quite the best she had ever made. With great care, therefore, she crawled through the snow to it, holding her breath in trepidation. Was the pudding, basin and all, smashed to smithereens?

Suddenly Jess let out a subdued cheer. For there, unharmed was the pudding basin, reposing in the snow.

After that Jess resolved to walk a little more sedately; it was too much to risk ruining that pudding again.

The old oak was where she had

arranged to meet Laughing Jack, for it was in a quiet part of the wood, and a place which provided ready hiding for him should he need it.

The hour was early yet, and the day Christmas Eve. Few people were abroad, and dawn had only just broken, so that there was little chance of her being seen; and, of course, she had no wish to be seen meeting the highwayman, even though he was her friend. For people would immediately guess that it was she—Jess, of the Rising Sun Inn—who was his secret helper, and had so mysteriously helped him on many occasions when his capture had seemed imminent.

"Tral-la-la!" she sang, as she approached the old oak.

"Tral-la-la!" answered a merry voice. And there by the oak, astride his

Jess and her Highwayman friend were determined to bring festive happiness to one of the squire's poor tenants. The squire meant to throw them out of their cottage, but—thanks to Jess and Jack, he nearly got thrown out himself!

lovely, shiny, black horse, was Laughing Jack, his sweeping cloak snow-covered, and snow on his tricorn hat.

A velvet mask covered the upper part of his face, except where his merry, dancing eyes showed through the slits. But that he was handsome could not be mistaken.

"The pudding?" he cried gaily. "And the best ever, I'll be bound!"

Jess held it up, her eyes sparkling with pride.

"A merry Christmas you shall have," she told him. "For there's a sixpence in it, and you need not present your pistol to get it, either."

Highwayman Jack took the pudding basin and lifted it with both hands to his lips; then, looking down, his merry face took on a more serious look.

"Friend," he said gently, "would it wound you were I to give half this pudding to someone who may lack one this Christmas?"

Jess, though startled by this request,

felt immediately concerned about the unfortunate person who might have to go without any pudding that Christmas.

"Why, if there's someone who'll have a poor Christmas, Jack," she said, "I'll be the first to brighten it. They shall have a special pudding—yes, and pies, too! Some friend of yours?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Inasmuch as they are enemies of the squire's, and because they are poor and needy, yes," he said. "To tell the truth, that old rascal is pressing them for their rent; and if he gets it they will get no Christmas fare, which will be hard for the children."

"Oh, poor things!" gasped Jess, and felt even greater contempt for the greedy Squire Olding, who had far more money than he could make use of. But Jess did not want Jack to have to share his pudding, which wasn't a very large one. "Where do they live?" she asked.

Highwayman Jack pointed across the fields.

"The little cottage under the hill," he said. "There's a widow with two children."

Jess knew the cottage, and the woman, Mrs. Bates, hard-working and honest, whose eldest son had gone to

London to seek his fortune, leaving her with the two youngest to keep.

"There's a pudding she shall have," said Jess quickly. "And I'll go right back and get it. You keep yours."

And back she went a moment later, after bidding adieu to Jack, and promising him that all she could do for the poor family she would.

But when she returned to the inn her stepmother was up and about, and no sooner did Jess go to the larder than she looked in, sour-faced, as usual, and tapped her sharply on the shoulder.

"And what are you doing, Jess?" she demanded. "Put that pudding basin down!"

"Oh, 'tis not for myself!" Jess said quickly. "But there are many here, and I was thinking that one at least might be spared for Mrs. Bates—"

"Mrs. Bates!" her stepmother took her up shrilly. "A good-for-nothing woman like her! Put that pudding down at once, my girl! Mrs. Bates can

buy her own puddings—on the squire's back rent!"

In vain Jess pleaded. Her stepmother, ever hard-hearted, was adamant, and was not content until Jess had left the pantry. To make sure that she was not defied, she kept possession of the key, too.

But Jess was not to be beaten. She had pocket-money, and those puddings, being for use in the inn, were for sale. Nothing was easier, therefore, than for Jess to buy a small one later on in the morning, giving the money to Nell, the servant-girl, without telling her who was the purchaser.

Then, at the first opportunity, Jess put on her things and went through the thick snow to the little cottage under the hill.

It was a pretty little place, but sadly neglected by the squire, who was supposed to keep it in good order and repair, and before she reached it Jess saw that there was a bad hole in the roof, through which the snow had already found its way.

When Jess knocked on the door Mrs. Bates was busy getting the simple midday meal, as the smell of cooking proclaimed.

"Why, Jess!" she cried, in surprise, as she opened the door.

"With a gift from the inn, wishing you a merry Christmas!" smiled Jess.

Tears shone in Mrs. Bates' worried eyes as she opened the door wider.

"Please come in!" she faltered. "How sweet and kind of you it is, Jess! Without that there'd have been no pudding for the kiddies."

Jess stepped into the spotless living-room of the simple cottage. There was little enough furniture, but it shone, and the floor was fit enough to eat a meal from, as Jess' admiring eyes noticed.

"Will you have a bite of dinner now you're here?" Mrs. Bates asked. "'Tis near the time, and you're welcome!"

Jess knew well that Mrs. Bates would share what she had, but it was just unthinkable staying. There was probably only enough to go round, anyway.

"I really can't stay," Jess said. "But I'd like to speak to the kiddies, if I may."

She had brought two silver sixpences,

and when the two youngsters came forward shyly—a boy, George, and a girl, Ada—their eyes sparkled at the sight of the coins.

"Not for us?" asked George.

"Yes, for you," smiled Jess. "To buy lollipops with, or what you will, dear."

George looked large-eyed at his coin and then shot a look at his mother, and his expression became suddenly eager.

"Here, mum, you keep it for the squire!" he hissed.

"Oh, my dear, no!" his mother protested, blushing. "That's your own private present. I'll pay the squire all right when Tom comes home, as he will to-day or to-morrow, with plenty of money like he promised."

"There, George, so you can keep the money," said Jess. "And—"

She turned, for there had come a noisy bang at the door. George ran at once to look out of the window, and he came back at the run, alarm on his face.

"Oh, mum, the squire!" he cried.

Jess had no wish to be present and witness a painful scene which would prove very embarrassing to Mrs. Bates. It was better that she slipped away.

"I'll go by the back entrance," said Jess quickly. "I don't want to meet the old tyrant."

Jess went into the kitchen and fumbled with the bolted door; but before she had it open she heard the squire's voice.

"Ha! Money in the house, eh? You've got sixpences to give the children, Mrs. Bates. And what's this? A fine big pudding you've bought. From the inn, too! So this is what I find! No money for my rent, but money to squander on luxuries; money to give the children to squander!"

Jess swung round from the back door, her cheeks flaming. She simply could not stand this. How dared he insult the poor woman like this! He had to learn that he had blundered—that she had given the money and the pudding.

"Oh, sir," Mrs. Bates protested, "it was the young lady—"

"Don't bandy words!" snapped the squire. "Are you suggesting that I'm wrong?"

Jess swung into the little living-

room, and faced him, and her entrance was so unexpected that the squire gave a startled jump.

Jess knew that as he was a rich, important person, and one of her father's best customers, she should have been deferential; but she was so angry that she could not master herself and act cautiously.

"You're wrong, sir!" she blurted out. "Mrs. Bates has not squandered money. That is a Christmas-box to the children, and the Christmas pudding was my gift."

The squire's mean, shifty face creased in a scowl, and his small eyes glinted. He was annoyed to find all his surmises completely without foundation.

"Oho! Giving away your father's puddings, eh? Stealing them to give to Mrs. Bates, indeed! All right, my girl, I'll report it—and your insolence, too!" he snarled.

Jess coloured deeply. She started to protest and explain, but the squire held up his hand in fury and refused to listen.

"Mrs. Bates," he said coldly, "have you the rent money?"

"No, not yet. But my son is coming home—"

"Have you it now, woman? Yes, or no!"

The squire's face was red with wrath, and the podgy hand he extended to receive the money shook visibly.

"No, alas!"

"Very well," snapped the squire, "then this afternoon out you go!"

Frustrated by the Highwaymen!

THE squire slammed the door behind him, and next moment there came the jingle of the harness bells as his sleigh went away over the soft snow.

Jess, her eyes gleaming with fury at the squire's harsh methods, turned next moment with deep compassion to Mrs. Bates, who stood with her apron to her eyes, while George and Ada, distressed, clung to her.

"Mrs. Bates," said Jess huskily, "he can't do it! He shan't do it! I'll see he doesn't!"

Then, still fuming at the squire's heartlessness, Jess turned and went hurrying from the cottage. She had to find Highwayman Jack. He was the only person who could help Mrs. Bates.

Many a time before the highwayman had baffled the squire, and there was no reason why he should not do so again. Yet, in calmer mood, Jess did not quite see what he could do, except, perhaps, advance the money himself—if he had it.

Jess went to the old oak, but it was not there, and there was little likelihood of his appearing; but they had devised a system of signals to arrange meetings, and now she took the small stones that had been placed near by, and arranged them to form the figure three. It meant that she would meet him there at three o'clock.

Jess returned then to the inn; but as she went on foot she arrived a good while after the squire, who had driven there at once. His sleigh was outside the door when she reached it, and her heart sank. For obviously he had gone to report her.

Jess walked into the hall, head high in air, and then paused as she saw her stout, jovial father, her sour-faced stepmother, and the squire, talking together.

Talk stopped as she entered, and both her father and her stepmother turned upon her.



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"What is this, Jess—" began her father severely.

"A disgrace to the inn!" snarled the squire. "That's what she is! Encouraging insolence and insubordination and defiance in my tenants!"

Jess faced her father calmly.

"Dad, it was with my own money that I bought that pudding," she said quietly. "And my own money I gave the kiddies; and little enough it was, too—sixpence each."

"That's no way to talk!" snapped her stepmother. "Go up to your room, my girl! How dare you insult the squire, fine gentleman that he is! You should be ashamed of yourself—ashamed!"

"Sorry I am, indeed, and should be to hurt or insult a gentleman," said Jess meekly, with a double edge to the words.

Then, leaving the squire to take it as he pleased, head in air, Jess went up to her room. And there she had to remain during dinner-time, with tempting smells filling the air, with nothing to eat herself but bread-and-butter. But she had to go down to help with the waiting, of course; her stepmother saw to that.

That afternoon Jess was given tasks to do, but so busily did she set to work that she had finished them in good time to enable her to slip out to keep her tryst with Highwayman Jack.

At first when she reached the spot she feared that he knew nothing of that message; but then she heard the clomp of hoofs through the trees, and there he was, smiling, whipping his tricorne hat from his wigged head, and waving it aloft.

"Well met! And what news?" he asked.

"News of the worst, Jack!" she gasped. "The squire is driving Mrs. Bates out of her house this very afternoon!"

The highwayman stared at her aghast.

"On Christmas Eve, and in this snow! Why, 'tis not human!"

"The suspicious man thinks Mrs. Bates has a store of money," said Jess angrily, "or else he has a heart of stone. But I have sworn to stop it, Jack, and there's only one way. I must ask your aid!"

"Aha! 'Twill be most readily given. If rolling the squire in the snow will serve, lead the way!"

"I'm afraid it won't," said Jess, with a faint smile. "But, you see, the Bates can't be evicted unless there is someone there to evict them. They must have a wagon, too."

Highwayman Jack whipped out his pistol and laughed.

"Stand and deliver—the furniture—or your lives, eh?" he demanded. "My friend, run ahead and give me warning. When that wagon is in sight I'll ride out."

Jess and he arranged a signal of whistles, and then, greatly excited, she ran towards the Bates' cottage. Gasping for breath, she reached it, and after knocking at the door was admitted by a damp-eyed Mrs. Bates. To her intense relief, Jess saw that the furniture was still there.

"They have not called yet?" she asked.

Mrs. Bates shook her head.

"Not yet, but they are on their way. George is looking out from the attic, and—"

Suddenly there came a cry from above.

"Mum, here comes the wagon!" cried George.

That was enough for Jess. She raced out in the snow, saw the wagon just appearing at the top of the hill, and



DISGUISED as an old woman, Jess turned away to hide a smile as the squire, shivering with cold, and with his feet in hot water, took a cup of steaming cocoa. Her scheme was working beautifully!

then ran helter-skelter through the furried snow until she was sure her whistle would carry to Highwayman Jack.

It was only a minute later, when the wagon was but three hundred yards from the house, that a magnificent figure rode through the snow, cloak flying, red jacket making a fine splash of colour with its gold facing.

The wagoners increased their speed as though hoping to reach the cottage before he caught them; but Laughing Jack cut ahead of them and reined up, his horse slithering on its haunches for fully ten yards.

"Stand and deliver!" he yelled.

Jess, from hiding, watched, her eyes sparkling.

"Eh, highwayman, 'tis but an empty wagon we got here," said the driver.

"Pah! Tell me not so. 'Tis full of provender for the cottage sent by the kindhearted, generous squire!" scoffed Highwayman Jack.

"Tha doest not know squire, lad," said the driver's mate. "We've got all he'd give anyone in here. Take a look. Nowt."

"Unharness the horses," said Jack.

"But—"

"Come! Look lively, or you shall have a dinner of leaden pellets, my lads!" he said briskly.

The carter and his mate, muttering sullenly, got down, and unharnessed the horses.

"Now, mate, take a look!" grumbled the carter.

But Jack did not take a look. He fired his pistol in the air with deafening report. And like bullets themselves the two hefty horses bolted, trailing their reins behind them. They went thundering through the snow, leaving the carters gaping.

Next moment those two men bolted after the horses, slithering through the snow hard as they could go.

"Well, done, Jack!" cheered Jess, in glee.

"All too easy," said Jack lightly. "But, alas! I fear 'tis not the end of the squire's attempts to clear that furniture; but if we have made him postpone it, it will be something."

"Everything; for Mrs. Bates' son will be back with money," said Jess. "And they'll have a merry Christmas all together."

Bidding him au revoir, Jess in merry mood returned to the inn, and there for the first time awaited the squire's arrival quite eagerly.

It was not until six o'clock when pitch darkness reigned that he arrived, shaking snow from his thick coat, and stamping slush in the hall. He was obviously in a fuming rage.

"I'll teach that highwayman to hold up a wagon I send to clear out furniture!" he snarled. "I'll see that the next one he stops will be full of soldiers!"

The Squire is Most Generous!

JESS had no need to pretend to be startled. The news was a staggering blow to her.

If the squire really did put this plan into practice, nothing could save the Bates. And unless Highwayman Jack, who planned to play the same trick again on the morrow, were forewarned, nothing could save him, either. A dozen muskets would fire a volley at him as soon as he cried his "stand and deliver!"

Jess knew that he had to be warned now, just in case she could not see him to-morrow. To-night, as she knew, he had planned a little prank which he had discussed before. He intended to stop the squire's sleigh, and then pelt the old rascal, not with bullets, but with snowballs.

To put that plan into execution, Highwayman Jack would be waiting down the road at nine o'clock, the usual hour when the squire left the inn.

Not until a quarter to nine could Jess do anything; but then she hurried down the dark road through the drifting snow, which now was blowing, thicker and thicker.

True to his plan, Highwayman Jack was where he had said he would be; now looking not unlike a snowman, although he had well covered his horse with a thick blanket.

"Why, Jess! Again?" he explained. Breathlessly she gave her warning, and Laughing Jack whistled softly in dismay.

"Had I not known, I should most certainly have held up those soldiers!" he exclaimed. "But now— Why, the Bates are surely lost!" he ended dismally.

But Jess had been thinking as she hurried along, and a plan was already formed in her mind. It was daring, risky, and yet she guessed it would be to the squire's liking.

"Jack, will you hold up his sleigh?" she asked. "Then take over the reins, and drive him hard through the snow—drive him out to the hill, where there's no house near but the Bates'."

"Um! What then?" murmured Jack, smiling.

"Why, then, let him step out," went on Jess, "and say that you have such a liking to the sleigh that you will keep it, letting him walk home. And, of course, he will walk then to the Bates' house, and then—"

She lowered her voice, and giggled. Laughing Jack, hearing her plan, roared out loud, and was still laughing when the jingle of the squire's harness and his sleigh-lantern's gleam came from the distance.

"Here he comes," muttered Jess. "I'll go there ahead. Dark though it is I'll know my way, and I'll see then that the Bates' have a lantern gleaming to guide him."

What happened to the squire she did not know in detail until afterwards, but that Laughing Jack put the plan into practice she knew an hour later.

Jess was then in the Bates' living-room. The children were in bed, and she herself sat up with Mrs. Bates, knitting by the fireside; but so that the squire should not recognise her she wore some of Granny Bates' clothes—a shawl, old skirt, bonnet, glasses, and a bandage round her face as though she had toothache.

A knock came at the door, and Mrs. Bates answered it, staring out into the darkness.

"Who's there!" she called. A snowman tottered into the room, and then flopped down into a chair with a groan.

"Ooh, a highwayman!" squeaked Jess, who could see at a glance that it was the squire.

The squire blinked about him, and slivered.

"I'm not a highwayman!" he managed to gasp at length. "I am your squire. That rascal highwayman—he cast me adrift in this terrible weather; I'll stay here—here in this room. It's my cottage."

"It's my chair," said Mrs. Bates sharply. "And my fire you're warming yourself by, squire. The best thing you can do is to get home."

The squire gaped at her, amazed. "In this?" he cried. "Are you mad, woman? There's a blizzard blowing." "Tut, tut!" said Jess. "And when is it the men come to turn us out, my dear?" she asked Mrs. Bates. "Some time to-night, I heard."

The squire gave a violent start. "No, no. I forbid it. Certainly not!" he protested.

After he had soaked his feet in hot water and drunk hot cocoa—

"Squire, here's an old suit of clothes for you," Mrs. Bates said. "They're warm, if old, and you'd better change into them. The only spare room is the attic, and it's too cold to sleep up there, except fully dressed, and your own clothes are soaked."

Grunting, and feeling very uncomfortable, the squire stamped up to the

attic. As Jess had expected, ten minutes later she heard him shout.

"Hey—there's a hole in this roof! The snow comes through!" he yelled.

"Hole—not a new one?" piped Jess. She went upstairs and looked at the hole in the roof, through which snow was fluttering in, and then at the squire, who lay in the ragged clothes on the bed, with rugs and the carpet on top of him.

"That's the same hole that's been there for two years," she said. "The landlord ought to do something about it—beggin' yer pardon, squire; I forgot the same was yourself."

And downstairs Jess went, to find that another visitor had arrived. It was Highwayman Jack, in chuckling, merry mood, and he told of his hold-up—how he had driven the squire, and then stranded him within sight of the lights of the cottage, and not a quarter of a mile from it.

But he was not dressed in his normal bright clothes. He had a suit on of dowdy cut, and a baize apron, a patch over one eye, a red wig, and darkened cheeks, so that he was really unrecognisable, except in a bright light.



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"Has he nodded off yet, I wonder?" he asked. "If so, 'tis time to start."

Highwayman Jack had come disguised as a bailiff.

"Start here," decided Jess. "We'll make the right noises."

Between them they lifted the table and dropped it, bumped it, turned it, until the sounds really suggested a wholesale removal, and all the while they made the right vocal noises.

Then, having prepared the squire for it, Highwayman Jack thumped up the stairs and burst the attic door open. He caught hold of the bed and lifted the end a foot from the ground. A furious howl came from the dozing squire.

"Hey—what's it? Who's that?" he roared, now fully awake.

"Here, you, mister, out of that thur-

bed!" said Jack. "This is an eviction by the squire's orders. This bed goes out in the snow and into the van!"

The squire sat up in bed, and Jack showed the lantern on him. Goggle-eyed, the rich landowner gaped at the evictor.

"Leave this bed alone!" he howled. "I am the squire. I cancel the order!"

Jess, who had been waiting outside for this moment, peeped in and piped agreement with the squire's statement.

"Ay, he's the squire. No one else has a nose like that," she said. "And if he's the squire—why, if he wants to he can cancel the eviction; and if he wants to he can say he doesn't even want the rent."

"Not without a proper written form, he can't," said Jack. "I like things done proper. I want seven pounds, or out goes this bed."

The squire saw him stoop to take up the bed again.

"Man—stop!" he snarled. "Not for seventy pounds would I leave this bed."

"Squire's orders," said Jack stolidly. "All I want is the seven pounds, or else out goes every stick! Squire's orders."

Jess saw the squire's eyes widen, and she actually heard his teeth grate. With trembling fingers he counted out seven sovereigns.

"Take 'em!" he snarled, almost audibly groaning at having to part with the money. "If you'll promise to go."

Jack rubbed his ear and nodded thoughtfully.

"You want a receipt, mister; for it must be done proper, because I've got to give this to the squire and get a receipt from him."

Mrs. Bates' voice came from the passage.

"Dear, dear! What is all this?" she asked. "Here is the rent bill for seven pounds, and here's pen and ink to sign it. Who wants to sign it?"

The squire snatched the receipt, and the inked pen from Jess, who passed them on, and with a flourish he signed the receipt.

Jess heaved a mighty sigh. "Well, that's settled," she said.

"And—now I'll stay here till morning!" gritted the squire, and threw himself down under the rugs and refused to speak another word.

Downstairs, Jess and Highwayman Jack and Mrs. Bates gathered for a soft laugh; but Mrs. Bates was sorely troubled. For she considered that she still owed the squire the seven pounds.

"Call it a Christmas box," said Jess. "Unless he makes a fuss. And now—the kiddies' stockings. You have the things, Jack?"

Jack had brought some small toys, and Jess added some sweets she had brought with her; and presently there were two well-loaded stockings for the kiddies to find on Christmas morning.

There was a Christmas box for Mrs. Bates, too; for her son arrived home on a hired sleigh.

It was a glad reunion, and his first words were that he had the needed rent and a little over. He did not know that the old man huddled by the fire was Squire Olding, or, strongly though he felt about the old skinflint, he might have moderated his tone. But the squire made no comment.

And so the Bates family had a lovely Christmas, after all—not to mention Jess and Laughing Jack!

END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.

LOOK out for another of these fascinating stories, featuring Jess and Highwayman Jack, in next Saturday's SCHOOLGIRL.

Further Chapters of our Gripping **Valerie Drew Detective Story.**



SUSPECTS OF PLEASURE ISLE!

By ISABEL NORTON

FOR NEW READERS.

VALERIE DREW, the famous girl detective, together with her clever Alsatian dog, **FLASH**, is on holiday at Mazoria, a romantic pleasure-island in the Atlantic. She is in charge of four young people, **DULCIE** and **FRANK FURNIVAL**, brother and sister, and **ROGER DRAKE**, and **MOLLY DIXON**. With the party is a tutor for the boys and girls, a **HORACE BOON**, who has brought his own daughter, **SYBIL**. Valerie and her party, suspected of stealing a famous ruby, are forbidden to leave the island until the mystery is solved. Valerie discovers that the ruby was flown off attached to a carrier pigeon belonging to **SERGEANT FANCHAL**, a policeman in charge of them. The pigeon was hidden in Frank Furnival's camera-case, and he is arrested. But Valerie sees a man give the ruby to Sergeant Fanchal!

(Now read on.)

Drama at the Swimming Pool!

CONVINCED that it could be nothing less than the stolen Ramon Ruby which she had just glimpsed, Valerie Drew felt a thrill at this sensational development.

Sergeant Fanchal slipped the treasure into a breast pocket of his uniform jacket and swiftly buttoned the flap over it.

Breathing a trifle more quickly in her excitement, Valerie leaned forward to try to see what he would do next.

Suddenly the sergeant turned and addressed his companion in rapid sentences, too low-pitched for Valerie to catch a single word of what he said. Then he strode away.

As Valerie watched him, looking intently worried, pass within a few feet of where she was crouched, she felt suddenly perplexed herself.

She knew that to accuse a responsible officer of the police force of being the actual thief of the missing Ramon Ruby would be a very grave step which might have far-reaching consequences for all her party if she had made any mistake. It might quite conceivably land them in a worse plight than they were in already.

Before she breathed a word of her

sensational suspicions she must be absolutely certain that it was the Ramon Ruby the sergeant carried in his breast pocket.

Reaching a little sun-shelter which, for the moment, was fortunately unoccupied, Valerie entered, took off her sun spectacles, and removed her close-fitting beret. Neatly reversing her coat, as before, she donned her former hat and reappeared as herself.

Sergeant Fanchal, who had rejoined the rest of the party in the meanwhile, was glancing anxiously around him when Valerie smilingly strolled up.

"Hallo, sergeant! Back already?" she greeted him brightly.

"Yes," said the sergeant gruffly. "But if we are going to the water sports we had better hurry along now."

Horace Boon, tutor to the party, fell in step with him at once, and his daughter Sybil followed.

"Any luck, Valerie?" asked Frank

VALERIE'S CHANCE TO LEARN THE TRUTH — BY WATCHING THE DIVING CONTEST!

Furnival's cautious, eager voice, as he joined her.

Valerie smilingly shrugged her shoulders. She knew how high she stood in Frank's estimation after the way in which she had got him out of his recent tight corner, but she resisted the temptation to give even him a hint of the truth.

"Maybe I'll be able to make up my mind about that better later on, Frank," she answered jestingly.

"There you are, Clever Dick!" laughed his sister, Dulcie, giving him a triumphant nudge. "Didn't I tell you it's no good trying to quiz Val?"

Roger Drake and Molly Dixon were walking just ahead of them.

"Let me tell you, Roger," they heard Molly declare, "that if you go and land flat on your tummy from the top diving-board, after we've come so far to see you, I'll never speak to you again!"

Roger laughed heartily.

"Don't worry! There won't be any me worth speaking to if I do that! Gosh, there it is! What a beauty!"

Valerie nodded agreement as she saw the diving-board towering high over a blue pool in an exquisitely beautiful setting.

They had just reached the entrance. Beneath a huge archway of flowers Valerie saw a number of officials waiting expectantly. The presence of Sergeant Fanchal made their party recognisable at once, and a silk-hatted gentleman, wearing an enormous rosette, rushed forward and welcomed Roger like a long-lost brother.

With a confident wave, the lad went off with the officials.

When the others were shown to their seats—and the sergeant insisted on taking the one next to the gangway—Valerie promptly sat down beside him.

"I wouldn't have missed this outing for worlds!" she told him, her eyes shining.

She really meant it, for she had seldom seen a more glamorous setting for a swimming entertainment. The pool of blue water was ringed with shining marble and graceful statuary. The seats were not set in the usual lines, but bunched in attractive clusters on rising ground amongst beautiful tropical trees. There were beds of flowers everywhere. The gay native costumes to be seen on all sides made the scene one of entrancing colour and life.

But the tiny bulge in the sergeant's breast pocket soon brought Valerie back to earth. The glittering red gem was still there. Well, only one thing to do—not let the sergeant out of her sight until they were back in Mazoria. Then, at the police station to which he was attached, she would tell her story and demand that he produce the missing gem. It would be for his superiors to decide what part he had actually played in the amazing conspiracy.

Satisfied that her decision was the best she could come to under the circumstances, Valerie stretched herself more comfortably in her chair as the first performers ran to the lower diving-boards and took to the water.

"How soon do you think Roger'll be doing his stuff?" asked Molly Dixon tensely.

"Hope it's soon," declared Frank, gazing up at the high diving-board, which seemed loftier than ever when



Between Ourselves

MY DEAR READERS,—Before I go any further I want to send you the compliments of the season, and thank you, one and all, for the really delightful Christmas cards—just shoals and shoals of them—with which you have deluged this office for the past few days.

Everyone of us—and by that, of course, I mean my staff and I, and all our authors and artists—sincerely join in wishing you

A Very, Very Happy Christmas!

Hilda Richards has sent her own wishes in the form of a special letter, reproduced on page seven, and your very popular friend, Patricia, also sends you Yuletide greetings in her own way.

I do so hope that you will enjoy all the good things in this number. We've tried our best to make it as Christmasy as possible, and if it succeeds in bringing something of the festive spirit to you, then we shall be satisfied.

But forgive me for having given myself such tiny space this week, won't you? Only—something had to make way for all the other extra features, and Editors are never very important persons in print, are they? (No matter how terrifically important they are OUT of print!)

Now, a few very brief, very quick words about next week's gorgeous Babs & Co. Christmas Holiday COMPLETE. It is entitled:

"THE MYSTERY OF THE TOLLING BELL!"

viewed from the special terrace they were occupying. "I wouldn't care to take off from that jigger myself."

"I'd have fifty pink fits if it was you, Frank," Dulcie laughed breathlessly.

It thrilled Valerie to see her young charges so obviously excited and happy. For this was the sort of holiday she had planned for them. If only they were not under suspicion—only then to move about without an escort!

There was a sudden lull in the proceedings, broken by a loud chord from the orchestra. Then the master of ceremonies paddled to the centre of the lake in a blue-and-white boat to announce:

"The high diving!" Valerie breathlessly translated. "The champion will take off from the top board first, then Roger must follow!"

"Cooee! There's Roger over there to the yellow suit!" yelled Molly.

"Show 'em how, big boy!"

"Good old Roger!" cried Dulcie, snatching off her hat and waving it excitedly.

"England expects—" bawled Frank, through cupped hands, and even Mr. Boon rattled his stick loudly on the tiles.

There were cheers all round. Roger, waving a lean, confident brown arm back at them, swarmed lithely up the long ladder after the island champion.

and—goodness me! What an exciting, thrilling story it is, too!

Here, in brief, are the outstanding features of it—friendly rivalry between Barbara Redfern and her chums, staying at Trevlyn Towers, and another gay house-party; a girl who has lost her memory but who, for some strange, desperate reason, has to ring the bell in the old, ruined chapel; unscrupulous enemies who are determined to prevent the girl doing that, and, finally, Babs & Co. rallying round to help the girl and solve the whole bewildering mystery for themselves!

There! What do you think of those for the ingredients of a Christmas story? Add the charm of HILDA RICHARDS, writing, and fun and merriment galore, and you have a perfect feast of lovely reading.

Also in next week's issue will be further dramatic developments in Valerie Drew's latest exciting detective case; another delightful COMPLETE "Jess and Highwayman Jack" story; and more of Patricia's Bright and Interesting Pages. So don't miss it, will you, girls?

To conclude, I do so hope that you all have just the very presents you want. Don't forget that if you need a hint regarding presents, one of our superb Annuals—you can read about them on page nine—would be ideal, either to have yourself, or to give to a friend.

And so, again wishing you a really lovely Christmas!

Your sincere friend,

THE EDITOR.

ejaculated delightedly, the almost unbearable tension broken at last. "He's quite equalled—"

The words died in her throat. Dumb-foundedly she stared at the seat beside her.

Sergeant Fanchal had vanished!

A Most Amazing Policeman!

FOR a moment or two Valerie's feelings at the sergeant's apparent duplicity were almost indescribable. Then the realisation that there was not a moment to be lost spurred her to instant action.

Whispering to Dulcie to tell the others to stay in their seats, she rose to her feet and spoke urgently to Flash.

"Find him, boy!" she instructed, pointing to the seat where the sergeant had been sitting. "Sergeant Fanchal! Find out where he's gone!"

Flash sniffed eagerly around the spot, and, recognising the scent almost immediately, trotted along the path.

Valerie was breathing rapidly as she followed her pet. She could only believe that the sergeant's dramatic disappearance was connected with the vital ruby.

Was he going to prove too adroit for her, after all?

At the exit from the swimming enclosure, Valerie stood gazing across an expanse of ground which, at any other moment, would have enraptured her with its beauty.

Even in this island, where everything seemed to grow to perfection, they called it the Garden of Flowers.

Purple bougainvilleas bloomed in riotous clusters; climbing plants Valerie had never seen before drooped graceful sprays of pendulous blossoms from the rustic arches which spanned the numerous paths. Every conceivable hue was represented in the beds, or on the flowering bushes which were planted all around.

But it was, alas! only for Sergeant Fanchal that Valerie's anxious eyes were seeking now as she followed Flash towards rising ground.

Standing in a cluster of bushes at the summit, Valerie gazed down towards a natural lake where dozens of small, decorated boats were waiting in readiness for the water carnival which was to follow the swimming exhibition. At the moment the lake was deserted.

Valerie's eyes narrowed as her gaze moved nearer to the water's edge, for she detected a faint movement amongst bushes which fringed it.

It did not need Flash's tiny warning growl to tell her what it meant.

She had discovered the sergeant at last. For some amazing reason he was kneeling there and gazing intently away over the lake.

With a whispered word of caution to her pet, Valerie began softly creeping nearer to the sergeant.

Suddenly she stopped. A hand had risen above the bushes. As it moved, in a throwing motion, towards the lake, something shot away from it.

Glittering with brilliant red beams in the sunlight the object whirled through the air, and sank fully thirty feet from the edge of the lake.

For a moment or two Valerie stood petrified. Apparently Sergeant Fanchal had deliberately thrown the Ramon Ruby into the lake!

Collecting her wits again in the nick of time, she signalled sharply to her pet, and took cover.

The sergeant was, after a last cautious scrutiny, emerging from the bushes, to pass within a dozen feet of

the spot where Valerie was hiding, softly whistling. She had never seen a man so changed in such a short time. It was as though a great weight had been lifted from his mind.

What did it mean?

As the sergeant disappeared over the brow of the hillock, Valerie stood for several seconds gazing towards the lake, fixing in her mind the spot where the vital gem had vanished. Then, stooping to give her sagacious pet an affectionate pat, she made her way back in the direction of the swimming pool.

A daring idea for recovering the missing ruby was already forming in her mind, but she must be absolutely certain of success before she put it into execution.

Luckily there was the water carnival to follow the swimming contest. And that would give her the chance she needed!

Returning to the others, Valerie found the sergeant back in his seat, whilst Frank, Dulcie, and Molly were enthusiastically shaking hands with Roger and proudly thumping his back. She gathered the joyous news in an instant. Roger had tied with the champion. The gleaming little silver cup he clasped in one hand was a happy souvenir of that memorable feat.

"Where have you been, Mees Drew?" asked the sergeant, his tone cold and faintly accusing.

Valerie met his gaze in astonishment. His eyes were as sharp as ever, his bearing once more completely confident. If she had not seen him with her own eyes she would certainly never have suspected what he had only just been up to.

"Looking for you, sergeant," Valerie sweetly retorted. "I thought our policeman was supposed to be with us all the time."

The sergeant calmly folded his arms. "I reckoned it would be safe enough to leave you while you were in the main enclosure," he answered easily. "I am not very fond of high diving myself—I have seen some bad accidents. I am very glad it is all over."

The sergeant was lying with perfect composure. What did this change in his bearing imply? Had he disposed of the valuable gem, merely intending that he or his assistant could retrieve it later?

"Sorry you had so little confidence in Roger, sergeant," said Valerie, her breezy tone giving no hint of what was really in her mind. "Hallo, is the show over?" She glanced quickly around as she saw an excited scramble being made for all the exits. "Must be the water carnival next."

"Water carnival? Whoopee!" ejaculated Roger. "That sounds like fun! Coming, troops?"

"What-ho!" warmly agreed Molly, grasping his arm. "Now you're down from that board, my boy, you're going to stay down!"

"Roger, don't forget we've all got to have a drink out of the silver cup!" added Dulcie, taking his other arm and hauling Frank along in her wake. "They make a marvellous island drink called hironella!"

"One moment, please!" exclaimed the sergeant peremptorily. "I have something to say!"

Valerie felt a sudden spasm of uneasiness as she saw the stern set of his features and the glitter in his eyes.

In an instant she guessed what was coming.

The sergeant, having accomplished his own mysterious work, was now quite satisfied. He meant to take things easy for the rest of the day.

Looking after the party when they were all sitting together watching a diving exhibition was one thing; trying to keep an eye on them when there was a carnival in progress, quite another.

The sergeant evidently intended to take no chances.

He was about to forbid them to visit the scene of the water carnival at all!

Underwater!

IT was a breathless moment for Valerie Drew. She knew it was touch and go. Her plan for recovering the vital ruby from the depths of the lake could only be carried out if she could sail the waters herself in one of the small boats.

"Please, please!" cried the sergeant, seeing that Roger & Co. still enjoying their own merry antics with the silver cup, had failed to realise he had an announcement to make. "Listen to me!"

Valerie was thinking at lightning speed. To refuse to obey a definite order, when they were under official supervision, was out of the question. She would have to act before he could utter the words. Her intended defiance of his obvious wishes must appear to be the merest accident.

"Oh, excuse me!" she gasped, and snatched at her hat as the gentle island breeze tilted it. Losing it, after all, she made a seemingly clumsy effort to snatch it as it sailed towards the sergeant. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry!" she ejaculated.

The sergeant gasped as Valerie's outstretched hand sent his own peaked cap flying.

"Bother!" he muttered, stooping to retrieve it.

"Don't worry, sergeant! Flash!" Valerie exclaimed breathlessly as the cap went rolling along the path. "After it, boy! Surrender it! Surrender it!"

She used the unusual word deliberately, for to Flash "surrender" meant that there was a game on!

Rushing forward, Flash grasped the sergeant's hat just before his fingers

could close on it, leapt joyfully back amongst the bushes, and waved his tail in happy expectation of a game with this surprising new playmate.

At the same moment Valerie stepped softly to Frank's side.

"Tell the others to bolt for the carnival," she whispered. "The sergeant wants to stop us going! Make yourselves scarce, or we're sunk!"

The sergeant was still trying to get his hat back. Knowing Flash's usually good behaviour he was bewildered at what was going on.

"Flash, what's the matter with you?" Valerie cried, joining the sergeant in order to distract his attention from the others. "Don't you realise what you've got? Surrender at once!"

Flash immediately made a playful pounce, brought the hat to within inches of the sergeant's hand, then bounded away amongst the bushes.

Muttering under his breath, the sergeant went after him once more. Cornering Flash at last, he jammed his hat back in position and came striding back to the spot where Valerie was waiting.

"You must have been playing with Flash on the sly," she chided him gently, "and that was why he expected a game to-day."

"Ridiculous!" answered the sergeant tartly. "Now I will have all your party together and explain— Good gracious!" His eyes opened incredulously as he stared at the line of empty seats. "Where have they gone?" he ejaculated.

Valerie, following the direction of his gaze with secret satisfaction, gave a seemingly puzzled smile.

"Why, with all the other people to the water carnival, of course!" she answered. "Have they done anything wrong?"

Sergeant Fanchal looked ready to explode.

"I intended to forbid them to do anything of the sort!" he fumed.

"Dear, dear!" murmured Valerie, still quite unperturbed.

The sergeant gritted his teeth.

"We must find them immediately!" he muttered, and, striding off, made his way through the Garden of Flowers,



CROUCHED out of sight, restraining her eager pet with one hand, Valerie watched in utter amazement. For Sergeant Fanchal, the very policeman who was in charge of the suspected party, was throwing the stolen ruby into the lake!



which was now filled with the merry-makers.

His face fell as he saw what had already happened.

At many of the busy stalls, where gala novelties in the form of masks, comic noses, and wigs made of paper streamers were sold, a roaring trade was already being done.

From the fact that only Mr. Boon and Sybil were to be seen standing around, Valerie delightedly realised that Frank and the others had already accepted this providential opportunity to escape completely.

"Where are the others?" demanded the sergeant.

Valerie, who might have been sorry enough for him under different circumstances, had no sympathy to spare at this moment for the officer who had apparently played them so false already. Her one idea was to get the precious ruby, on whose recovery the

happiness of her whole party still depended.

"I'll look for them," she volunteered. "Flash, you stay here with the sergeant, and don't dare to touch his cap again! I'll be as quick as I can."

Valerie had doubled away almost before he was aware of her intention. Watching her opportunity, she swiftly reversed her coat, then purchased a wig and mask for herself. Now, thoroughly enjoying the amazing game of hide-and-seek, she deliberately changed her walk as she made for the spot where the small boats were being hired, guessing that it was in that direction that the other members of her party had already gone.

"Race you across the lake, Frank!" she heard Roger's unmistakable voice, a few moments later.

"Done!" Frank immediately responded. "Grab that paddle, Dulcie, and put your back into it! Off we go!"

Two boats, containing the four younger members of her party, amazingly and amusingly disguised, shot away from the landing stage just as Valerie reached it.

Confident that she would be able to locate them as soon as she needed their help, Valerie engaged a boat herself and glided off across the smooth, sunlit water.

It was a scene of unforgettable quietude that she witnessed. Many of the Mazorians had brought ukuleles with them, and played melodiously as they drifted across the tranquil waters. Other boats were engaging in energetic battles of flowers, the "ammunition" floating in lovely trails behind their gaily decorated craft.

But it was no time for Valerie to think of enjoying the trip herself.

Paddling steadily along about thirty yards from the shore, she paused when she guessed she was at last over the spot where the ruby had been thrown.

She gazed keenly over the side of her craft into the crystal depths, hoping she might be able to get a glimpse of it. But here the water was so deep that the bottom of the lake was too shadowy for the gem to reflect even one stray gleam of light.

On the bank, to her sudden dismay, she saw the familiar figure of Mr. Boon, with Sybil and Flash close at hand; while the sergeant, evidently in a worse temper than ever, was now pacing up and down close to the water's edge.

Tactfully deciding to leave the spot for the time being, Valerie paddled on in search of the others.

Roger's black mask, combined with his powerful handling of a paddle, soon enabled her to locate him again.

"Roger, don't raise your voice if you can help it!" Valerie cautiously hailed him, as she drifted near. "The sergeant's looking for us."

Roger grinned behind his mask. "As long as he doesn't disguise as a goldfish," he opined, "we ought to be safe enough!"

"I can't afford to chance it," Valerie smilingly replied in the same low tone.

"Listen to me carefully. I want you to do me a great service. Follow my boat, and when I stop and lift my hand, bump into me and upset me!"

"Not really?" asked Molly Dixon incredulously.

"Yes—and as hard as you can!" Valerie firmly instructed. "It must look as much like a real accident as possible."

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"But, Val, you'll get wringing wet!" Molly protested.

Valerie smiled.

"That's just what I want," she responded complacently. "Whatever you do, don't fail me! Everything may depend on what luck I have now, so don't forget to make a proper job of it!"

Turning, she paddled serenely back to the spot where she was sure the ruby had sunk.

Pausing to rest on her paddle, she took a cautious backward glance to make sure that Roger was following, then gazed dreamily towards the shore.

Roger, she was convinced, would do the trick properly. Frank, with his gentler nature, might be the victim of last-minute qualms and bungle it. Roger, luckily, never did things by halves—

"Mees Drew!" a voice sternly hailed her.

Looking up in amazement, Valerie saw the sergeant, still on the bank, staring straight towards her. He had penetrated her disguise!

But at that instant—

Crash!

Roger's boat struck her craft fairly and squarely. The smaller craft heeled right over immediately. Throwing up her hands, Valerie went straight over the side and plunged into the lake.

It was deep—deeper even than she had anticipated when gazing from the surface. The pressure gave her a stifled feeling, making it twice as hard to progress as would have been the case in shallower water. But she was down at last. With wide-open eyes, she swam around in search of the missing gem.

To her dismay, nothing whatever was to be seen on the sandy bed.

Fears suddenly assailed her. Had the gem sunk in the sand, already lost for ever?

Then all at once she found herself almost at the end of her tether. In a few more moments she would be compelled to shoot back to the surface for a breather. Once she did that, it would be impossible to dive again without rousing the sergeant's suspicions.

Turning at random to the right, she took four last hopeless strokes. Then, convinced she had failed, after all, she was about to turn upwards when something lying to one side attracted her attention.

Very faintly indeed some red object lay gleaming on the bed of the lake almost within reach of Valerie's hand!

WHAT a dramatic and thrilling moment this is! Can Valerie possibly hold out long enough to secure the precious gem? On no account fail to read the exciting continuation of this grand story in next Saturday's number.