

Our Magnificent Extra-Special Christmas Number

The SCHOOLGIRLS' 2^d OWN

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Week ending
December 21st, 1935.
EVERY TUESDAY.



**Morcove's Xmas
Phantom!**

See the Thrilling Long Complete Morcove Yuletide story inside.

There Are Five Enthralling Stories Inside

One of the Finest, Most Thrilling and Dramatic Morcove Stories—

MORCOVE'S CHRISTMAS

By
Marjorie
Stanton



Yuletide!

Morcove Girls and Grangemoor Boys! Fun—Laughter—Gaiety! And then, like an ominous black cloud, there is cast over the whole party the shadow of the Phantom Horseman. What is it—man or spectre? If Betty and Co. could guess

The Horseman of Mystery.

"AND haven't they any idea what it means?"

"None whatever!"

"But how strange!"

"Thrilling! I say, supposing it goes on like that over Christmas? Let's tell the others—if we haven't lost them in this snowstorm!"

So five youthful figures, powdered with the whirling flakes, stopped to turn round and hail two chums of theirs who should be not far behind in the wintry night.

"Hi, Bunny! Tom! Come on, there!"

"Something to tell you!" was the supplementary shout from Polly Linton, whose face—in the light of a lantern carried by one of her companions—held that laughing look which Morcove School knew so well.

"Coming!" a girlish voice gaily responded. "It's only that Tom is so slow!"

This grumble in regard to her brother would have been most unfair, if Bunny Trevor had meant it to be taken seriously. For it was soon apparent that Tom was only being slow, because he had more or less jokingly taken up his sister, to carry her over the snow.

She came into the lantern-light as a writhing, kicking human burden, desiring to avoid being dumped down by a brother who certainly intended something of the sort.

"Oh, Tom dear—now—please!—"

"Anybody want her?" Tom inquired, still managing to handle his sister. "For Christmas—all wound up! Will any kind friend take her off my hands?"



"No-o-o!" dinned madcap Polly, for self and friends. "Just leave her."

So Bunny was dumped, after all, into the foot-deep snow, where the first thing she did was to make a snowball and whizz it at Tom.

Plop!—good shot! Nicely on the right ear.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wretch," Bunny called him, as if he deserved much worse than that. "Oh, how I wish he hadn't been included in the invitation!"

"I like that," Tom protested. "There you were, saying we'd never get to Priors Wold to-night! Absolutely whacked, you were—"

"Oh, I wasn't! But," to the others, "where is Priors Wold? We can't see a light anywhere even now! The miles and miles we've trudged, I'm sure—"

"A mile and a half," calmly corrected Judy Cardew's brother Dave. It was he who had the lantern. "And it's only just over another hill now."

"It's a pity perhaps," said Madge Minden in her usual common-sense way, "that we didn't catch an earlier train and so get in before dark."

She, with Bunny and Tom, had arrived at the

—Featuring Betty Barton and Co. of the Fourth—Ever Written

PHANTOM

Complete in
this issue



The four who had gone to meet the train were Betty Barton and Polly Linton, Judy Cardew and her brother Dave.

"Well," said Bunny, as the floundering along was resumed, "if we do turn up at the wrong house, we'll have to be Christmas carollers—lantern and all!"

But she, as usual, was only joking. There could be no mistaking the way back, even on such a night as this, with Judy and Dave for guides. Priors Wold was their own home—that age-old Cotswold manor which their young widowed mother had acquired a few years back.

Priors Wold, already teeming with guests for Yuletide, already bedecked with berried holly, the mistletoe bough hanging in the hall, fires everywhere flaring chimneywards. Priors Wold, its stout old walls standing four square to this right Christmassy weather, and within doors—the right Christmas spirit!

"Something to tell me and Bunny, you shouted just now?" Tom said eagerly. "So what?"

"Judy and Dave had better repeat what they were saying just then," Madge exclaimed, with an excited smile. "Somehow, the way they told it—"

"What I said was," Dave interposed with his usual composure, "that we might perhaps see something of the 'Black Rider.'"

"The what?" cried Bunny.

"Black Rider? Who's he?"

"No one knows."

"This, from Dave, brought a protesting: "Here!" from his school chum, Tom.

nearest station for Priors Wold some forty minutes since.

There would have been a car to meet them, only this snowstorm had begun at nightfall to blanket the vast wastes of the rolling Cotswolds. Even with wheel chains, no car could have tackled the drifts that were here and there.

So a party had set off on foot to meet Bunny and Tom and Madge at the station. Now, having left all the luggage to come along in the morning, the party was trudging back over the whitened wastes.

A Very Happy Christmas To
All Our "Schoolgirls' Own"
Friends—

From The Editor
His Staff
His Authors
His Artists



"Now, Dave, just because it's Christmas, and your home's in this off-the-map part of the country—"

"But what I'm telling you is simply hard fact,"

Dave calmly insisted. "Judy will bear me out. She and I had no sooner got home to Priors Wold, a few days ago, than we heard of him from servants who had actually

SEEN him!"

"That is so," Judy softly interposed. "And there are people, besides, who live in the nearest village to Priors Wold—they've seen him, too. It can't be just one person's imagination; there have been far too many instances."

"They call him the Black Rider,"

Dave said, whilst he changed the dangling lantern from one hand to another, "because he always appears as a black-cloaked figure, riding a black horse. He was first seen about a month ago, by a shepherd on the hills. Three nights after that, two of the maids at Priors Wold got in at ten o'clock, after their mid-week outing, almost frightened out of their wits."

"The Black Rider had gone by them, galloping across a field," Judy put in, "whilst they were keeping to the lane. They described him as looking like the ghost of a highwayman; flapping cloak and a three-cornered hat."

"Goodness!" Bunny gasped. "You hear this, Tom?"

"I'm listening all right! Go on—what else, one of you?"

"Farmer Brown, last week, motoring back late from a neighbour-farmer's place on these hills, got such a scare that he muddled his steering and ended up in the ditch." Dave smiled as he said this. "Mind you, Farmer Brown was quite sober. And he honestly admits he was scared stiff and ran all the rest of the way home."

"After seeing that same—same phantom, I suppose you call it?" Bunny said, a note of awe in her lowered voice.

"Yes!"

"Well?" burst out Tom with pretended scorn. "What's the explanation? There must be one!" "Of course there must," Dave drily agreed. "Only—it hasn't been found yet."

"No one can say, no one can suggest even, who the Black Rider is," Judy carried on the impressive story. "And it's beginning to be believed by lots of country folk round here that it must be—a phantom."

"There was a highwayman in the old days used to work the Oxford-Cheltenham road—where it runs so high and lonely for miles and miles," Dave murmured. "Now it's being said that this is his ghost."

Tom suddenly guffawed.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ghost is good—ha, ha, ha!"

"But how perfectly lovely!" gurgled Bunny. "Oh, I do adore a ghost, especially at Christmas! I was saying, I'd give anything if, this Christmas, at Priors Wold— But"—disappointedly—"the Black Rider doesn't exactly belong to Priors Wold, does he? Pity, that!"

"He has been seen near enough to Priors Wold, more than once," Judy smiled, half-seriously, "to make it seem as if he—"

"Anyway, it's this district that he haunts! I say—Dave, turn out the lantern," Bunny gaily implored, beating her gloved hands together. "Then, perhaps—we shall see!"

Polly had not left her madcap nature behind, when she came away for Christmas. She skittishly took a flying kick at the lantern, knocking it clean out of Dave's grasp.

Still burning, it turned over and over as it went flying through the air. Then it fell upside down in the snow and went out.

"You goop!" screamed Bunny, as if that were the very last thing she had wanted to happen. "When you know Tom hates the dark!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wow, I can see him!" Tom now bellowed in pretended fright. "Hi, look, there he goes! Ooo-er, he's coming this way! Bunnee, don't leave me!"

She didn't. What Bunny did was to go close enough to her brother to tip him off his balance, to the great amusement of the other girls, who laughed still more when he affected a paralytic inability to rise again.

As for Dave, he had some matches, and he could see where the extinguished lantern was lying half-buried in the snow. He stepped to recover it, smiling at the way others had been fooling about. He had picked the lantern up, and was about to strike a match in the shelter of his greatcoat, when—

"Look!" came a wild yell from Polly; and this time there could be no supposing that it was a false alarm, by way of a joke. Polly's voice held a note of genuine fright. She was pointing with an outflung hand.

"There—see him, there! Oh, look, it is—it is!"

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"The Black Rider!" panted Betty. "Yes!" For she, like all the others when they looked the way Polly was pointing, had seen a great dark shape looming past them, not fifty yards from where they stood.

An apparition; a phantom-like figure, rendered all the vaguer because of the myriad snowflakes that were eddying down. And yet, to their startled, even horrified eyes, how instantly it had become recognisable as the mystery object of which they had been talking!

A black horse, galloping—and yet no sound of hoof-beats! A cloaked figure riding the horse, the man's posture a crouching, urging-on one; the head, with its black three-cornered hat dipped low to the wind and the driving snow, as if it were a case of: "On, on!"

All of them saw this phantom of the winter's night for a moment or two—yet only fleetingly.

Then the Black Rider was gone, swallowed up in the darkness, and there they stood, so tongue-tied, so spellbound by what had happened, there was absolute stillness except for the eerie crepitation of the snow and the shrilling of the wintry blast about their ears.

Gone Without Trace

"**W**HEW! My goodness!"

There was uneasy laughter when Bunny Trevor had said that, ending perhaps a half-minute of astounded silence.

"Can you light the lantern, Dave?" chuckled Polly. "Then light it, please—quick! Oh, but—but what a turn it gave me!"

"Just fancy, we've seen him," quavered Judy. "He was just like what they say about him."

"And I don't wonder," said Betty, "those maids were scared."

"Or that the farmer ran all the way home," Tom laughed rather hollowly. "Amazing!"

"Uncanny is my word for it," Madge shuddered. "I mean, it wasn't a real man on a real horse."

Dave, having to apply a second match to the lantern wick, muttered vexedly.

"It's not going to burn. It's jiggered up. That horse was not making a sound that I could hear, but that might have been the snow. Where are the hoof-marks?"

There were no hoof-marks! In vain they hunted and peered about where the Black Rider had gone galloping by; no trace remained.

Abandoning the search for tracks, they resumed their plodding way, and a few minutes later they were at the stone porch of Priors Wold.

Even before they had bunched together, in that first bit of shelter from the blinding snowstorm, they had heard happy sounds.

Brothers and chums of theirs who would soon be flocking around them were in a state of revelry, and above all the hubbub of voices rose the shrieky laughter of that dusky imp, Naomer Nakara.

The snow-powdered party in the porch did not ring to announce themselves. At a sign from Polly Linton, they all started a Christmas carol. Bunny and Polly, it is to be feared, put on terrible falsettos, whilst Tom indulged in a terribly deep bass.

Then the hall door came open, and fun-loving Jack Linton, Polly's brother, imitated the testy roar of an old curmudgeon, whilst offering two-pence to the singers.

"There you are, and now go away!" he roared, "or I'll have the police after you!"

"No!" was the hearty chorus from sundry girls

and boys who now flocked to welcome the new arrivals and their escort. "Come on in, all! Hallo, Bunny—Madgo—Tom! Merry Christmas!"

Naomer appeared, dancing and singing shrilly. "Haow are you, geals—and you, Tom?" asked Paula Creel, the adored duffer of the Morcove chummary, looking very dainty in a party frock. "Bai Jove—smothered with snow!"

"Ooo, look at it!" cried others, taking a hasty peep at the snowy darkness before the door was thudded-to. "Grand for to-morrow!"



"Please, can you take me in for the night?" the stranger asked piteously. "I've been so frightened!" Betty Barton and her crowd of chums just inside the doorway listened intently. Had the girl encountered the Black Rider, they wondered?

"Winter sports," smiled tall Pam Willoughby. "Toboggans!"

"Hurrah, yes! Let's hope it keeps on!"

Mrs. Cardew, the charming hostess of Priors Wold and the mother of Judy and Dave, suddenly broke through to the heart of the joyous mob, to give a very hearty welcome to the new arrivals.

"And now we're all complete. Everybody else is here! Judy darling, you can show Bunny and Madge where they are to sleep. Dave, you'll see after Tom? Shame, you all had to trudge like that from the station—"

"Oh, we loved it!" cried Bunny. "And—what do you think? We all saw the Black Rider!"

"Wha-a-at! Ooo—"

Not only did their brothers and chums continue to hang around those who had just come in; various parents and other grown-ups, having heard an allusion to the Black Rider, hurriedly appeared from the drawing-room and the library.

There was such a crowd of eager listeners in the holly-bedecked hall, that no one noticed how a servant of the place also hung about, to hear the recent experience being described.

She was a housemaid of about nineteen years who, coming into the hall with another basket of logs for the fire, became an unnoticed listener to what was being said.

After a few moments she seemed to realise that she ought to appear to have a reason for hanging about, and knelt down at the hearth to give it a tidy-up.

Other girlish faces at Priors Wold to-night were rosy-red; but deathly pale was the face of this young housemaid. And afterwards, although she had knelt in front of the roaring fire, she looked cold as she retired to the kitchen quarters.

She went away only when the new arrivals were going upstairs with a chattering escort. Although it would have sufficed for Dave to show Tom where he had been put, Jack had to go aloft as well, and so did Jimmy Cherrol and Tubby Bloot.

Inseparables at school, these five boys had to be together now. And it was just the same with the girls. Bunny and Madge were shown to a delightful, cosy guest-chamber which they were to share, by Judy Cardew—assisted by all the others!

The whole Study No. 12 chummy—under this hospitable roof for Christmas! That was the thing to make the girls riotously happy.

They had one another; they had the Grange-moor boys; and last, but not least, there were loving parents who were all such close friends amongst themselves.

But Bunny and Madge, it was realised, would like to get a wash and tidy-up before returning downstairs, so Judy and the rest suddenly effaced themselves.

"Jolly little room, Madge!" sparkled Bunny as soon as they were left to themselves.

She held her hand towards the fire whilst Madge went to the window to draw the pretty curtains aside and peer out into the night.

The lattice panes, however, were almost masked with snow. This room was right at the top of the house, and the two girls could hear the wintry blast wailing outside.

"Wonderful view, I expect," Madge murmured, "although you can't see a thing at present!"

"And don't want to, either," laughed Bunny. "I feel that if I looked out, I'd see that Black Rider Johnny again, in fancy, anyhow! Really, though, wasn't it strange?"

"Uncanny! Somehow I can't believe in spooks, Bunny; but if it were a real man on a real horse, then why the old-time cloak and hat?"

"Besides, not a sound as he went by, and not a hoof-print to be seen afterwards. As Dave said, that may have been the way the snow was coming down. But still!"

Madge was going to run the water to get a wash, when she paused and turned round.

"Somebody outside, Bunny? Did anybody tap just then?"

"I didn't hear a knock. Come in!" Bunny called out, in case there should be somebody there.

But nobody entered.

After a moment Madge laughed.

"Mustn't start fancying things, Bunny—in an old house like this! What it is, dear, that Black Rider business rather got on our nerves!"

"I'm glad I wasn't alone when I saw him,"

Bunny smiled, still warming herself at the fire. "Besides, who would have believed us if we'd been—"

She broke off. She turned to face the closed door again. So did Madge.

"There is someone out there in the passage," Bunny decided uneasily. "I'm sure I heard a floorboard creak. Come in!" she cried again.

Then—the door opened. A comely housemaid

entered with a can of hot water. She was the same maid who, a few minutes since, had hung about in the hall downstairs.

"I should have brought this sooner, young ladies," she apologised with a pleasant smile. "There's no hot water laid on to these out-of-the-way rooms."

"Oh, thanks so much," Bunny smiled in return.

"But we don't want to give a lot of trouble. There's a big crowd of us, for Christmas, isn't there?"

"Yes, miss; it is very nice to see so many. And we don't mind how much work it makes; Mrs. Cardew is always so good to us."

"Have you been with her long?" Madge inquired. "You'll be looking after us, up here, I suppose. We ought to have your name."

"Maisie, miss—Maisie Turner," was the low-spoken answer. "I have only been here a month; but I hope to stay on for good. I couldn't wish for a better place."

"Splendid!"

The two schoolgirls were taking to Maisie Turner. Their eyes remained upon her as, before withdrawing, she looked round the room to make quite sure that all was in order.

A nice, quiet, refined girl, they thought her, with an air of having known hardship perhaps—or had she experienced some cruel bereavement, only recently, that her good looks seemed to be haunted with sadness?

"Good-night, young ladies. If you should want me for anything, later on, you only need to ring."

"Thanks! But we shan't be bothering you, Maisie. Good-night."

She went out, closing the door softly behind her.

BUT once outside that bed-room, Maisie Turner stood for a few moments poised in a listening attitude. In the dimness of the narrow, ill-lit passage, her face was a white mask, charged with a suffering expression.

It was as if, amongst other things to distress her, she hated loitering like this—to overhear what those two girls might be saying to each other.

Anything they did say, however, could not have been of interest to Maisie after all, for she soon went away—carefully avoiding a floorboard that had creaked underfoot just now.

And, as she drifted out of one upper passage into another, making for some back stairs that would take her down to the kitchen regions, she swept a hand across her forehead and sighed, like one who is going about her life of daily toil with a secret weight upon heart and mind.

The Unexpected Guest

"NOW, you girls—after your long journey!"
"Yes, come on, Bunny; come on Madge—"

"Bekas, you must be starving! Zis is ze way—I'll show you!" Naomer shrilly offered, streaking for the great dining-room of Priors Wood, with its ancient minstrel's gallery. "Everybody," Naomer yelled on, "come in and have something!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A good deal of this laughter was due to Morcove's discovery that Tubby Blot was already in the dining-room—"having something."

But it was like Tubby to turn round at the laden side-board and express supreme pleasure at finding himself joined by his chums of Morcove and Grangemoor. Tubby was no selfish glutton—far from it.

All the same, Polly and others shouted "Oi!" as they all surged in, as if Tubby had been caught doing a very heinous thing in the way of pilfering.

Jack and Tom, who were great teasers of their fat pal, swooped upon him, and, for the honour of the old school tie, got him down and rolled him about.

Then, to the increased merriment of the girls, Jack and Tom ran their own little sid-show. They were too important, too grown-up, to sit with Morcove! They demanded a separate table, insisted that Tubby should wait upon them—even dressed him up as a waiter.

As Jack was sporting a toy monocle and wearing a false military moustache, he was able to be a great success in the rôle of a peppery colonel.

Then he came over to the main table, bringing Tom with him. All the girls, with Dave and Jimmy, were finding game pie, and cold roast pheasant, with jellies and mince pies to follow, rather good going. So they only booh'd when Jack interrupted the harmony by becoming the "compere" to an impromptu cabaret.

"Ladies—and—gentlemen!"

"Booh! Out him!"

"For your special benefit to-night," Jack vociferated, dodging a bread roll aimed by his sister, "Senorita Tubbyvesco, in her great star turn—secured at great expense! Come on, Tubby!"

Tubby had not yet made his bow to the supper party, but it was now realised that he was being hurriedly dressed up by Tom, in a corner. It was evidently to be a musical turn, for Jack suddenly produced a mouth-organ and began to vamp "The Girl on the Flying Trapeze."

At Christmas, Jack always carried about with him a dozen or so absurdities bought from "kerb merchants" in Town. The moustache was one, the mouth-organ another. As Tubby did not come on in response to the mouth-organ overture, Jack put that away and brought out some toy bagpipes.

(Continued on the next page.)

BABS & COS' MAGIC CHRISTMAS
THE SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN LIBRARY #516

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The balloon part of the bagpipes went pop! however, and then he had to resort again to the mouth-organ.

By this time, Polly and Bunny and other lively spirits were becoming very vocal in their impatience for Tubby, if he was going to do anything, to do it. So Tom, who was making-up Tubby's face, let him come on with it only half made-up. And a most extraordinary face it was.

As for his stage dress, he had been given an old skirt and a shawl to wear, the idea being, Morcove could only infer, that there was to be some Spanish dancing.

Sure enough, Jack switched to "Argentina!" and then Tubby skipped about and shimmied and stamped the floor, whilst the audience said what a shame it was not to have him put away.

The dining-room became a scene of general frivolity, during which Tubby was caught in the act of more "picking" from the sideboard.

He was chased up to the minstrel gallery by half a dozen of the merry-makers, whilst the rest flocked away, intending to cool off a bit in the hall.

But these others were soon fetched back to the dining-room, there to behold Tubby, suspended in midair over the carved front of the gallery.

It seemed that, in attempting to escape from his pursuers, he had climbed over, meaning to let himself down to the floor. His braces had caught somewhere, however, and there he hung—like a fat cherub.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Morcove, whilst grown-ups in other rooms and in the large hall laughed at all this uproar that the girls and boys were making.

At last most of them found the spacious hall an attraction, for there the Christmas decorations were most lavish and many a Chinese lantern shed its light upon a polished floor that simply cried out for dancers.

There was the wireless, and they tuned-in to a dance band. Jack skated across to claim Betty for the foxtrot, and away they went, causing a rush with the pairing-off of others.

"But you're not dancing, Pam," smiled Mr. Minden, enjoying a fine cigar, "when here's Jimmy Cherrol—looking for a partner?"

"Hallo, Jimmy," said Pam, giving that brilliant smile which always dazzled him; and he said: "Hallo, Pam!" as if surprised to find her there.

And then suddenly Tubby slipped. He went down as a skater on ice, and Naomer flopped over him, yelling: "Hi!" The peals of merriment were the loudest yet, and it was whilst all this laughter was dying down that someone cried out loud in a startled way:

"Hark!"

It was Betty who had called out.

"A knock at the door," she explained. "Didn't you others hear?"

No. No one else had heard. But, next moment—

Thud, thud, thud! It was a dull beating against the outside of the stout old door.

Everybody kept mute and still for a moment.

"Now, who can that be?" Mrs. Cardeew wondered aloud, ending the sudden dramatic pause.

"We are not expecting anybody."

Dave switched off the wireless. There would have been dead silence, only the urgent rapping came again.

Then Jack, who was nearest the door, drew its latch and opened it wide.

Betty and Polly were the very first to see, along

with Jack, a young lady huddling there at the threshold, all whitened with snow.

She gave one appealing gesture and came with such a tottering step across the threshold that the two girls put out their hands to save her from falling.

"Please—oh, please, can you take me in for the night?" she wailed piteously. "I've been so frightened! I'm feeling ready to drop!"

Frightened!

Had she, then, seen the Black Rider out there in the blizzard?

The More the Merrier

MRS. CARDEW was ready with a quick cry of compassion.

"My dear! Oh, you poor soul—of course, come in and welcome!"

"Th-thank you," panted the fair stranger, sinking into a chair which one of the boys had hastily placed for her. "Oh, how warm and jolly you all are here! What a blessing I saw the lights of this house!"

"Why, were you lost?"

She nodded in a hopeless way. Jack drove the door shut with a dull thud, and there were those who noticed how she looked towards that closed door in sudden relief. One or two of the Morcove girls, with the kindly hostess smiling approval of their impulsive action, started to remove the young lady's snow-blobbed hat and draw off her gloves.

"It is kind of you," she quavered. "Yes, I was absolutely lost. You see, it came on dark just after I had found my way to where I expected to stay for Christmas."

"But that was hours ago!"

"I know. And I've been floundering about on the hills ever since. The people I expected to stay with—they're no longer there. The house is standing empty. So I don't know what I shall do. Spend Christmas in the nearest workhouse, I suppose," she laughed ruefully.

"My dear, you mustn't say such things!" cried Mrs. Cardeew. "If you have nowhere else to go for Christmas, you must simply spend it with us!"

"How sweet of you!" purred the young lady.

"Oh, thank you!"—as one of the Morcove fathers offered her a hastily-poured-out cup of coffee.

"It's only a temporary fix I am in. I get an allowance every month from a relative in Canada, but this last month the remittance seems to have gone astray. I found Christmas coming on and wondered what on earth I would do. I hated the idea of owing for my keep. Perhaps it's a mistake, but I suddenly made up my mind to see if the Munros could have me. I used to be at school with Elsie Munro. I sent a letter yesterday to let them know I was coming down to their place, and set off this morning. Now I realise; the letter can't have been delivered. Their house is shut up—empty."

Mrs. Cardeew nodded understandingly.

"Yes, the Munros moved away from this district six months ago. How very unfortunate for you! But never mind. Just let us have your name—"

"Darrington—Isabella Darrington, or Bella, as I prefer to be called," she smiled. "Oh, but I feel worlds better already! This coffee—the feeling that I'm amongst friends!"

"That is how we want you to feel," said the large-hearted hostess of Priors Wold. "Judy dear, just find one of the housemaids—Maisie Turner will be the one. Explain to her, and say I would like her to get that last bed-room on the east side ready at once."

"Right-ho, mumsie!"

As Judy sped away, her mother turned again to Bella Darrington, around whom all the guests still clustered.

"It is a very tiny room, I'm afraid—little better than an attic. You see, we are full up for Christmas—"

"Of course, and as if I mind! It is so good of you to have me at all! I think you're wonderfully kind; I've some luggage, by the way, but that's at the station."

"Don't worry about that. It will be fetched in the morning. We have other luggage to fetch. Your room won't be fit to go into for an hour or two. There has been no fire there this year. But—"

Bunny interposed.

"Mrs. Cardew, why not let her use the room that Madge and I have, just for now?"

"That is the very thing," Judy's mother gladly responded. "For the room Miss Darrington is to have is next to yours. Perhaps Miss Darrington would like to go upstairs now?"

"Thank you," the young lady said, and handed her empty coffee-cup to Dave, who was there to receive it. "I look a fright at present, I know."

She stood up, and Mrs. Cardew signed to Bunny and Madge to show her the way upstairs to their room. The two girls, looking down into the hall from the first half-landing, as Bella Darrington followed them aloft, were aware of many pairs of eyes still watching her in a sympathetic way.

"Feet wet?" inquired Madge. "But we can easily find you dry stockings and shoes to slip on. If you like to get a hot bath, by the time you are out we could have a complete change for you. I dare say, Mrs. Cardew will be able to fit you out, even if we girls can't."

"I think I will get a bath—to be on the safe side. I don't want to catch a cold."

"Did you come down from London?" Bunny asked.

"Why, no—from the North, and a rotten cross-country journey it was, towards the end. This is a ghastly lonely district. Somehow, when I got out at that tiny railway station, I felt—burr!"

"When you began by saying you had had a fright," Bunny laughed, "we wondered if you had seen—the Black Rider!"

"The what!"

"Oh, then you haven't seen him in the snow-storm to-night? He's the sensation of the neighbourhood at present; a spook, a spectre—"

"Really? No, I didn't see—anything! But—"

"We'll tell you more about him by-and-by," smiled Bunny, for they were coming to her and Madge's bed-room now. "Here we are. Go in,

and you can use my dressing-gown. When you come out of the bath-room you'll find fresh things to put on."

Bella Darrington, at the threshold of the inviting room, with its good fire, looked entranced.

"Well, this is—too good to be true. I can only say—thanks awfully!"

At that instant someone came along the dim-lit passage, lugging a scuttle of coals with some paper and wood on top for kindling a fire. It was the housemaid, Maisie.

Bunny and Madge, turning to go downstairs again, gave the willing-looking girl an admiring smile.



"Look at our things for the show!" was Polly's horrified cry. On the table beneath the skylight had been set out dresses and many special requirements for the play. Now these were smothered with broken glass, splinters of wood and rapidly melting snow.

"You're the one, Maisie!" Bunny said in passing.

There was a pleased smile in acknowledgement of the words of praise, and that was all. Bunny and Madge hurried down to where all the Yuletide jollity was in full swing again, after being so dramatically interrupted, whilst Maisie Turner busied herself in the room that was to sleep Bella Darrington.

There was plenty Maisie could find to do, for she wanted everything to be in good order. From Judy she had gathered that the stranger in distress was to be treated quite as a guest.

So the housemaid was still busy when, presently,

Bella Darrington came to the doorway, after getting a hot bath.

"This is the room, then?"

"Yes, miss."

"I see. Quite nice, too!" But there was no word of thanks to the housemaid for having made the room so warm and "comfy" at such short notice. "It'll suit me," was all Bella added.

The maid departed. Closing the door, Bella Darrington stood in front of the fire for a few moments, then moved to the window. Holding the curtain aside, she would have peered out, but the glass was flecked with snow.

Instead of abandoning the idea of looking out into the bitter night, she opened the casement window so as to be able to rub the snow away.

Then, closing the casement, she peered out through the diamond panes—for a long while.

"Yes, there he is," she whispered to herself at last.

And, taking out a handkerchief, she waved it up and down at the window, as if to give a signal.

Presents For All

CHRISTMAS morning at Priors Wold!

Only a few minutes since had the wintry daylight crept back to the whitened wilderness amid which the old house stood so lonely and aloof.

But Naomer, at any rate, was awake.

Morcover had kept the fun going until a late hour on Christmas Eve, and there had been yawning talk of "extra bed" in the morning. Nor were Betty, Polly and Paula—sharing a large guest-chamber with their dusky chum—showing any signs of stirring.

"Bekas—now to see if jolly old Father Christmas did ze trick in ze night!" Naomer was thinking. "Eef not—sweendle!"

Partly as a joke and partly to save Father Christmas the trouble of going in and out of so many rooms, after his descent of the main chimney of Priors Wold, all the girls had hung their stockings outside their bedchambers.

In most cases the outer doorknob had sufficed for the purpose. But as there were four stockings to this particular room, the girls had resorted to a line stretched across their doorway.

Naomer, as she now turned the inner knob, had "gorjus" visions of four stockings, hung out upon a line just as if they had been put there to dry. But they would be well-filled stockings—bulging and knobby—of which she would have first pick!

Never mind which was her stocking by rights; first up, first served!

And then, having whipped open the door, she goggled her eyes in amazement and disgust.

Nothing there! Not a stocking to be seen. Even the stretched line was gone.

"What—ze—diggings!" she gasped. "Of all ze sweendles! Hi, Polly—Betty—Paula!"

Slam! went the door, and Naomer was standing turned about, so as to offer her woeful face to her three chums as they all woke up sharply.

"Queek!" she shrilled. "Bekas—no Christmas stockings!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"Father Christmas hasn't been!"

"Don't be a goop!" Polly snorted. "Of course he's been!"

"Oh, but I know what it means!" Betty said, changing from amazement to merriment. "The boys! They have been playing a trick on us. They've been round collecting the stockings, just to tease us, ha, ha, ha!"

"Zen, I call zat a rotten trick to play upon us," stamped Naomer angrily. "Bekas, e't cee'n't funny—no!"

Polly, after putting forth her head to look this way and that, drew back, closing the door.

"I can see the stockings of other girls, hanging out all right—simply bursting, too! They're only our stockings that have vanished."

At that moment the door was tapped and Maisie the housemaid came in, looking half-amused and half-perplexed.

"These stockings, young ladies—"

She got no further with the inquiring remark. At sight of four crammed stockings, the four girls yelled together:

"Oh! Yes, they're ours—ours, Maisie!"

"I felt sure they must be, as I could see none in the passage!" smiled comely Maisie, with Polly and Naomer already struggling for first pick.

"But where were they, Maisie?"

"I came upon them stuffed behind a radiator in the passage! It did surprise me! I couldn't understand why—"

"An alleged jape, by those boys," Betty chuckled. "Must have been!"

The incident, genuinely annoying at the time, was soon being forgotten. The whang-whang! of the breakfast gong was heard by Morcover and Grangemoor during a first furious snowball battle out of doors.

Back into the house they trooped, breathless, laughing, warmed up—hungry! Yet, after all, most of them were to forget to eat anything, for beside each plate at table was a mound of packages and small parcels, involving the eager cutting of string and the excited tearing away of tissue-paper wrappings.

Christmas presents! Everybody in a yelling state of surprise and delight! Young and old alike, at one moment admiring a present of his or her own, and next moment admiring what someone else had received.

At last the babel at the breakfast-table changed to the pandemonium of a dispersal, with armfuls of presents to be rushed upstairs, to the various bed-rooms.

Morcover was in a great hurry now, for the boys had gone to get the toboggans out of the old stables.

But all this eagerness to be off for a morning of winter sport did not cause Betty and Co. to defer a certain graceful action.

They had made "a present from all," to a couple of maids who waited upon them at meal-times. Now the chums remembered housemaid Maisie. Her turning up to start doing their bed-rooms gave the girls just the right chance.

"Oh, Maisie!" said Betty, who had been asked by her chums to make the presentation, "we girls—er—something for Christmas for yourself—"

"For me,



miss!" as the tissue-papered package changed hands. "Oh, it is kind of you. I don't know how to thank you."

"Not at all, Maisie," smiled Betty, on the point of hurrying off to rejoin chums who had kept out of the way. "We mean a lot of work for you, and it is for us to say—thank YOU!"

She hurried from the room only to pull up sharply, or she would have blundered into Bella Darrington, who had just come away from her bed-room.

"Hallo, Betty! I wonder if I might come with you and the others? D'you mind?"

"Of course not!"

Christmas goodwill had something to do with Betty's cordial answer. By now, she and her chums were not so sure that they really liked Bella.

That young lady had certainly aimed at making herself popular with the whole house-party. All yesterday—after her first night under the roof that had given her shelter—she had figured to the grown-ups as a most pleasing girl. Her manners were right, she was vivacious, and she danced—perfectly. Quite a welcome addition, in fact, to the Yuletide gathering!

But Morcove's private opinion was that she was a bit too gushing and plausible now and then. There had been moments when the girls felt her to be not as genuine as they would have liked her to be.

Above all, they had noticed that she did not make herself nice to the servants. As Bella Darrington was "one extra," and was only here because there had been nowhere else for her to go, the least she might have done in return for the kindness was to give as little trouble as possible. Instead, she showed no hesitation in ordering Maisie and others about.

Like Betty, however, the rest of the girls took care not to betray any vague dislike when Betty and her companion appeared in the snowy yard near the stables.

Outwardly they appeared quite calm.

Pam was thinking how really charming Bella looked this morning. Madge was more inclined to think of the call there was for treating Bella sympathetically. Pretty awful, to have been placed in such a fix at Christmas! The girl had come off all right for a happy time; but it was only by a mere fluke!



In a few seconds Dave Cardew was able to look on to the snow-covered roof. Betty and the others who had crowded into the room were longing to know if he had discovered any clue as to the cause of the broken skylight.

Not Altogether Popular

AT that moment a huntsman's horn was heard—a long, drawn-out, hurtling note, blown by boisterous Jack, as he and his Grange-moor pals came galloping upon the scene, harnessed to several home-made sledges and toboggans.

"Tally-ho, boys!" Jack raved, meaning the girls. "Yoicks, gone away! Now starting—circular tour, back in time for Christmas dinner! Hurry up, please!"

Yet both he and Tom did the most absurd things to prevent any prompt boarding of their respective toboggans. As sure as any of the Morcove girls tried to seat themselves, the toboggans were jerked away.

Once, Jack became a runaway horse, tearing round and round the yard, with his sledge bounding about behind him and Polly in pursuit.

Finally, he became very particular as to whom he would consent to pull. He asserted that his toboggan was specially reserved for Paula and Naomer. It must be those two, or—no one.

Naomer felt highly honoured; but Paula was not sure that the "horse" would be quiet enough in harness for her liking. If she had been allowed to choose another sledge—but she wasn't! Paula was unceremoniously dragged down by Naomer, to sit behind that shrieky imp, who instantly yelled:

"Hi, Jack! Get ze jerk on!"

Jack did that, right enough. He set off with such a jerk that the toboggan went from under its two passengers, who were left tumbled together in the snow.

As other false starts were being made just then, resulting in much tipping over, the laughter was considerable.

At last they were all really off, going out over the crisp snow to where some fine runs downhill had been enjoyed yesterday.

All the Morcove chums were being saved the trouble of walking, and there would have been room for Bella Darrington as well, as a passenger, but she had sweetly declined.

"I feel so awfully fit down here," she had declared gaily. "You'll be tired long before I am!"

But they were not.

If the chums had tremendous fun during the next hour or so, they also had a most strenuous time of it. After each exciting race with the toboggans, there was all the exertion of toiling back up the slope. Yet it was Bella Darrington, not any of the Morcove girls, who opposed a sudden idea of leaving the toboggans for another time, and setting off on a trudge that would take in the Munros' former residence.

Morcove was not only surprised, but a good deal annoyed. Bella was "too tired" now, and the walk would not be worth the fag!

Yet she had previously boasted of being tireless, and surely she should have been as keen as any of them to see that house by daylight where she had expected to spend Christmas, only her friends had moved away.

Judy had suddenly suggested the walk of two miles, feeling that they would all find the now empty house a most fascinating place. But Bella Darrington insisted that it was much too late in the morning, and, anyway, she was too tired. They had better be guided by her, she added, and get back now to Priors Wold.

Check, for her to start domineering them like that!

To avoid unpleasantness, they gave in to her. But from that hour what had been only a vague dislike of her became very definite.

The bother of it was that she seemed more inclined to be with them than with the rest of those at Priors Wold. Just before the joyous sitting down to the grand Christmas dinner, Betty found Polly looking furious—all on account of Bella Darrington.

"One simply can't shake her off! She's everywhere!" Polly said irritably. "Here I was, in this bed-room of ours, just running a comb through my hair before going down to dinner—and suddenly in she walked!"

"She did!"

"Without even tapping, yes. She has her own room. I think she might keep to it. She said, as an excuse, that she had come to borrow a clothes-brush; but—I don't know!"

"The boys were looking a bit fed-up with her," Betty chuckled, "when she went to see them put those toboggans away in the old stables just now. Have you noticed she hangs about Dave a lot?"

"Yes. Talking mostly to him all the while we were out. I suppose it's because he is the son of the house."

"After to-day, Polly, we can choke her off a bit. There'll be no going out any more to-day; we'll be one big, jolly party, so we shan't notice her so much."

"Except that I can see her wanting to join in the play we're going to do later on," Polly grimaced.

"Then we had better not say anything about it," was Betty's prompt rejoinder. "Keep it dark—that's what we'll arrange with all the others to do straight away."

So Morcove & Co. did not make its intended announcement of a Grand Christmas Play, to form part of the evening's gaieties.

If it had not been for the presence of Bella Darrington, all the grown-ups would have been warned to hold themselves in readiness for a real "thriller"—"THE GHOST OF PRIORS WOLD!" As it was, the juniors had to keep the whole thing a close secret.

In one way, of course, keeping the screaming farce as a surprise hour of boisterous fun on Christmas night had its advantage. But it also had great drawbacks.

Even allowing for the versatility of Polly, Bunny, Jack, Tom and other players with a gift for "making it up as you go along," some sort of rehearsing had to be done. Not exactly easy to do in secret!

Then there were all the preparations for dressing the play. If there had been no need for secrecy, the amateur actors and actresses could have done much more routing out of things from old wardrobes and cupboards.

The best they could do, in the circumstances, was so to adapt the play, that some of the girls could wear their best party frocks. As for rehearsals, these had to take the form of hasty and secret conferences, obtained by innocent-looking withdrawals from the rest of the house-party during the afternoon.

There was a remote, unused room on the ground floor of which Judy had obtained the key. Here the furtive "rehearsals" went on, and here also dresses and "properties" required for the play were gradually accumulated. Betty & Co. resolved to use this room for dressing-up.

A gloomy, superfluous room it was, jutting out from the side of the house and having a flat roof. The primitive architecture of Priors Wold had resulted in only one mean window here, and a skylight covered a foot deep in snow.

By tea-time, Morcove & Co. reckoned that all was ready, and there was an understanding that Jack Linton should announce the performance of the play at ten to six for six o'clock. This would allow a pleasant hour, after tea, for Christmas games, to be resumed with all the more hilarity after the play.

Very delightful the girls and boys found it, to drift back in twos and threes to the lantern-lit hall, where tea was being even then handed round.

It was a welcome change from the cheerless "rehearsal" room, with all the whispering there had had to be, to warmth and brightness and lively talk and laughter.

Bella Darrington was there, already served with tea. Unlike the grown-ups, who thought nothing of the juniors having absented themselves once again just recently, she asked inquisitively:

"Where do you girls and boys get to? What are you up to, that none of us must know?"

"Seeing a ghost!" said Bunny lightly. As Jack, during the most recent snatch at rehearsals, had acted about in a white sheet, Bunny's flippant evasion could be considered truthful enough. In any case, the grown-ups were not so silly as to take the statement seriously.

"Not the Black Rider, I hope?" jested Mr. Linton, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"No, daddy," Polly kept up the fun demurely. "At least, not unless he had been covering himself with snow!"

Everyone laughed again—everyone except Bella Darrington, whose eyes held a queer gleam.

Mystery Mars the Merriment

TING-a-ling, a-ling, ting-LING!
"Oh, ha, ha, ha! Oh, dear—"
"Ladies—and—gentlemen—"

But Jack Linton, suddenly in the midst of the Christmas party dressed up as a bearded sort of town crier complete with handbell, was not to be able to make himself heard just yet.

Great guffaws from some of the menfolk, screams of laughter from the ladies, and yells of delight and much clapping by Jack's fellow juniors—all this went on for a full minute, during which he could only continue to shake the bell most vigorously. At last:

"Oyez, oyez, oyez!" Polly's brother dinned. "To-night at six o'clock! The world-famous Morcove Mummies in that grand, spectacular, sensational play, THE GHOST OF PRIORS WOLD!"
"Oh!" and clapping. "Ha, ha, ha! Bravo!"
Ting-ling, ting-ling, ting-ling!

"Also," Jack was resuming when, somewhere in the house, there was a shattering CRASH! that caused a few startled screams and then—dead silence.

The momentary silence gave place to an outcry of bewilderment. Young and old alike were up from chairs and settees, looking blankly at one another.

Betty turned to Polly.
"It sounded to me as if it came from that room—you know the one I mean!"

"That's what I thought!" Polly nodded. "It was in a downstairs room, anyway, on that side of the house. Judy!" she hastily whispered. "You have the key?"

"Yes—"
"Come on, then!"
And away darted all the girls and boys, whilst their elders were still in a spellbound state.

Judy was getting out the key as she ran with the rest along a dim-lit passage, at the end of which was the locked-up room.

Five seconds later the key had been slammed into the lock, the hasp turned back and the door was being thrown wide open.

One of the girls found the switch and clicked on a light.

Then Morcove and the boys stood aghast once more.

The skylight was smashed. More than half its glass had fallen in, and with the glass had fallen huge quantities of snow.

"Look at our things for the show!" was Polly's horrified cry. "Oh, look—how awful!"

"Yes, hai Jove—"
"Bekas—done for!" yelled Naomer. "What ze diggings, eet has spoiled everything!"

They swarmed into the room, gathering round a table which, being centrally placed, was just under the skylight.

On that table they had set out dresses and many special requirements for the play. Now all these things were in a ruinous state, smothered with broken glass, splinters of wood, and a cold slop of fallen snow.

Dave, without saying a word, suddenly seized a chair, slammed it on to the table, and then mounted first the table and then the chair!

In less than five seconds he was standing high enough to be head and shoulders above the framework of the broken skylight.

The girls, his chums, and the many grown-ups who had now come upon the scene, saw him taking a first look-round up there. Then, doing his best to avoid any fragments of glass, he hauled himself up and managed to clamber out on to the flat roof.

"Oh, I know why!" Polly cried, in greater excitement than ever. "He's seen somebody! It was a burglar, then, and he fell through the skylight!"

A few moments later, Dave's feet reappeared, then his legs.

The clamour, to know if he had seen anything outside in the starlight, began before he was safely down again. Yet all he had to say, after all, was that he had cut his hand just slightly and had better go and dress it.

He was soon able to dispel his mother's concern about that cut; but Judy insisted upon going away with him. And with Judy went most of the other juniors, for they meant to get some information out of Dave!

"Now, Dave," his sister coaxed, whilst she sponged the cut for him with some peroxide. "Whilst we are waiting for Maisie to find that lint—for you must keep it bound up—"

"Come on, old son," Jack jovially insisted. "What was he like? You've got to say!"

"All right, the; if you must know," Dave gravely smiled, "I had just a glimpse of a black figure."

"What!" came awed whispers from the girls. "Dave! You—you don't mean—the Black Rider?"

"It was the Black Rider, only not on horse-back."

As those words were spoken a loud sighing sound startled the group, and then came a dull thud as of a body falling.

There on the floor, only a few paces from them, lay the housemaid who had undertaken to return with lint for Dave's cut hand. Half a dozen of the girls voiced recognisably:

"Why, it's Maisie—it's Maisie!"

She was prone and still, nor did she stir as they all darted to her in great alarm. Betty was one who, kneeling beside that stricken figure, tried to revive her.

"Was it that talk about the Black Rider again?" Betty wondered, looking up to those who stood around. "For she has fainted right away!"

[END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.]

MORE thrilling than ever is the Morcove story, "The Phantom Strikes Again," in the next issue of SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN on sale Saturday, December 21st, don't forget.