

Fun And Thrills For The Christmas Holiday

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EVERY FRIDAY.

Week Ending December 24th, 1949.

GIRLS' CRYSTAL ^{3¢}

AND "THE SCHOOLGIRL"



THE SECRET OF THE
CHRISTMAS CAKE

The MERRYMAKERS' Island College



By DAPHNE GRAYSON

THE CHRISTMAS TREE SURPRISE.

THE Holly and the Ivy—
Sally Warner, humming the lovely old carol, stepped lightly down the wide staircase, its rail twined with glossy green leaves and small red and yellow Christmas Bells. "Not holly and not ivy," she smiled, "but very lovely, just the same!"

"And look at those gorgeous vases of Christmas Lilies," cried fair-haired Fay Manners, pointing down to the square, cool-looking hall below. "And the Christmas Bush! How strange to see so many flowers in bloom at Christmas!"

"How strange to feel so hot," grinned Johnny Briggs from the landing above. "Phew! I'm roasting already!"

"Now you know what the turkey feels like when they take it out of the oven back home in England," chuckled Don Weston. "The only thing is you don't look so nice and crisp and crackly!"

There was a ripple of laughter from the chums, and from the other students just making their way to the stairs along the landing. A merry, excited gathering they were, the girls colourful in their dainty summer dresses, the boys cool and immaculate in white flannels and white shirts.

Strange attire indeed for Christmas Eve—for that was what it was, Christmas Eve in Australia, the height of summer, with blazing sunshine. What a contrast to England, where it was now mid-winter; where they were now experiencing frost and snow as the people made their wildly exciting last-minute rush for presents.

And if Sally & Co. had anticipated feeling a little homestek, that had very quickly evaporated when they, with several other students from the International College on Waloorie Island, had received this wonderful invitation from Mrs. McEwen to spend Christmas at her beautiful home, Mount View, on the outskirts of Brisbane.

They had already met Mrs. McEwen and her charming companion, Eva Barton, both of whom had spent a week at the college recently as guests of Miss Monica Trent, the history professor.

The party, in the charge of Miss Trent, had arrived at Mount View about half an hour ago, and, after a quick, gay greeting from their hostess, had been hustled up to their rooms for a refreshing wash and a change into their coolest dresses.

Now, with a delicious feeling of excitement, the happy party was making its way downstairs to rejoin their hostess and Miss Trent.

"I've got all my presents tied up and labelled," said Sally happily, as they stepped on to the highly polished floor of the big hall. "All I've got to do now— What she had to do was suddenly forgotten. Her lovely blue eyes widened with delight. "Golly! Look!" she cried rapturously, pointing to a wide-open doorway across the hall.

At a rush the others hurried down the stairs, craned their heads in the direction in which Sally was pointing. And they, too, exclaimed in delight.

For in the centre of the very large room was a huge Christmas tree, reaching from floor to ceiling. And such a tree—its tinsel and gaily-coloured glass ornaments shooting out fiery sparks of many coloured lights as the sun played upon them; its sturdy branches almost bowed down under the weight of the bewildering array of presents hanging upon them. And as if that were not enough, the floor around it was piled with parcels wrapped in holly-sprigged paper and tied with gay green and red ribbons.

"Forward, troops!" cried Linda Powell eagerly. "Let's get a closer look!"

Laughing and chattering excitedly, they began to surge forward. But as they did so there came a little exclamation from the other end of the hall. In a sudden, hurried rush, Mrs. McEwen, followed more leisurely by Miss Trent, hurried towards the room, and drew the door shut just as the party reached it. Her charming face was alight with laughter as she looked at the rather startled students.

"Don't look so worried," she said lightly. "That's just something I didn't mean you to see yet. I thought the door was shut—I don't know who could have opened it."

She frowned puzzledly, then smiled again.

"Anyway," she went on, "I've prepared the tree as a special surprise for you and for my other guests who will be arriving this evening, and I'm childish enough not to want my sur-

prise spoilt. So will you all promise me—College honour—that you won't go into that room until Christmas Day?"

"You bet we will, Mrs. McEwen!" chorused the students.

"Yes, you can trust us, Mrs. McEwen," said Sally with a confident smile. "What about playing some of the games we used to play back home, everyone?" she added eagerly.

"Splendid idea!" said their hostess. "Fraid I can't join in—too busy. Monica, show them the music-room, will you? They may need the piano or radio."

The excited party was just surging off, when Sally suddenly turned.

"Goodness! I almost forgot Eva," she said apologetically. "We haven't seen her since we arrived! Is she too busy to join us, Mrs. McEwen?"

At Sally's innocent question Mrs. McEwen suddenly stiffened. Her sweet, grey eyes filled with pain.

"I—I—" she began haltingly. "Eva has—has gone away!"

"Gone away?" echoed Sally in amazement. "At Christmas time? Oh, what a pity! Will she be back before we leave?"

"She—she will not be back—not ever," faltered Mrs. McEwen. "Please, Sally," she added distressfully, "please don't ask me any more questions. You must forget about Eva, as I am trying to do!"

And with her bright face suddenly grey and shadowed, she stumbled blindly off along the hall, leaving Sally feeling as if a bomb had exploded at her feet.

"What was this? What did it all mean? What could have happened to make Mrs. McEwen send Eva, the girl she had intended adopting as her own daughter, away from this house, out of her life? Eva, who had seemed so sweet, so thoughtful—

"Come on, dreamy!" shouted Tubby Withwood, his plump face beaming round the door of the music-room. "We're going to play hide-and-seek!"

Stunned though she was feeling, Sally forced a smile to her lips. Whatever happened, she must not let the unhappy bewilderment she was feeling upset the rest of the party. That would only make things worse for her hostess, who was making such a wonderful show of brightness and gaiety in the face of what must have been a shattering blow.

"You're the seeker, Sally," called Johnny. "Give us five minutes. On your way, everyone!"

Bright-faced and laughing, the happy boys and girls poured from the room, while Miss Trent wandered off

In Australia It Was Mid-summer—But Sally & Co. Meant To Have A Merry Christmas All The Same

to join Mrs. McEwen. And Sally, left alone, found herself thinking again of Eva—wondering what terrible thing she had done to make Mrs. McEwen, who had adored her, send her away from this lovely home. And at Christmas, of all times!

"Poor Mrs. McEwen," sighed Sally. "And poor Eva! If only I could see her—"

The sound of muffled giggles, of pattering feet and scuffles, had died away now. With a guilty glance at her watch, Sally realised that more than five minutes had passed, that her chums would be wondering what had happened to her.

Swiftly and silently she darted from the room, and then, reaching the hall, she pulled up with a little cry of alarm. For once again the door of the forbidden room was open, and through the opening Sally caught a glimpse of a girlish figure bending over the parcels at the foot of the tree.

Sally felt a quick surge of anger. Who could it be who had forgotten so soon their solemn promise not to enter the room? Who—

But even as Sally stepped into the room to speak sharply to the intruder, the girl, hearing her footsteps, straightened up with a frightened gasp. For a moment the two girls stared into each other's eyes, and then—

"Eva!" cried Sally. "Eva! But I thought—"

"Sally—oh Sally!" There was a sob of heartbroken entreaty in that cry. With her white face drawn and shadowed, her large eyes brown wells of unhappiness, the girl stumbled uncertainly forward. "Sally!" she cried tremblingly. "Oh, how glad I am to see you! If I could—explain—make you believe in me—"

"Hallo there, everyone!" called the cheery voice of Mrs. McEwen. "Come along! Iced drinks for all! I—Monica!" Her voice suddenly became sharp. "That door—it's open again!"

"Sally!" Eva made a frantic grab at Sally's arm. "Please help me. I mustn't be found in here. Trust me—"

Sally had only a split second to make up her mind. But there was something in those pleading, agonised eyes that made her believe in the girl, made her want to help.

"Through the window, Eva—quick!" she hissed.

Eva flashed her a glance full of gratitude. Next moment she had sped across the room and tumbled almost headlong through the open window. While Sally, for the first time realising the unhappy position in which she had placed herself, turned in the doorway to gaze into the reproachful face of Mrs. McEwen, and the sternly indignant eyes of Miss Trent.

"Sally!" cried Miss Trent sharply. "Is this the way you keep a promise? You gave your word of honour—"

"Oh, I say, Sally!" There was uncomfortable reproach in the voice of Tess Terry, who had just drifted on to the scene. "You are a chump!"

"You jolly well knew we wouldn't hide in there," put in Linda.

"But—but—" blurted Sally, and then stood scarlet-faced and silent. To clear herself of the suspicion of having pried into the forbidden room, she would have to give away Eva. And that she could not do.

But if she was silent the others were not. Miss Trent, fiercely resentful of the slur Sally had appeared to cast on her beloved college, was tight-lipped and frosty; the students were openly resentful.

It was Mrs. McEwen who ended the unhappy little scene.

"I'm quite sure it was just a lapse of memory on Sally's part," she said soothingly. "Let's forget all about it. And, just to make sure it doesn't happen again, I'll have the door locked. Now—drinks everyone!"

Though Mrs. McEwen had so charmingly dismissed the incident, Sally could still see the reproachful glances cast at her. And, unhappy as she felt in that moment, she

could not help wondering whether she had done wrong in protecting Eva; could not help wondering why the girl had been in the room; wondering more than ever what lay behind this unhappy mystery!

A SHADOW OVER THE PARTY

IT was as well that Sally had the problem of Eva's mysterious behaviour to occupy her mind during the next few minutes, whilst the party sprawled in comfortable rattan chairs on the shady veranda, sipping their ice-cold drinks, otherwise she would have felt considerably unhappier than she was already.

She was conscious of the distinctly reproachful glances cast at her by the other students, and the disapproving eye of Miss Trent.

But when Mrs. McEwen swept out on the veranda, everyone looked up at their hostess with a smile.

"Everybody finished?" asked Mrs. McEwen in her cheerful voice, as she turned to bestow a specially forgiving smile on the rather woebegone Sally. "Good! I hope the drinks have put new life into you because I want all these balloons blown up. Any volunteers?"

They were all eager to help, and in their resultant scarlet-faced efforts to inflate the balloons they forgot the slight unpleasantness, and ceased to look reproachfully at Sally.

Only Sally did not forget. She still



As Eva heard the sound of approaching footsteps, she turned agitatedly to Sally. "Please help me, Sally," she urged. "I mustn't be found in here."

smarted a little under the assumption that, wittingly or unwittingly, she had broken her word. Only Eva could clear her of that stigma. But over-riding her desire to put herself right in the eyes of her hostess and her chums, was her even greater desire to help Eva—and in doing so perhaps to remove the burden of unhappiness which Mrs. McEwen was trying so gallantly to hide.

But how to do that? Sally asked herself. She must in some way contrive to meet Eva again, discuss the situation with her. Meantime, there was not a thing she could do—nothing but join in the jollifications and try and forget this black shadow which hung over the house, threatening to spoil this wonderful Christmas.

"Here you are!" she cried gaily. "Positively the last one. If I blow up another I'll burst!"

"Good for you, Sally!" cried Johnny. "Gosh! I've blown so much of myself away my bones will rattle when I walk."

"In which case we'll use you for the Christmas ghost," laughed Fay. "Where do you want the balloons, Mrs. McEwen?" she asked.

"In the large drawing-room," beamed their hostess. "We'll be having dancing in there to-night, and I want them tied up very high so that they can be let down during the dancing. The one to collect the most balloons will win a prize. Perhaps you'll fix them up for me—I've given the servants the rest of the day off

as they'll be so busy to-night. I thought you'd like to help me decorate the room, too."

Soon the large drawing-room, with its beautifully polished hardwood floor, was a hive of activity. While the boys, perched precariously on tall step-ladders, fixed up the balloons, the girls draped the walls with beautiful glossy leaves with their sweetly scented red and yellow flowers.

The effect was breath-takingly beautiful.

"It's wonderful!" beamed Mrs. McEwen. "There's just the flower-vases to do now. They're out in the conservatory—"

"I'd love to do that—may I?" asked Sally eagerly.

"Gladly, my dear. I'll just show you the way, then the rest of us will arrange lunch on the lawn picnic-fashion."

She led Sally into the conservatory at the side of the house, and Sally caught her breath in sheer delight as she saw the masses of beautiful, sweetly-scented flowers already cut and waiting to be placed in vases. Lovely purple jacarandas, vivid



scarlet poincianas, hibiscus and poinsettia, and a host of others.

"Golly, I'm going to enjoy this!" Sally's eyes sparkled.

"We'll give you a shout when lunch is ready," smiled Mrs. McEwen, darting off in her busy way.

Lovingly Sally began to arrange the flowers, but at the same time she looked keenly around through the open windows towards the thick belt of trees across the lawn, wondering whether Eve might be hiding there, wondering whether she should chance dashing over and looking round.

So engrossed was she in the thought that she started violently when a hand clutched her arm and a soft voice whispered her name in her ear.

"Eva!" cried Sally. "I was just thinking about you. You've got to tell me—"

"Sally, please!" cried Eva frantically. "I know I owe you an explanation, and I'll give it to you later. But not now—there isn't time. Listen, Sally, I've got to get into that room. I couldn't get back through the window—the shutters have been fastened—"

"Eva!" Sally's tone was horrified. "Not the—the tree room? Oh, no—"

"Everything depends on it," insisted Eva feverishly. "Oh, Sally, I'm sure I can clear myself if only I can get into the room. I can bring back Mrs. McEwen's faith in me, make her happy again." She gazed beseech-

ingly, imporingly at Sally. "Don't you see, this is just the opportunity for me to get in there. The servants are out, you'll all be at lunch on the lawn. Sally, please, please get me the key! Please!"

For a moment Sally stood aghast, gazing at that white face raised so imporingly to her own. There was a ring of truth in Eva's choice; bewildering as it seemed, the girl was really convinced that she could clear herself if only she could get into the forbidden room. But to ask Sally to get the key—that was a different matter. Supposing she should be caught with it, when already she had offended Mrs. McEwen.

Sally looked at the other girl, so worried and pathetic, and suddenly her mind was made up.

"Eva! I'll get it," she cried. "It's hanging on the keyboard in the kitchen. Wait here, but keep out of sight."

Feeling acutely unhappy, but convinced that she was doing the right thing, Sally slipped through the french doors and into the house. Her heart gave a throb of joy as she saw her friends, with Mrs. McEwen and Miss Trent, busy spreading out the lunch by the swimming-pool. Like a flash she was in the kitchen, looking at the long board with its row of hooks on one wall, each hook bearing a key and a label indicating to which room it belonged.

It only took her a moment to grab the one she wanted, and then she was whizzing back to the conservatory. Breathlessly she thrust the key into Eva's eagerly outstretched hand.

"Sally—I'll never forget you for this," that girl breathed huskily. "I swear you won't regret it. Please don't tell anyone what you have done—it would ruin everything—"

Next moment, with one last look of infinite gratitude, she darted out through the door of the conservatory and disappeared behind a clump of shrubs. While Sally, alternating between fear and hope, continued her arranging.

"Finished?" asked Mrs. McEwen a few moments later. "Oh, Sally, how charming. Now the boys can help us to carry them across. The white porcelain vases are all for the drawing-room. The one you're carrying, Sally, is for the kitchen. And this green one—she smiled as she entered the house—"is for my tree-room. I'll take that in myself, of course."

Sally's heart gave an awful lurch at those words.

"The—the tree-room!" she gasped. "Mrs. McEwen—oh, no!"

"Why not?" asked Tim Topham, while Don and Johnny looked across at Sally in surprise.

"I—I—" Sally's tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

And then she finished as Mrs. McEwen's startled voice came to her ears.

"The key! It's gone!"

"Gone!" The word was echoed by the three boys, and by the other students who had come strolling back to see where their hostess had got to. "Gone? But where? Who—?"

Almost instinctively their eyes turned to Sally, who was standing there so white, so wretched, the very picture of guilt.

"Sally—" There was a bewildered, hurt pleading in Mrs. McEwen's voice. "Sally, it can't be you. You would not take the key—" She broke off, as Sally stood silent. "Then—then you have! But why—and where is it?"

"I—I can't tell you, Mrs. McEwen," choked Sally. "N-not yet! Please don't ask me—"

"Then in that case, Sally," came Miss Trent's voice, brittle and hard in the stupefied silence that followed, "you will go to your room at once and stay there until you are given permission to leave. It seems that you are determined to spoil Christmas for us all, but you shall not. Unless we have some very good excuse for your unpardonable behaviour very soon, I shall have you sent back to college this evening. Now go!"

CAUGHT—AND CLEARED

FOR a moment Sally stood still, shocked into immobility by those words. Sent back to college, barred from this Christmas gathering to which she had looked forward so eagerly and excitedly. Oh, no!

With a choking little sob tearing at her throat, she stumbled quickly up the stairs, blundered into the room which she was sharing with Fay, and hurled herself face downwards on the bed.

But not for long did Sally stay there. Determinedly she sat up, bathed her hot face and tidied her hair. Why was she worrying so much?

True, it was heartbreaking to be under this cloud, to feel that she had so bitterly hurt Mrs. McEwen, that her friends were of the opinion that she was deliberately trying to ruin Christmas for them. But everything would be cleared up soon—very, very soon!

But as hour followed hour, a bitterness began to creep over Sally.

Had she been too ready to believe in Eva?

It seemed hard to believe, and yet—

Suddenly, unable to bear the suspense any longer, Sally crept to the door of her room, opened it and peered out. The wide square landing was deserted, so were the stairs and the large hall below. But as she stared down her blue eyes widened in horrified dismay.

If Mrs. McEwen herself could not get into the tree-room, she had made sure that the person who had taken the key should not do so, either. For the handle of the door had been lashed with wire, carried tautly and firmly to the handle of the next door along the passage.

For a moment Sally felt her head spinning. Supposing Eva had already been in the room before the lashing-up had been done. She would be trapped—a prisoner. That would explain why, if she had indeed found what she had hoped to find, she had not yet been able to proclaim her own innocence and clear Sally.

Like a flash, Sally darted down the stairs and bent to the keyhole.

"Eva!" she hissed. "Eva—are you there?"

"Sally!" Eva's voice broke on a sob of relief. "I can't get out—"

"Hold everything! I'll see what I can do!" muttered Sally tensely.

Headless of putting herself into deeper disgrace, she feverishly began to tackle the firmly attached wire.

"Done it!" she cried at last. "O.K., Eva—"

In answer to her cry the door was flung open. An agitated Eva appeared on the threshold, a square object in her arms from which the gay wrapping papers which had been torn open were still hanging.

"Thanks, Sally!" she cried fervently, darting into the hall. "Now—"

"Eva!" The name came in a shrill, sobbing cry from Mrs. McEwen. "So you came back to finish your wicked work! Hold that girl, someone!"

In an instant two of the students leapt forward, grabbed Eva on either side, and held her tightly, while Sally stared in horrified dismay.

"Mrs. McEwen," cried Eva, struggling desperately, "you must listen. I had to get into that room—"

"You had to get in there, yes—because that is where you hid my jewel-box, is that it?" asked Mrs. McEwen with heartbroken bitterness, as she plucked the parcel from the nerveless fingers of Eva. "And you, Sally, you believed in her, helped her to do this to me, after I had warned you against her. How could you—oh, how could you!"

She paused and turned to the silent students.

"I think I owe you an explanation," Mrs. McEwen went on. "A few days ago my jewel-box was found to be missing. Eva admitted having taken it from its usual place, but when I

asked her to return it she made the excuse that she could not find it—"

"It was true—oh, goodness, it was true!" panted Eva.

"There were objects of sentiment in the box, as well as those of value," continued Mrs. McEwen with deep sadness. "I begged Eva to return them—she still stuck to her absurd story. In the end, though it broke my heart, I had to tell her to leave my house."

"But," she added scornfully, "apparently she wasn't content with this bitter unhappiness she had already caused. She hid herself here, determined to retrieve that jewel-box and make off with it. And she used you, Sally, as a pawn."

"Hallo, there, everyone!" came a boomingly cheerful voice from the open doorway. "Merry Christmas! Say, what is this? Some game you're playing? Hi, there, Mac, my dear! I've arrived early, I'm afraid—just got off the plane from Melbourne. Hallo, Eva, my love! I've done it! Got that little surprise all fixed up and ready for you-know-who's stocking-to-morrow morning!"

"Uncle Wally!" Eva literally tore herself from the grasp of the two boys and hurled herself upon the jolly looking newcomer. "Where is it? Give it to me, please!"

"But Mac will see it," objected the man bewilderedly, as he pulled a tiny package from his pocket.

"That's just what I want her to do," sobbed Eva. "There!" she cried, handing the package to the stunned-looking Mrs. McEwen. "That was why I took your jewel-box. Open it quickly!"

With trembling fingers Mrs. McEwen opened the small parcel. Then a cry of happiness, of gratitude came from her lips.

"My ear-ring—my precious ear-ring!" she murmured tremblingly. "You—you've had another one made to match—"

"That was why I took the jewel-box!" cried Eva, hovering between laughter and tears. "I knew how much you prized those ear-rings—the last gift from your husband before he died. I knew how you grieved when you lost one. So I thought the nicest Christmas present I could give you was another ear-ring to match, so that you could wear them again."

"That's right," put in the man Eva had called Uncle Wally. "She came to me in a great rush a week ago, just as I was off to get the plane to Melbourne. Begged me to get the thing made for her while I was away!"

"I was in such a rush," put in Eva hurriedly, "that I didn't have time to put the jewel-box back after I had taken the ear-ring. I knew I could do it when I returned. You can imagine my horror when I found it had gone. It sounded so feeble, I know, and I couldn't blame you for doubting me," she added, with a doubtful glance at Mrs. McEwen. "It was only afterwards that I remembered we had had some friends in helping to wrap up Christmas parcels to put round the tree. And I suddenly realised that that was what might have happened to the box."

"And you were right!" cried Mrs. McEwen, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Oh, Eva, my darling, will you ever forgive me? And, Sally, you, too?" She clasped Eva in her arms, smiling mistily at Sally. "Thank you! Thank you, my dear, for having more faith in my—my little daughter than I had!"

If Sally had not had another present, the sight of the radiant Mrs. McEwen and Eva would have sufficed. As for her hostess, she could only show her gratitude to Sally by making sure she and her chums enjoyed every moment of their holiday. And that she succeeded in doing so was made plain when the students voted it the most bumper Christmas they had ever known.

There will be another complete story featuring the ever-popular Merry-makers in next Friday's GIRLS' CRYSTAL.



The SECRET of the Christmas Cake

By PETER LANGLEY

A SURPRISE FOR NOEL

"WHAT a wizard place for spending Christmas, nunky!"

June Gaynor's eyes sparkled as she drew a deep breath of the frosty air with its unmistakable tang of the sea. She was gazing up through a sloping gap in the cliffs where, half hidden by trees, nestled a red-brick house, its roof powdered with snow.

Noel Raymond, her famous detective uncle, paused in the shelter of the overhanging rocks to light his pipe.

"So you like it, June?" he asked, with a quizzical smile. "I thought a change of surroundings might give an added zest to the festivities—especially as we're on our own this year. Dolphin Guest House was recommended by a friend. Plenty of life and merriment, with the Cornish scenery thrown in!"

"It's going to be gorgeous!" June declared happily. "And I'm so glad we decided to walk along the beach from the station—"

She broke off, the smile frozen suddenly on her lips as she stared up. "Nunky, look out!" she gasped. "There's a rock falling!"

Noel started away from the cliff as something hurtled from a high ledge, accompanied by a rattle of loose stones. Then he suddenly tensed, catching the falling object in midair.

"The rocks have changed since I was last in Cornwall, June," he remarked. "They're wrapping 'em up in cardboard boxes now!"

He was holding a square cardboard carton, neatly tied with tinselled string and bearing part of a torn label bordered by holly-leaves.

"Is—is it empty?" asked June. "Not by the feel of it." Noel shook the box gently. "Unwanted salvage, perhaps. The address has been torn off, but we may as well peep inside."

June looked on, considerably intrigued, as Noel methodically cut the tinselled string and opened the lid. Then—

"Oh!" she gasped, her eyes widening in blank astonishment. "It's—it's a cake, nunky!"

The box contained an iced Christmas cake, only slightly damaged, owing to the close packing of paper-shavings and the fact that Noel had caught it so deftly before it could hit the ground.

It was simply yet tastefully ornamented with a robin on a sprig of mistletoe, and an inscription in pink icing:

"A Merry Christmas."

"But why," demanded June, her mind in a whirl, "should anyone throw a gorgeous cake like that over the cliff—and at Christmas of all times?"

Noel shook his head, a perplexed expression on his face.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

June," he replied. "And where," he went on, asking a question of his own, "is the person who dropped the cake? I can't see anyone on the cliff. If you'll wait here with our cases, June, I'll have a look round. There's a steepish flight of steps leading up to the headland—"

"I'll come with you, nunky," June cut in eagerly. "The cake will be all right here with our luggage. There's not a soul in sight on the beach."

"Mind how you go, then," said Noel, smiling as he led the way up the rough steps cut in the face of the cliff.

A breathless scramble and they reached the top. June and her detective uncle stared round at the snow-powdered grass, dotted with bushes, and at the distant house almost hidden by the trees.

There were footprints in the snow, close to the edge of the cliff, but of the person who had made them there was not a sign.

Then June's keen eyes spotted something lying among the bushes, and she pounced on it excitedly.

"Look, nunky! It's the torn-off label!" she exclaimed. "It's addressed to the Dolphin Guest House. Why, that's where we're staying."

"This is getting really intriguing, June," commented Noel. "Someone drops a cake over the cliff, makes no attempt to retrieve it, and vanishes from sight. Well, at least we know now where to take the cake—and the mystery may be explained when we arrive. I suggest we collect our luggage and make our way to the guest-house through the gap."

He spoke lightheartedly as he assisted his young partner to descend the steep flight of steps; but behind his smile was a vaguely troubled expression.

Returning to the spot where they had left their belongings, June carefully picked up the box containing the cake, while Noel collected their light luggage.

Together they made their way up by the sloping gap that led to the guest-house. As they turned in through the gates a clamour of youthful voices greeted them. From among the trees trooped a merry crowd of young people, dragging a toboggan on which was tied a massive yule log.

They caught sight of Noel and June, and waved gaily. Then a plump, red-faced boy who was puffing and blowing at the rear of the toboggan straightened up with an indignant shout.

"Hi, that looks like the cake that was stolen from here!" he cried, pointing at June.

"Your cake?" the girl detective gasped, glancing quickly at her uncle.

"It's the same box, anyway," said the stout boy, approaching suspiciously. "Isn't it, Frank?"

"It looks the same," answered a cheery-faced boy with a shock of red hair.

"Just a minute!" put in Noel, who had been regarding the young people keenly. "Before we go any further, how did you happen to lose your cake, and when?"

"It was pinched," announced the fat boy, "from the dining-room in the guest-house this afternoon. A jolly mean trick!" And he glared at June.

"Steady, Osbert!" put in the other boy. "Perhaps we'd better explain."

He turned to Noel, telling his story in a pleasant, straightforward manner. The party of young people were all staying at the guest-house. Mr. Penhale, the genial proprietor, had ordered six special Christmas cakes—one for each table. Two had been delivered that morning, and one of them—a cake with a robin and mistletoe decoration—had been put on show in the dining-room after lunch.

It had been there scarcely ten minutes when, inexplicably, it had vanished. Exhaustive inquiries among the guests and staff had brought no results.

Noel and June exchanged significant looks.

"Would you recognise your cake again?" asked the young detective.

"I'll say we would!" declared Osbert.

Noel raised the lid of the box June was carrying—to give an incredulous start.

"That's not our cake!" exclaimed one of the girls in the party. "What a horrid-looking thing!"

June was staring blankly at the decoration on top of the cake. Instead of the robin and mistletoe, the icing was dotted with silver balls, forming the sinister design of a skull-and-crossbones!

"June, this must have been done while we were searching on the cliff-top!" exclaimed Noel. "It's the same cake, but the decorations have been altered!"

He could see now that the silver balls had been added clumsily and in obvious haste. The rest of the party had gathered round, murmuring excitedly as they stared at the weird decoration.

"Gosh, that's funny!" said Frank.

JUNE GAYNOR AND NOEL RAYMOND SOLVE
AN INTRIGUING YULETIDE MYSTERY

glancing at the others. "It was only last night that Mr. Penhale was telling us about a notorious pirate who used to live in these parts. They called him 'Jolly Roger,' owing to the feasts he used to give the villagers every Christmas from his ill-gotten spoils. I say—a broad grin crossed his reckled face—a bit of a lark if the old pirate's ghost had come back to pinch our cake!"

"Frank, be quiet!" ordered his sister Hilary. "You're giving us all the creeps! It's just a silly prank on someone's part. Don't you think so?" she added, appealing to Noel.

The young detective nodded gravely, with a warning glance at June.

"Most likely," he replied. "I suggest we go in and have a word with Mr. Penhale—"

"Hi, careful, Osbert!" suddenly yelled Frank.

The fat boy had attempted to lift the cake from the box, and now clumsily he had dropped it.

There came a dismayed gasp from the youthful party as the precious cake hit the snowy drive, to break into a score of crumbled fragments.

"Well, of all the fatheaded chumps!" snorted Frank, eyeing the abashed Osbert.

"Accidents will happen—even at Christmas!" put in June brightly, anxious to smooth matters over. "We shan't be able to sample that cake now, but I'm sure that Mr. Penhale will have one to spare."

Noel had bent to examine the broken fragments. Now, as the little party trooped up to the guest-house, June pulled at her uncle's sleeve.

"Out with it, nunky!" she whispered. "I believe you were looking for something in that cake!"

"Frankly, June, I'd hoped to find a clue," Noel admitted in a cautious undertone. "But there was absolutely nothing there except currants, raisins, and the usual things. Nothing, in fact, to explain why the cake was stolen in the first place, to be thrown over a cliff—and then hastily re-decorated! The whole thing baffles me, but I'm certain there's more behind it than a prank."

Just then the door of the guest-house was thrown open, to emit a cheery glow from within.

Mr. Penhale, the jovial, grey-haired proprietor, was there to greet them. He shook hands warmly with the famous detective and his young partner, and listened in surprise to the excited story blurted out by the youthful guests. Then he glanced at Noel, a twinkle in his eyes.

"It's my opinion that one of these young scamps has been up to a lark," he declared, "but we'll say no more about it as it's Christmas! We'll have the second cake for tea to-day and have the others till to-morrow. Ah, here comes Amy now with the festive cheer!"

A dark-haired young maid was crossing the hall, carrying a tray. And on the tray, lit by a dozen winking candles stuck round its silver base, was a veritable dream cake, its icing fashioned to resemble snow and a miniature house and Christmas-tree forming a centre-piece.

Its appearance was greeted by a cheer from the young guests.

"Stand away!" chuckled Mr. Penhale. "No one will go into the dining-room till the bell rings for tea. We don't want any more mishaps."

Laughing, the youthful party dispersed, the two boys dragging their yule log round to the yard. Through an open doorway June caught a glimpse of the lofty panelled dining-room, decorated with holly and mistletoe and lit by a crackling log fire that vied cheerfully with the fading daylight. The little maid placed the cake on the sideboard and commenced to pull the curtains.

Noel was questioning Mr. Penhale about the pirate legend current in the village and June turned interestedly to listen.

At that moment the pleasant murmur of voices was broken by a horrified cry. June and Noel whirled, together with the startled proprietor. The young maid stood in the dining-

room doorway, her face as white as death.

"The cake, Mr. Penhale—the second cake! It's gone!" she gasped, and pointed a shaking finger.

JUNE ON THE TRAIL

INCREDULOUSLY the young detective sprang to the open doorway, June and the proprietor close at his heels.

The glistening white cake which June had seen the maid place on the sideboard was no longer there. The Christmas candles still twinkled in their holders on the silver stand; but within their glowing circle was a gaping hollow where the cake had stood only a few minutes ago.

"This—this is beyond a joke!" exclaimed Mr. Penhale, an angry frown crossing his good-natured face as he stared round the room. "These young rascals are going too far. One of them must have slipped into the room while our backs were turned."

"But I was standing close to the door, Mr. Penhale," June intervened. "And—and Amy was in the room all the time!"

The young maid nodded, her face very pale against her dark hair as she stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the dancing candles.

A Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year

The Editor and the
Authors and Artists
Send Best Wishes To
All Readers

"I had just pulled the curtains, Mr. Penhale, and I swear I didn't see anyone or hear anything."

"Well, the cake can't have gone far," said Noel. "If a prankster's to blame, we'll see if we can catch him—or her—red-handed. I suggest we ring the gong now and summon the young people to tea."

The brazen notes of the gong brought the youthful guests trooping into the dining-room, where Noel had switched on the lights to display the festive spread.

"Oh, good show!" chuckled Frank Gaye, rubbing his hands, while a murmur of delight went up.

Then Osbert noticed the empty cake-stand, and there was a chorus of anxious, excited inquiries.

It was quite clear to Noel as he scanned the perplexed young faces that none of the party was responsible for the disappearing cake.

Then how had it vanished—and why?

That question was uppermost in the young detective's mind as, after a brief examination of the empty cake-stand, he crossed to the windows and pulled back the curtains, looking out into the wintry dusk.

Noel opened the window, and a few feathery snowflakes were driven in on the breeze. He felt June's hand on his arm.

"Nunky, are there any footprints?" she whispered.

The young detective took out his torch, flashing it across the terrace. The snow lay powdery and untrodden as far as the eye could see.

"Apparently the thief didn't come this way," Noel said quietly. "Or, if he did, he left no traces."

June looked at him sharply, but just then Noel turned to his host.

"I'm going to search the grounds," he said. "It would be best"—he lowered his voice, with a glance towards the little group of young

guests—"to treat this as a practical joke. Keep the party spirit going, June. Don't let 'em take this too seriously!"

June and Mr. Penhale both nodded. The proprietor was obviously relieved that the famous detective was here to take charge of matters.

Noel stepped out on to the terrace, closing the window behind him. June, smiling, joined the little group round the sideboard.

"Why so solemn, everyone?" she demanded gaily. "After all, one cake doesn't make a Christmas, and there are lots of other good things waiting for us to sample. I vote we make a start!"

"Well spoken!" declared Frank. "Gosh, there's Osbert wading into the mince pies already! Let's have a go, chums, while the going's good!"

Amid much laughter and good-natured banter, a rush was made for the laden tables.

The little maid had gone to fetch the tea, but Frank seized a bottle of lemonade and, pouring out a brimming glass, suggested that June should propose a toast.

"To the spirit of Christmas, and may it preside at our festivities!" smilingly toasted the girl detective.

"Hear, hear!" came a chorus of merry voices.

Frank chuckled, refilling his glass. "Another toast!" he exclaimed. "To Jolly Roger, the ghostly pirate—and may the cake he's pinched give him indigestion!"

The roar of laughter that greeted this sally was suddenly stilled by a sharp cry and a crash of falling crockery.

Amy, the dark-haired young maid, stood in the doorway, the tea-tray and its contents scattered on the floor at her feet.

"I—I'm sorry," she faltered, her face very white as June and Hilary sprang to her assistance. "I—I must have tripped."

But June knew that was not the real explanation. In the young maid's dark eyes as she bent to pick up the broken china was a look of fear.

Hurriedly the little maid departed with the tray of broken crockery.

The incident only momentarily disturbed the gaiety of the party, now well away thanks to June's encouragement and Frank's irrepressible high spirits.

But the girl detective was worried. What could have scared Amy sufficiently to make her drop that tray?

It was just then that June's sharp eyes spotted something lying near the door. It looked like a crumpled handkerchief—no doubt dropped by the maid.

The girl detective picked it up. What she had supposed to be a handkerchief was actually a dainty, hem-stitched table napkin. A name had been embroidered in the corner, and though the stitches had been carefully unpicked June could faintly make out the lettering:

"The Jolly-Roger Cake Shoppe."

June stared at it, her heart beating quickly; she was scarcely conscious of the merry clamour of voices around her.

The name could, of course, be a coincidence. In a district where a quaint old legend was a tourist attraction it was quite likely that an enterprising cafe would have adopted the name of the once notorious pirate. On the other hand—

The girl detective slipped, unnoticed, out of the room. There was no sign of the young maid, but in the hall she encountered a burly, red-faced figure—the porter at the guest-house. He treated June to a friendly nod as he stamped the snow from his boots.

"Seasonable weather, missy," he declared, "though it's goin' to be a rare cold night. Moon's got a mist round her. Sign o' more snow, I reck'n."

June agreed. "By the way, Mr.——"
"Tregellis is the name, missy, but everyone calls me Fred."

"I wonder, Fred, if you could tell me where I could find a little cake-shop known as the Jolly Roger?" asked June casually.

The porter regarded her queerly. "Well, miss, you couldn't find it in a matter of speaking. It's not there now. Closed last month, it did. Young fellow who ran it—name of Bert Norton—got into a spot of bother with the police, and had to shut down. Just got engaged to be married an' all, but there it was."

And he shook his head sadly as he turned to sort some letters into the rack behind the reception desk.

June's thoughts were racing. "What a pity!" she said. "I—that is, someone recommended it to me for—for its delicious cakes."

"Best cakes in the district, miss," agreed the porter. "We used to have a standing order for 'em here, but then Mr. Penhale changed over to Heskell's Bakery in the town. An' speakin' of cakes, it's a queer turn-out about them two cakes that are missing. Bet some o' those young folk have been up to a lark!"

June smilingly nodded, but her pulses were throbbing with suppressed excitement as she went in search of the maid.

She felt convinced that she had stumbled on vital information that might have a bearing on the strange mystery of the vanished cakes, and Amy, the maid, was certainly connected with it in some way!

The girl had been scared of something, and June was determined to discover the reason for her fear.

But in the kitchen she was informed that Amy Jones had asked for the evening off, to visit relatives, and no one had seen her since she took up the tea-things.

Returning to the hall, June heard her uncle's voice behind the closed door of the proprietor's office. For a moment she hesitated, wondering whether to knock; but just then, happening to glance casually out of the hall window, she gave a violent start.

A slender figure was stealing down the drive, faintly visible in the ghostly light of the rising moon. And under its arm the figure carried a bundle.

All thought of disturbing her uncle was banished from June's mind. There were occasions when seconds were vital, and this was one of them. On no account must she let that slender figure out of her sight.

A moment sufficed to slip on her warm coat and reach the door. She was glad that the garrulous hall porter was not around; he would probably have raised an alarm and scared her quarry.

Hurrying softly down the snow-covered drive, June reached the gates—in time to see the fitting figure disappear down the gap that led to the beach.

Puzzled and excited, the girl detective followed. What possible reason could anyone have for visiting the lonely beach at this hour on Christmas Eve?

Cautiously she descended the steep slope. A large boulder momentarily shut out her view of the beach, but as she crept round it June caught in her breath in sheer amazement.

She could see her quarry now. Amy, the young maid, was feverishly digging in the firm sand at the foot of the cliff. And beside her, on the beach, was the missing cake!

As June crept closer, concealing herself behind the prow of an upturned fishing-boat, she saw Amy drop to her knees beside the cake, placing it carefully in a box. For a moment her fingers seemed to be busy with the decorations. Then, with a nervous glance over her shoulder, she quickly secured the box with string and lowered it into the hole she had dug in the sand.

Her thoughts racing, June watched the girl fill in the hole, marking the place with a lobster-pot that lay among a pile near by.

Then, with another anxious glance up and down the beach, she hurried back by the way she had come, pass-

ing close to the girl detective who was crouched behind the boat.

June waited till the other's footsteps had died away. Then she slipped from her hiding-place and picked up the spade that the girl had concealed behind the lobster-pots.

The next minute she was digging in the firm sand her heart pounding with excitement. Would the buried cake reveal the answer to the strange Yuletide mystery?

A STRANGE WARNING

THE strains of an old Christmas song greeted Noel as, accompanied by his host, he opened the dining-room door.

Tea was over, and the youthful party of guests were gathered round the piano, where Frank was heartily thumping out a tune.

"Hallo, everybody!" remarked Noel, grinning. "Having a good time?"

"Rather, sir!" declared Osbert, his mouth full of mince pie.

The young detective looked round the room.

"June not with you?" he asked.

"She left us about a quarter of an hour ago, Mr. Raymond," said Hilary. "We thought she'd gone to have a word with Amy about bringing some

like one of the remaining cakes brought to the dining-room now," he said.

"I'll see to it at once," said Mr. Penhale. "Then I'll join the youngsters."

As soon as the proprietor had gone the young detective quickly closed the door and made a few rapid preparations. If the Christmas "joker" made another attempt, Noel hoped to catch him or her red-handed.

He had just completed his task when there came a knock at the door. He opened it to admit the buxom cook herself, carrying a large cake resplendent with chocolate icing.

"I brought it myself, sir," explained Mrs. Marples, "as I couldn't find Amy. That girl's been acting most queer recently—slipping off on her own without a word to me. I'll have to report her to Mr. Penhale."

The young detective smilingly waited till the cook had left the room. Quickly he arranged the chocolate cake on the silver stand, took a last look round, and stepped out into the hall, locking the door behind him.

Then abruptly his smile faded. Through the open window, carried faintly on the rising wind, came a girl's terrified cry.

Noel sprang for the front door and



The plump boy gave a startled shout as he saw the box June was carrying. "Hi, that looks like the cake which was stolen from here!" he cried.

more tea, but it didn't turn up. We made do on lemonade!"

Noel's eyes twinkled. June's absence did not surprise him. Knowing his youthful partner, he suspected she was following up the mystery on her own account.

"And what's the programme now?" he asked.

Frank started up from the piano. "I was going to suggest a game of hide-and-seek in the moonlight," he said eagerly.

There came an excited chorus of assent, and a few minutes later the youthful party trooped away to collect their coats. Noel turned quickly to Mr. Penhale.

"I don't want to be an alarmist, Penhale," he said, "but I suggest we keep an eye on them."

"You really think there's something serious behind this affair of the missing cakes, Raymond?" asked the guest-house proprietor worriedly.

"I'm positive of it!" replied Noel. "You say that these six cakes were ordered from Heskell's, the big bakery in the town, was the order given?"

"A month ago," replied Mr. Penhale. "But they were to be iced specially and delivered on Christmas Eve. Two arrived this morning, as you know. The other four were delivered just before you turned up. I impressed on Mrs. Marples the cook, that they should be kept securely locked in her pantry till Christmas Day."

Noel nodded thoughtfully. "With your permission, I should

dashed out. He could see the party of young guests on the lawn, surrounding the jovial proprietor.

"Penhale, you heard that cry?" jerked out Noel as he hurried up.

"Are all the girls here?"

"All of them except Miss Gaynor," said Mr. Penhale, with a worried frown. "I don't understand—"

"June!" muttered Noel uneasily. "Great guns, why didn't I think of it? She's slipped off on her own to investigate—"

He broke off, turning on the startled proprietor. "Get the youngsters back into the house," he said tersely. "There may be danger."

He turned and sprinted down the drive towards the gate, pulling out his torch as he ran.

The brilliant gleam revealed unmistakable footprints in the newly fallen snow. A double trail—one of small, pointed shoes with high heels, the other also a girl's, but with flat heels.

And both trails led towards the gap in the cliff. Noel's uneasiness increased as he hurried down the slippery path; then he halted abruptly.

A slim figure was stumbling towards him through the driving snow, something clutched under her arm.

"June!" exclaimed Noel huskily as he ran to meet her.

Panting for breath, June caught at his arm. Her face was pale with excitement.

"Nunky, I've found the missing cake!" she gasped.

"Just a minute, June!" Noel stared at her, his relief mingled with grow-

ing perplexity. "Was it you who screamed just now?" "Screamed, nunky? No, I didn't!" She caught in her breath, her fingers tightening on his arm. "It might—it might have been Amy!"

Breathlessly June gulped out her story, describing her finding of the crumpled serviette, her interview with the hall porter, and the strange activities of the young maid. "I dug up the box, nunky, but I haven't had time to open it. Do you"—June's voice shook—"do you think anything could have happened to Amy?"

There was a troubled expression in Noel's eyes.

"I don't know, June. On the face of it it looks as though Miss Amy Jones has got herself mixed up in a particularly mean plot of revenge."

"Nunky!" protested June.

"Wait," put in Noel. "I said 'on the face of it'—though your description of the girl's fear and that cry suggests something more sinister. It's plain from the embroidered serviette that Amy was employed at the cake-shop run by young Norton. Norton was disgraced in some way and his shop was closed down. He may have had a grudge against our host. The disappearance of the cakes, and that skull-and-crossbones that was substituted for the decorations, seem to have been intended to upset the young guests, and reflect on the credit of the guest-house."

"I don't believe it!" declared June warmly. "Amy has acted strangely, but, if I'm any judge of character, she wouldn't do anything underhand. I'm sure the poor girl was terrified!"

"You may be right," said Noel gravely. "There's no means of discovering from which way that cry came, but I'll arrange with Penhale for a thorough search of the grounds. Meanwhile, the best thing we can do for the moment is to take this cake indoors and examine it. It may—or may not—give us a clue to the mystery."

They found the youthful party assembled in the hall, with the exception of Frank Gaye and one of the other boys who had volunteered to patrol outside.

Noel drew Mr. Penhale aside and engaged him in earnest conversation. The proprietor looked worried, but nodded his assent.

The young detective unlocked the dining-room door and they all trooped in.

Everything was just as Noel had left it, including the chocolate cake on the sideboard. Osbert eyed the latter hungrily and edged towards it.

Noel, meanwhile, had placed the box on the table. He cut the string and lifted out the iced cake, quite unharmed, with its miniature house and Christmas-tree. "Oh, look!" came a startled cry from Hilary.

She was pointing to an inscription below the centre-piece, an inscription hastily picked out in silver balls:

"YOU ARE IN DANGER—NOW!"

"This is preposterous!" exclaimed Mr. Penhale angrily. "Someone is obviously trying to frighten my guests. If I catch the scoundrel—"

"Just a minute!" cut in Noel. Magnifying-glass in hand, he was examining the inscription on the cake. "This is very interesting."

"Nunky, what do you mean?" breathed June eagerly.

"I mean," said Noel, "that these silver balls were not put on the cake for the sake of making a sinister design or inscription—that was merely an after-thought. They were put here for a very different purpose—to cover up the scoundrel's real motive!"

"And that was?" demanded Mr. Penhale, staring disbelievingly.

Noel opened his lips to reply, but at that instant the lights in the room were suddenly extinguished.

"Help!" yelled a voice. It was Osbert's voice, choked with fright. "He—he's got me!"

Frightened cries arose from the

girls as there came the sound of a scuffle.

"Stand where you are, all of you!" called Noel urgently. "Guard the door, Penhale!"

The gleam from his torch stabbed the darkness, revealing Osbert's pallid face as he sat on the floor near the sideboard, a slice of chocolate cake clutched in his nerveless hand.

"The rest of the cake had vanished! "I—I was just sampling a piece of cake when someone—something grabbed me," faltered the fat boy plaintively.

"Whoever it was," cut in Mr. Penhale angrily, as he switched on the lights, "the trickster's got away! He must have slipped out of the room before I reached the door—yet I could have sworn no one passed me."

June was staring at her uncle. Noel had bent to pick up a length of broken thread that dangled from a corner of the sideboard. There was a grim smile on his lips.

"Whoever came into this room, June," he murmured, catching her glance, "did not come through the door!"

June's heart missed a beat, but before she could voice the startled question that rose to her lips, there came a sudden commotion in the hall. Into the room burst Frank Gaye and another boy, and between them they led a pale, trembling figure.

A little gasp escaped June's lips.

The tearful captive was Amy, the little maid; and in her hand the girl clutched a torn paper cake-frill, with a large portion of chocolate cake still adhering to it.

A SHOCK FOR SANTA CLAUS

WE found her stealing out of the porch with this in her hand, sir," panted Frank. "She tried to escape when we grabbed her—begged us to let her go."

A murmur of indignation rose from the young guests.

Mr. Penhale looked at the girl in stern reproach.

"So this is how you repay my kindness to you, Amy Jones," he said gruffly. "By frightening my young guests! When your fiancé, Bert Norton, got himself into trouble with the police and had to close his shop, I offered you this job and kept your secret."

"Mr. Penhale, I—I swear that neither Bert nor I had anything to do with this!" exclaimed the girl spiritedly.

"How can you say that?" demanded Mr. Penhale sternly. "I've heard about your mysterious conduct this evening—conduct that can only point to one thing. An act of spite against my young guests and myself, because I happened to be one of the magistrates who considered your fiancé's case, and ordered him to leave the district."

"It's not true!" whispered the girl brokenly. "You—you don't understand, and—I can't explain."

With a little sob she turned away. Impulsively June started forward, slipping an arm round the girl's shoulders.

"No point in pressing the matter to-night, Penhale," put in Noel. "It's plain the girl is not in a fit state to answer questions. I suggest we leave it till the morning."

June escorted the tearful Amy up to her room, but despite all her attempts to persuade the other to confide in her, the girl remained stubbornly silent.

Christmas morning dawned, ushered in by a distant merry peal of bells. The guests assembled at the festive breakfast-table, but Noel came in rather late, with June and their host. Mr. Penhale cleared his throat, and gravely made his announcement.

Amy was to go. As she had refused to explain her activities, he had no option but to dismiss her. Noel was escorting her as far as the nearest town, where she would be able to join relatives.

They left shortly after breakfast, Noel driving Mr. Penhale's car, with the young maid seated tearfully beside him.

"It's too bad—on Christmas Day, of all times," said Hilary, with a little gulp. "I wish we hadn't made such a fuss about those cakes."

June attempted to cheer them up. From a final word she had had with her uncle, she felt convinced that Noel had not abandoned his probing of the strange mystery. He had promised to return as soon as possible, and had warned her to keep her eyes open for any fresh developments.

During the morning a spirited snowball fight and a toboggan race completely banished any trace of gloom in the party. As hungry as hunters, the youthful guests trooped in to do justice to turkey and Christmas-pudding.

During the afternoon the tables were cleared and laid for tea. The three remaining cakes were brought up from the locked pantry and placed on the centre table, surrounded by plates of mince-pies, jellies and trifles.

The youthful guests gathered round admiringly, but June was wondering rather anxiously about Noel. He had not returned yet, and she saw Mr. Penhale glance at his watch with a worried frown.

"Possibly the snow on the roads has delayed your uncle, Miss Gaynor," he said. "He may be returning by train. I think I'll slip down to the station and make inquiries. What do you young people propose to do?"

"Snapdragon!" exclaimed Frank, grinning.

"Eh?" demanded Osbert, blinking.

"What sort of dragon—"

There came a laugh from the others.

"It's an old Christmas custom, popular in Cornwall," explained Frank. "Fred, the hall-porter was telling me about it. You have a big bowl of almonds and raisins and things, cover them with spirits, and set fire to them. Everyone makes a grab at them—and those who succeed get a surprise gift from Santa Claus."

"And who's to be Santa Claus?" asked Mr. Penhale, his eyes twinkling. Frank coughed.

"I thought I might take the part, sir. Fred told me you'd got an old costume in the store-room, and I was wondering if I could borrow it."

"By all means!" chuckled her host. "Help yourself, young man—and have a good time. But hands off those cakes till Mr. Raymond and our other guests come in for tea!"

"Hear that, Osbert?" demanded Frank, grinning.

There was a general laugh as Mr. Penhale departed, and the young guests busied themselves in preparing their entertainment. Osbert went to the kitchen to collect the bowl with the nuts, raisins and spirits; Frank made for the store-room in quest of the Santa Claus outfit.

June and the other girls prepared the room, pulling the curtains snugly and banking up the fire.

Though she joined in the general merriment, the girl detective was feeling tense and uneasy. Noel's prolonged absence was beginning to worry her, and with the deepening shadows of the afternoon her thoughts reverted to the mystery—the mystery that had not been cleared up by the young maid's departure.

Noel had warned her to keep her eyes open—but for what? What could possibly happen now?

Just then Osbert returned from the kitchen, triumphantly carrying the bowl of good things. They all gathered round as he placed it on a small table, and took a box of matches from his pocket.

"Put the lights out, girls!" he said importantly. "As soon as Frank comes in, in his Santa rig-out, I'll light up the bowl."

One of the girls switched out the lights, and just then there was a tap at the door.

"Come in, Santa!" laughed Hilary. A white-bearded figure in a hooded red robe stumped into the room, a sack on his shoulder.

"Gee, that's a wizard make-up, Frank!" chuckled Osbert. "Shall I light up?"

(Please turn to the back page.)



ROSALIE, ROBBIE and The ROBOT

By HAZEL ARMITAGE

THE NOTE FROM KEITH

ROSALIE WAYLAND and her brother, Robbie, were staying in Egypt with their Aunt Amy. Their chum, Keith Nelson was a fugitive from the police. But Keith had invented a talking robot which they found. In a recorded message spoken by Archie, as they called the robot, Keith asked them to find the Scarab of Isis, copy the hieroglyphics, and take them to Settak the Seer. Rosalie and Robbie found the scarab, but after copying the hieroglyphics it was taken from them by Hinton Forbes, an Egyptologist friend of Aunt Amy's, and Keith's enemy.

The robot, which Rosalie and her brother had hidden in the Cave of Ka, mysteriously disappeared. Back at Lotus House they were wondering what had happened to Archie when a native boy appeared outside the window. He had brought them a message from Keith.

A NOTE from Keith!

Rosalie thrilled, and eagerly her brother watched her open it. After a cautious look round, to make certain that none of the other occupants of the room were looking, they bent over the slip of paper. The message was quite short, but it set their pulses leaping.

"Don't worry about the robot. He is safe. Meet me to-night at the Grove of Hathor.—K."

"Gee!" exclaimed Robbie involuntarily, and at the sound Sammy Forbes looked up from his jigsaw puzzle.

"Hallo, what are you reading?" he asked, suspiciously regarding the slip of paper on Rosalie's knee.

Hurriedly Rosalie pocketed it. "Nothing of any interest to you," she replied and jumped to her feet and yawned. "Golly, I feel tired," she declared. "I think I'll go up to bed."

"Same here," said Robbie. Aunt Amy looked up from her knitting and smiled.

"Very well, my dears. An early night won't do you any harm," she said.

"Wait a minute—" began Sammy, but, anxious to avoid any of his awkward questions, Rosalie and her brother said hurriedly "good-nights" and bolted from the room.

Once upstairs, they went to Robbie's room and there excitedly they discussed the note which had come so unexpectedly from their fugitive chum. The mystery of the robot's strange disappearance from the cave was now solved. Obvious it was that in some way Keith had run across Archie and taken him away.

"Won't it be spiffing to meet Keith again?" exclaimed Robbie. Rosalie nodded.

"Rather! And what a lot he will have to tell us! Sooa all this strange business will be cleared up. Keith will be able to tell us the secret of the scarab, and—"

Breaking off, she darted across to the door and opened it. No one was outside, but she was just in time to see a door farther along close.

The door of Sammy's bed-room! Had Hinton Forbes' sneak of a son just retired for the night, or had he been eavesdropping outside Robbie's room?

Rosalie went cold at the mere thought.

"We'd better pretend to go to bed," she told her brother, "and lie low until everyone's asleep." Then we'll slip away to meet Keith."

Robbie nodded, and Rosalie left him, going to her own room.

During the next hour or so time seemed to stand still, but at last Rosalie heard footsteps on the stairs. Evidently the rest of the household was retiring for the night. She waited half an hour longer, then she tiptoed into the corridor and tapped cautiously on her brother's door.

"All right, Robbie," she called softly. "I think it's safe now."

Carrying their shoes, they stole along the passage and began to descend the stairs. Both of them were thrilling at the thought of meeting their old school chum again.

They had just reached the bottom of the stairs when—

Click! Suddenly, blindingly, the lights were switched on, and they found themselves confronted by the tall, sardonic figure of Hinton Forbes.

"So Sammy was right!" he observed. "He warned me you intended stealing out on some fishy business to-night."

Rosalie and Robbie seemed rooted to the floor with consternation, but mixed with their dismay was a feeling of anger.

So once again Sammy had been eavesdropping!

"Well—with another sardonic smile Hinton Forbes regarded them—"what have you to say for yourselves?"

Rosalie tossed her head. "Nothing—not to you, anyway," she retorted, and turned to her brother. "Come on, Robbie, let's go back to bed. We'll have to give up our plans for to-night."

Rosalie And Robbie Are Resolved That Nothing Shall Stop Them Meeting Their Fugitive Chum

Robbie seemed about to protest, but, catching a warning look from his sister, he bit back the exclamation on his lips and meekly followed her up the stairs.

At her door Rosalie paused. "Good-night," she said loudly, then in a whisper: "I'll see you later."

Robbie gave an understanding start and quickly nodded.

"Night, sis," he said, and retired to his own room.

For another half-hour Rosalie sat on the edge of her bed, waiting. She heard Hinton Forbes come upstairs, heard his bedroom door slam, then silence settled over the house. At last Rosalie rose and, cautiously opening her door an inch or so, peeped out. But to her dismay it was to see Sammy's door open and a light in his room.

"Oh, golly, he still suspects that we may make another attempt to slip out!" she groaned. "He's keeping watch!"

It seemed as if she and Robbie must really abandon their plans to meet Keith. But as she realised how anxiously their fugitive chum would be waiting at the Grove of Hathor, Rosalie's eyes blazed rebelliously.

"Sammy shan't spoil things," she told herself. "There must be some way of outwitting him. We've got to think—hard."

Silently shutting her door, she racked her brains for a moment or two, then, crossing to the window, she peered out. There was a narrow balcony between her room and Robbie's. Climbing out on to it, she edged her way along until she could tap on the window. The curtains were drawn aside and Robbie's astonished face peered out at her. She signalled to him to open the window. He did so, still regarding her in amazement.

"What the thump's the idea, sis?" he asked. "We can't sneak out. That worm Sammy is still on the watch."

Rosalie nodded and grinned at her puzzled brother.

"I know, but he's not going to keep us in," she declared. "If we can't slip out through the door, then we'll escape via the window. It's the only way."

"The—the window?" ejaculated her brother, staring uneasily down at the garden twenty feet below.

Rosalie gave another reckless nod. "Yes, we'll make a rope out of your sheets and shin down," she said.

The worried frown on the boy's face vanished and he gave her an admiring slap on the back.

"Good girl! That's a real brain-wave," he cried. "Come on, let's get cracking."

A JOYFUL RE-UNION

STRIPPING the sheets off his bed, Rosalie and Robbie twisted them into thick cords and tied them together. One end of their improvised rope they fastened to the bed-post, the other they threw out of the window. It just reached to the ground.

"Only hope that sneak Sammy doesn't twig," muttered Robbie, as, clambering out, he wound one leg around the rope and went shinning down at a reckless rate.

Reaching the path, he held the rope steady for Rosalie to follow his example, and in a moment or two she stood beside him, breathless but triumphant.

Robbie frowned rather worriedly at the sheet rope.

"I say, what about that?" he asked. "If anyone spots it, the game will be up."

Rosalie had been thinking of that, too, visualising with apprehension the consequences that might follow should it be found. In that event nothing could save them from being sent home in disgrace by Aunt Amy. But even that must be risked for

Keith! Whatever happened, at whatever cost, they must keep their appointment with their fugitive chum.

"Leave it," she said briefly. "Can't do anything else, anyway. Apart from that, we shall want it to climb back by when we return."

Robbie nodded, and stealthily they crossed the grounds. Swiftly they dived for the shrubbery, reached it, and vanished over the wall, Robbie mounting first, and then leaning down to help his sister up.

"Good! We're away!" he said gleefully. "Now for old Keith!"

They hurried on down a pebbly path which cut across the sandy waste of the desert. They knew where the Grove of Hathor was situated, and in half an hour reached it.

The grove, semicircular in shape, stood at the foot of a towering cliff which now gleamed white in the bright moonlight. A high, crumbling wall surrounded it, broken by a great gap, through which they now entered.

The grove was composed of small copses of olives, tangerines, and other semi-tropical trees. All was silent,

and anxiously Rosalie and Robbie looked about them.

Suppose they had had their journey for nothing! Suppose something had prevented their chum from keeping his appointment!

"Keith!" they called. "Keith!"

At first there was no response, then they heard a stealthy sound from the clump of trees just ahead.

"Keith!" they called again, and, to their delight, a figure stepped from out of the dark shadows cast by the trees.

It was the figure of a boy—thin-faced, haggard, his clothes almost in shreds. For a moment both Rosalie and Robbie were shocked into distress and wonder as they saw him. And then, with a cry, Rosalie had hurled herself towards him.

"Keith!" she cried in shaken joy.

She caught his thin hand, feeling a wave of pity sweep over her as she gazed into those tired, red-rimmed eyes of his.

"Rosalie! Robbie! You bricks!" Keith Nelson muttered. "Oh, gee, thank goodness you've come at last!"

For a few moments all they could think of was of this glad reunion, but once the first excitement was over Rosalie and her brother regarded their chum wonderingly.

"Keith, what's happened?" asked Rosalie.

"You look all-in, old man," declared Robbie. "What have you been doing? How did you get here?"

Keith smiled a little wanly.

"I'll tell you—in a minute," he promised. "I've been having a pretty sticky time, as you might guess by the look of me. But come here. Let's sit on that stone, and don't talk too loud, please, because voices carry in this air. But first tell me your news, though I know some of it," he added, with another rather twisted smile.

"Have you got the scarab?"

"No," Rosalie had to confess. "But we've got the inscriptions, Keith. Hinton Forbes—"

"That blackguard!" Keith said, and his dark eyes flashed. "But thank goodness for the inscriptions! Now go on. Tell me all—from the beginning."

And Rosalie, her compassion for their old chum deepening every time she turned to look into those haggard eyes of his, quickly and simply sketched the story. Keith nodded.

"You've been great!" he said huskily. "You've been wizard, both of you! And Archie—bless him—I've got him here." He nodded towards a clump of wild vines. "It was a bit thick, burdening you with this job; but what was I to do? I was just at my wits' end, and except for Ali, the little Arab boy, I hadn't a friend in the world. But now let me tell you my end of the story."

They listened in thrilled silence, hanging breathlessly on his every word. He described how, while working as Aunt Amy's confidential secretary, he had found some ancient papers relating to the fabled Palace of Isis. Where this place was, how it could be found—and opened—was carved in the symbols on the Scarab of Isis.

"It was a staggering discovery," Keith declared. "For this ancient palace is supposed to contain all the secrets of ancient Egypt, though it is looked upon as being as legendary as Atlantis. I didn't tell your aunt at the time. I wanted first to be sure I was right. But I did mention it—like a fool—to Forbes, who is an expert on such subjects."

"And that," Rosalie guessed, "started the ball rolling."

It had. Keith soon had evidence that Forbes was trying to steal the scarab. He had said as much to Forbes. To disgrace Keith in Aunt Amy's eyes, Forbes had contrived several small thefts which had been cunningly planned to be traced to Keith. In consequence, Keith had been told by a very distressed Aunt Amy to leave.

"And then," Keith went on, "Forbes did pinch the scarab. He meant it to look as if I'd taken it away with me—and did. There was a hue and cry after me. Determined to

Pip The Pup's Xmas Present



get the scarab back, I broke into Forbes' house. And—well, as you know, I did get it back. But I was discovered by the police clambering out of Forbes' window, and so I had to scoot."

"Oh, Keith! Poor old Keith!" Rosalie murmured, and a new indignation flamed in her heart against the treacherous Hinton Forbes. "And—and then?"

"Then——" Keith shrugged. "But let me go back a bit. All this time I'd been inventing Archie in secret. I wanted to save him up as a surprise for you when you came here for your hols. I knew, of course, when you were coming and meant to meet you, but hunted right, left, and centre, I didn't dare risk going to the station. Apart from that, I felt a bout of the old fever trouble coming on. So I did the next best thing. I recorded it all and sent All to meet you with that message."

"And how jolly glad we were that you did!" Rosalie said. "But I'm afraid we haven't helped much——"

"You've been tops!" Keith said. "Oh, gosh, if only you knew how thankful I've been to find I had two such pals! All has been scouting around in that silent way of his—All, by the way, is the son of a desert snick for whom I did a good turn some time ago, and with whom I have been hiding. All knew you were having difficulties, and he reported them to me."

Rosalie breathed deeply. She felt a warm flush of gratitude to the absent Arab boy.

"Yesterday the police got on my track," went on Keith. "I had to bolt. I managed to get a boat. Thinking of the Cave of Ka, I determined to hide out there. And then——"

"Yes?" Rosalie asked tensely.

"Then I saw Sammy snooping. I saw him lock up the cave and scoot. I knew something was up. Luckily, I've got a couple of master keys. I looked into the cave while his back was turned, and there was Archie. Naturally, I made off with him. Now—he's there."

He nodded again to the clumps of vines. Rosalie drew a deep breath.

"So that's it," she said. "At last we know. Poor old Keith! Oh golly, how awful it all must have been for you! But now——her cheeks glowed——"now we're together again—we can work together! Forbes may have the scarab, but Forbes is no better off than we are. Keith, you know where Settak, the seer, is?"

"I know," Keith nodded. "And he is the man who can decipher the writing on the scarab?"

"He is the only man in Egypt," Keith answered. "The symbols are a lost secret."

"Then——then——" Rosalie gulped. Her excitement was mounting again.

"Then the first thing is to get to Settak. Once we've got the secret, Keith—once we know where this Palace of Isis is—then Forbes is beaten once and for all. Keith, where is Settak to be found?"

"He is a hermit, and lives in a place called the Grotto of Khemsu—away there in the mountains of Atlantis. But let me attend to him, please. If you'll only give me the hieroglyphics——" He stopped, pulling himself up short. "What was that?" he asked in a suddenly hunted voice.

Robbie had heard the sound at the same time. While Rosalie stared, he rose, and went tiptoeing towards the trees. And suddenly there came a gasp, a scuffle, then the sound of fleeing footsteps, followed by a yell from Robbie.

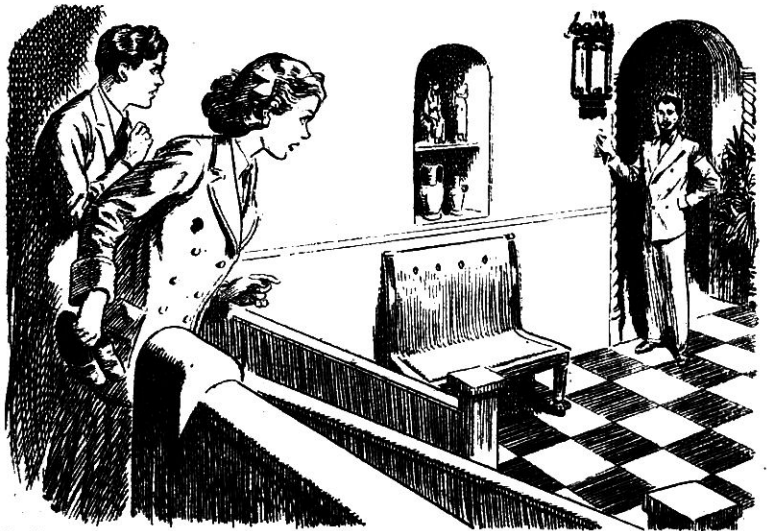
"It's Sammy! Sammy has followed us here! He's been listening—spying!"

CHASING SAMMY

AT once Rosalie, her heart thudding, was on her feet. She put a swift hand on Keith's shoulder as he, too, would have moved.

"No, stop here!" she whispered, and dashed away.

Robbie was ahead of her. She saw her brother, angrily chasing Sammy



Suddenly the lights were clicked on and Rosalie and her brother found themselves confronted by Hinton Forbes. "So Sammy was right," he commented. "He warned me you intended stealing out."

as that boy raced for the great gap in the wall which, with the cliff, encircled the grove.

Oh, what fools she and Robbie had been not to foresee that Sammy might see them escaping from their aunt's house and might follow them! Had they been less impatiently eager to join up with Keith they might have realised that anyone could have discovered their secret meeting-place with Keith by following their footprints in the sand.

But it was useless to think of that now. Sammy had listened-in, so he must now know where Settak, the seer, was to be found. At all costs he must be prevented from passing on that knowledge to his father.

Rosalie wondered dismally, as she ran, what he had learned about the robot; and then, remembering that they had referred to the robot only as Archie, she was less worried. To Sammy, "Archie" would be just the name of some unknown fellow-conspirator. He would never associate him with Keith's mechanical man.

"Catch him—grab him!" she panted, as, with a desperate spurt, she came abreast of the panting Robbie. "We've got to get Keith clear before he's allowed to go!"

Sammy now was scudding through the gap. Abruptly he disappeared, swallowed up in one of the folds of the sand-dunes. Frantically, remembering that the fugitive Keith was in the grove behind them, Rosalie and Robbie sped after him.

"Hi!" Rosalie shouted. "Stop, you little blot!" roared Robbie.

They reached the nearest sand-dune, raced up one sloping side, and saw Sammy, obviously out of breath, stumbling up the other side of the next dune.

"Quick, Robbie—there he is! After him!" cried Rosalie.

They almost fell down the other side of the dune, and Robbie, putting on a spurt, caught up with Sammy, and grabbed at his shoulder.

With a cry Sammy swivelled round. "Got you, you little sneak!" panted Robbie. "I've got him, sis!" he called triumphantly.

But Sammy was cunning. Even as Sammy turned towards his sister, one foot came slyly out, curled itself round Robbie's ankle, and pulled.

Next moment Robbie had hit the sand, and Sammy, wriggling free, was dashing away.

Rosalie, rushing up, quickly stifled Robbie's abject apologies, and together they ran after the disappearing Sammy.

They raced up the next sand-dune, and Rosalie gave a breathless gasp. "There he is!"

Sammy was just disappearing over another dune. They pounded after him, but before they could catch him they got another shock.

Suddenly into sight came a posse of horsemen, galloping towards them. And at the head of the cavalcade was Hinton Forbes!

And behind the horsemen came clattering a carriage. They knew that carriage, and they could guess who was in it. Aunt Amy!

At the same moment Sammy stopped and began wildly waving his arms.

"Pater! Pater!" he shrieked. "This way! This way! They've got Keith Nelson—in the grove!"

Robbie looked at Rosalie. Rosalie threw a hunted glance around. She realised immediately that all further pursuit of Sammy was out of the question; realised that Sammy must have passed on the news of their escape from Lotus House, and that Hinton Forbes, securing help, must have immediately followed, meantime having roused Aunt Amy to tell her the news. But what were they to do?

Only one thing. "Robbie, get back. Get back to the grove," she whispered. "We've got to save Keith."

Robbie nodded. He, too, had seen the peril of the situation. Together they pelted back, rushing through the gap in the wall. At the same time there came a shout from Hinton Forbes, galloping behind them:

"Stop! Stop! You can't get away now!"

They fled on, plunging blindly into the grove. Then Robbie tripped and sprawled full length. Desperately Rosalie jumped to his rescue and heaved him up. But even as she did so——

"We've got 'em!" came the triumphant voice of Hinton Forbes. "They can't possibly get away now! Keep this gap closed, men!"

Rosalie's face paled, for she realised that Hinton Forbes was right. Walls and cliffs hemmed them in. The grove had become an absolute trap. With the gap sealed—as Forbes had now sealed it—there could be no escape.

It seemed that utter disaster hemmed them in. That the discovery and the arrest of Keith was certain. Now, definitely, the disgrace they dreaded faced them.

But worse than that was the realisation that nothing could help Keith. What could they possibly do now—trapped in the grove, with the only outlet guarded against them?

Next Friday's GIRLS' CRYSTAL will contain another grand instalment of this thrilling serial. Make certain of reading it by ordering your copy now.

Colin Forrest—

That Amazing
New Master



THE RESCUE FROM THE BONFIRE

THANKS to the help of Colin Forrest, the nephew of the headmistress and new languages master of St. Gwynn's, Vicky Marlow and her chums were given permission to begin rehearsals for an historical play which they wanted to enter for the local Schools Drama Festival.

Vicky & Co. learned that Miss Appleby, their tyrannical Form-mistress, was plotting against their play. They also discovered that a mysterious blue and gold mantle held some clue to the mystery.

One night the chums saw Miss Appleby acting furtively, a bundle under her arm. They saw her throw the parcel out to a bonfire. Convinced that it had something to do with her plotting against their play, they watched her go, and then made to rescue the parcel.

"HURRY!" gasped Vicky. "We've got to save that parcel. Whatever is in it may be of vital importance to us!"

Across the moonlit clearing raced the chums, everything else momentarily forgotten in the excitement of the moment. What they had seen was almost too incredible to be believed.

For only a moment ago they had watched Miss Appleby, the senior mistress, guiltily thrust a bulky parcel into the bonfire, covering it over with feverish haste.

Gone from their minds was the thought of the grave risk they were running in breaking bounds at this hour of night. For the moment they could think of nothing but the mysterious parcel their enemy was so anxious to destroy—the parcel which they believed concerned themselves.

Would they be in time to save it from the flames?

The bonfire, that had been smouldering dully before Miss Appleby disturbed it, was now beginning to glow more brightly, and a whiff of smoke reached the chums—the smell of scorching brown paper.

Karen seized the pitch-fork that the mistress had thrown aside, and frantically raked over the bonfire, exposing the parcel. The string had been burnt, the stout brown paper was singed and blackened, and one corner was a light.

Vicky made a grab at it, careless of scorching her fingers. Quickly she rolled the parcel in the grass, wet from the night dew. The scorched brown paper came away, revealing an inner wrapper of thinner paper, slightly singed in places and also tied with string.

"Oh, goody—it's not been burnt!" breathed Merle excitedly. "Open it, Vicky—"

"Not now," Karen intervened warningly, casting an anxious glance

towards the school. "If Crabby pays another visit to the dorm and finds our beds empty—we're for it!"

Vicky nodded. "Karen's right, Merle! The sooner we get back to school the better. Let's hope Crabby will go straight to her room, and then we can slip in through the dispensary window and cut up to the dorm without being seen. We'll examine the parcel later."

She was leading the way through the trees as she spoke, the bulky parcel tucked under her arm, her chums following closely.

As they came in sight of the ivy-covered school buildings, peaceful-looking and silent beneath the moon, Vicky raised a cautioning hand.

"Any sign of Crabby?" she whispered.

"Not a movement—not a sound!" breathed Karen. "She must have gone in through the staff entrance, round the corner. The window's still open as we left it. Come on, girls!"

They made a dash across the moonlit lawn, diving into the shrubbery beneath the dispensary window. But suddenly Vicky pulled up, grabbing at Merle's arm to stop her onward rush.

Footsteps were approaching from beyond the ivy-grown buttress that concealed the staff entrance; then they heard voices—Miss Appleby's high-pitched voice, and the quiet, rather worried tones of Miss Vernon, the headmistress.

"I thought I heard movements downstairs, and I came to investigate, Miss Appleby. I was surprised to find the staff door open, and to meet you in the quadrangle at this hour of night."

Miss Appleby cleared her throat, and the chums listened tensely as they crouched in the shrubbery below the window.

It was plain that the Form-mistress had been taken off her guard by Miss Vernon's unexpected appearance on the scene; but only for a second did she hesitate.

"As duty mistress, Miss Vernon," she replied calmly, "I, too, was investigating those sounds that disturbed you. I had just made a tour of the quadrangle and was returning when you met me."

Vicky drew in her breath, marveling at the cool way Miss Appleby was lying.

**What A Shock For Vicky
& Co. When They Opened
The Mystery Parcel Miss
Appleby Had Tried To
Destroy!**

By RENEE FRAZER

It was more clear than ever that the mistress wished to keep her nocturnal errand a secret—hoping that, by the morning, the mysterious parcel would be well and truly burnt.

It was a strange position for the chums. They alone knew Miss Appleby's secret—or would know it, as soon as they had an opportunity to open the parcel. But they could never accuse her without betraying the fact that they had been guilty of breaking bounds.

At that moment there came a surprised exclamation from Miss Vernon.

"Miss Appleby—the window of the dispensary is open! Yet I am positive that matron fastened it before we retired."

Vicky could have groaned aloud, and she felt Karen's hand tighten on her sleeve. Their way of escape had been discovered.

From the shadows they heard Miss Appleby's hissing intake of breath as that mistress crossed to the open window. They could not see her expression, but Vicky could guess the thoughts that must be chasing through her mind.

The open window could only mean one thing to her. Someone had left the school without her knowledge; someone who might have witnessed her midnight activities.

"Very—very strange, Miss Vernon!" they heard her say. "I had better investigate. But you will catch your death of cold if you remain out here. I shall make a thorough search of the grounds, and report to you—"

"I wouldn't dream of it, Miss Appleby," said the headmistress firmly. "If there is anyone hiding in the grounds we must find them. Come along, Miss Appleby."

"Very well, Miss Vernon." Miss Appleby, lips tightly set, turned, and together she and the headmistress began the search. And they were walking straight towards the bushes where the chums were crouched in hiding.

They tried to shrink back out of the betraying moonlight.

The two mistresses drew nearer and nearer.

Vicky's blood ran cold as she caught a glimpse of Miss Appleby's vindictive scowl. In another moment—

The mistress was within a few feet of them when a sound reached her ears that caused her to halt. At the same moment there came a gasp from Miss Vernon.

"Miss Appleby! Did—did you hear that?"

The chums had heard it, too—a startlingly unexpected sound that came from the open window of the dispensary.

It was a hollow, blood-chilling groan!

THE CONTENTS OF THE PARCEL

TWICE the groan was repeated, more loudly on each occasion.

It was unnerving, coming as it did from the presumably empty room. The two mistresses, as well as the concealed chums, stared in frozen amazement.

"Bless—bless my soul!" exclaimed Miss Vernon at last. "I suggest," she added, bracing herself, "that we go in together and investigate, Miss Appleby."

The two mistresses hurried round the corner, and the chums stared at one another in mingled bewilderment and relief.

"Who—who ever can be in the dispensary at this time of night?" whispered Merle.

"Someone in pain by the sound of it," breathed Karen pityingly. "I say, ought we to offer to help—"

"Hist!" breathed a voice from the open window.

They started violently as a head and shoulders were dimly perceived in the dark opening.

"Stay where you are, girls, till the coast is clear!" came the terse order. "When I say 'Shoot,' scam for all you're worth!"

"Mr. Forrest!" gasped Vicky, her heart leaping.

"Quiet! Leave this to me!"

Trembling with excited amazement, the chums huddled together. They realised that Colin Forrest, too, must have been on the prowl. Finding the window of the dispensary open, he had climbed in to investigate. He must have seen their frantic dash across the lawn, and heard the mistresses talking.

His realistic groan had simply been a ruse to divert attention, but how did he hope to cover himself and explain his actions to the headmistress?

They were not left long in doubt. They heard a door open, and the lights in the dispensary blazed up suddenly.

In the doorway stood Miss Vernon and Miss Appleby, blinking in the glare.

Vicky clapped a hand to her mouth to stifle an involuntary gasp.

Standing in the middle of the dispensary, a medicine bottle in one hand and a spoon in the other, was Colin Forrest. Vicky had difficulty in recognising him at first, for his face was swathed in a scarf, knotted at the side.

"C-Colin!" cried the amazed headmistress.

"Mr.—Mr. Forrest!" exclaimed Miss Appleby. Her eyes narrowed, and she looked quickly from the young master to the open window.

Colin gave a hollow groan.

"Oh—hallo, aunt!" he said huskily. "Hope I didn't disturb you. Touch of jolly old toothache, y'know. Thought a spot of oil of cloves might help."

"My poor boy!" exclaimed the headmistress anxiously. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Don't worry yourself, aunt," said Colin. "I'll be okay in a jiffy. But you might close that door, Miss Appleby—the draught, y'know."

Miss Appleby complied rather sourly.

"I notice you opened the window, Mr. Forrest," she pointed out.

"Ah—yes. The room was a bit stuffy when I first came in. I say, is this oil of cloves?"

"No, Colin; it is cough mixture." "Stupid of me!" said Mr. Forrest. "I should have put on the light, but I didn't want to attract attention. Would you mind fetching me the toothache mixture, Miss Appleby?"

Miss Appleby darted him a suspicious glance, but she had no option but to oblige. She crossed to the cupboard in the far corner where she was hidden from the window.

"Shoot!" exclaimed Mr. Forrest in muffled tones.

Miss Appleby almost dropped the bottle in her surprise, and the headmistress looked at her nephew in quick concern.

"My tooth," explained Colin, with an urgent wave of his hand. "Shooting like billy-o!"

The chums, swift to take their cue, were already stealing out from among the bushes and round the corner of the school, Vicky clutching the vital parcel.

In through the staff entrance they sped, as noiselessly as possible creeping past the closed door of the dispensary.

From inside they could hear muffled voices.

"If Mr. Forrest is quite recovered," Miss Appleby was saying unpleasantly, "I shall continue my round of inspection, Miss Vernon. I feel convinced that I heard footsteps just now, and I am uneasy about leaving doors and windows unfastened while the money for the school sports fund is in my possession."

Miss Appleby's footsteps were crossing the room, and the chums sped for their lives.

Upstairs and into the dormitory they silently raced.

Closing the door softly behind them, Vicky leaned against it, gasping for breath and almost choked with laughter, despite their narrow escape.

and contrived with some difficulty to slip it over the parcel.

A few moments later she was in bed, her head resting on the fateful parcel, the real pillow tucked away at the foot.

And only just in time.

Even as she snuggled under the clothes, she heard the ominous creak of the door, followed by the stealthy sound of footsteps in the dormitory. Then the curtains of the cubicle were drawn back.

Vicky closed her eyes quickly, feeling Miss Appleby's presence, sensing that the mistress was staring down at her.

For a moment Miss Appleby waited, then softly she entered the cubicle.

It was one of the most agonising moments in Vicky's life. Somehow she managed to breathe steadily, and not let her eyelids tremble.

She heard the faint click of a torch as Miss Appleby bent down to look under the bed. Next came a slight creaking as Miss Appleby opened her bedside locker.

Vicky almost gave herself away, so great was her anger then.

She could hear the mistress's heavy breathing; could hear her muttering



Vicky & Co. stared in wonderment through the window. What new daring role was Colin Forrest playing?

"Oh, goodness," she gurgled, "what a wizard actor he is, girls! If he hadn't put us wise, I'd have thought that he really had got toothache. Miss Vernon was quite taken in—bless her. But what about Crabby?"

"She suspected," declared Merle. "She knows that Mr. Forrest is our secret helper, and she's just waiting her chance to expose him. I bet she's feeling bad now, wondering if he knows anything about that parcel."

"She'll feel worse when she discovers that it's vanished!" chuckled Karen.

Vicky stiffened. "Golly, we're wasting time," she exclaimed. "She's almost bound to suspect us, even though she won't dare to say anything. We've got to hide the parcel."

"But we haven't looked in it yet," protested Merle, agog with curiosity.

"That'll have to wait!" Vicky told her firmly. "We daren't take risks. I bet she'll be round any minute now—"

"Listen!" broke in Karen. "Someone on the lower landing!"

They exchanged anxious glances, and Vicky clutched the parcel more tightly.

"If she searches the dormitory—" she began, and then her eyes lit up. "I'll chance it," she whispered. "Back to your cubicles, girls—quickly!"

Her chums slipped away, and Vicky, hugging the bulky parcel, dived into her own cubicle, pulling the curtains behind her. Whisking her pillow from the bed, she removed the pillow-case,

something, so softly, however, that although she strained her ears, she could only catch one word—"parcel."

But at last came a click as her locker was closed, and then hushed footsteps as the mistress crept away. Vicky waited, guessing that Miss Appleby would pay a similar visit to her chums' cubicles. But after a seeming eternity, the door creaked again, and there came the welcome click of the latch.

Miss Appleby had departed, momentarily frustrated in her errand.

Vicky gave a deep sigh of relief, her tense figure relaxing. However much the mistress might suspect the juniors or their secret helper, she had no proof; and her hands were tied by reason of her own guilty activities.

What counter-plans might be taking shape in the mistress' cunning brain, Vicky could not surmise, but for the time being, at any rate, they were safe.

She waited another quarter of an hour, then, slipping cautiously out of bed, she peeped in at her chums. Both were very wide awake and agog with suppressed excitement. All three foregathered in Vicky's cubicle, and Merle and Karen watched with bated breath as Vicky pulled the mysterious parcel out of the pillow-case and cut the string.

With trembling fingers she removed the inner paper wrapping, disclosing yet another layer of tissue-paper.

As this was removed a simultaneous gasp escaped the lips of the chums—a gasp of amazement and delight.

THE HEADMISTRESS' ANNOUNCEMENT

THE contents of the parcel lay on the bedspread, revealed in the soft light of the moon.

"The missing costumes!" breathed Merle, her voice shaking with wonder. "The costumes that were pictured in the book Mr. Forrest gave us!"

"They're marvellous!" whispered Karen. "A hundred times better than the illustrations."

"But why," burst out Vicky, her thoughts racing, "should Miss Appleby have actually tried to burn such beautiful things? It doesn't make sense!"

In silent awe they gazed at the exquisite garments of silk and satin—some a little frayed, others slightly moth-eaten—but most of them in almost perfect condition.

Vicky bent forward suddenly, picking one up.

"The blue and gold mantle," she whispered.

Her chums caught in their breaths, gazing in admiration at the lovely cloak, shimmering in the moonlight. All three were thinking of the same thing. Of that harsh, threatening voice they had overheard the other day—the voice of Miss Appleby's accomplice.

"Whatever happens, Vicky Marlow must not succeed in her ambition," he had said to the mistress. "Remember the blue and gold mantle—"

"It doesn't make sense!" repeated Vicky, though this time there was a tinge of uneasiness behind her statement.

"Why should Crabby have held on to the costumes all this time, and then tried to destroy them?"

Merle shook her dark head, but Karen's dreamy eyes held a thoughtful look.

"She must have thought that it was safe enough to keep them hidden. But when Mr. Forrest suggested there should be a search, it forced her hand. She was afraid they might be discovered, so she decided to burn them."

"But—why?" Vicky persisted. "What possible harm could it do to her if we wore them for our play?"

It was a question that none of them could answer. The mystery surrounding Miss Appleby's enmity towards them and their play had taken an even more baffling turn.

Impatiently Vicky shook off her uneasiness, and commenced eagerly to examine the other costumes.

"We must show these to Mr. Forrest," she whispered. "They're the very things for our play. We can trust him to persuade Miss Vernon to let us wear them."

"But where are we supposed to have found them?" put in Karen. "You're forgetting that we broke bounds to-night—and Miss Vernon's not likely to take a light view of that. She's already warned us that the next time we defy school rules she'll ban our play."

For the moment Vicky was stumped; then her eyes sparkled daringly.

"We'll tell the truth—we found them in the grounds... We needn't say that it was at night..."

"But Crabby knows!" said Merle.

"And she won't dare say a word," Vicky countered. "She'll just have to keep quiet, even if she's boiling with rage. This time, girls, we've got her in a cleft stick!"

Smilingly they exchanged glances across the shimmering costumes. The tyrant for once had played into their hands. Though they had not sufficient proof to denounce her to the headmistress, neither had Miss Appleby any means of pinning guilt on to them or the daring young master who was aiding them.

Quickly they made their plans. First thing in the morning they would smuggle the parcel of costumes down to Mr. Forrest's study, and ask the young master's advice.

They felt confident that they could safely leave the rest in his hands.

Immediately after breakfast next morning, as the bell was ringing for morning Assembly, Vicky slipped upstairs to collect the precious parcel, while Merle and Karen kept a sharp look-out for Miss Appleby.

She waited for her chums to signal "All clear," then, the parcel tucked under her arm, she hurried to Mr. Forrest's study, hoping to catch him before he joined the rest of the staff for Assembly.

She tapped on the door and opened it; then her face fell. Mr. Forrest was not in his room.

For a moment she hesitated. The second bell was ringing now, and she heard footsteps hurrying along the corridor.

She was more than anxious not to be seen with the parcel; it was vital to their plans that Miss Appleby should be kept in the dark till Colin had spoken to the headmistress on their behalf.

There was only one thing to do. Stepping quickly into the room, she placed the parcel on Mr. Forrest's desk, and looked round for a piece of paper on which to scribble a note.

Then her heart gave a little jump. She could not help seeing a printed document on the desk—an entry form for the local Drama Festival.

And it had been filled in with the name of their play—"The Gay Pretender," and other details, in Colin Forrest's clear hand.

Vicky looked away quickly, her eyes shining, her face slightly flushed. She had not been intended to see that. Colin had been keeping it as a secret, making all arrangements on their behalf, pending the headmistress' final approval.

"Oh, he's a sport!" she whispered, her lips trembling. "A master in a million. I—I'd do anything for him, and so would the other girls."

On second thoughts she decided not to leave a note. The parcel would speak for itself, and they would be seeing him immediately after Assembly.

She left the room, locking the door and taking the key. Mr. Forrest, she knew, had another key, just in case they were unable to contact him.

Just in time she reached Big Hall, and took her place with the rest of the Form as the staff filed on to the platform.

Mr. Forrest, a twinkle in his eye, was looking none the worse for his "toothache," but Miss Appleby's face was set and grim as she marched on to

the platform, followed by the headmistress.

There was a respectful hush. It might have been Vicky's imagination, but it seemed to her that Miss Vernon's expression was unusually grave.

The headmistress came to the front of the platform.

"Girls," she said, "a certain grave matter has been brought to my attention—something which I should like to think was due simply to a misguided youthful prank."

There was a hush. The girls stared at her wonderingly, and Vicky felt suddenly uneasy.

Colin Forrest and the rest of the staff were listening curiously, obviously quite unprepared for the announcement.

"Last night or this morning," went on the headmistress quietly, "a parcel was taken from Miss Appleby's study." Vicky started, flashing a bewildered, questioning glance at her chums. "This parcel," continued the headmistress, "contained some old theatrical costumes that have been missing for some time. Miss Appleby hunted them up at my request, and locked them in her study overnight, intending to hand them to me in the morning. Someone"—her voice grew stern—"someone had the audacity to enter her study and remove that parcel without permission!"

Vicky's pulses quickened. What new trick of their enemy's was this? What did she hope to gain by her astounding fib?

"That in itself," continued Miss Vernon, raising her voice slightly, "was very reprehensible, though it might have been some sort of practical joke. Unfortunately the matter turns out to be far more serious. For with this parcel—tucked under the string in fact—Miss Appleby left an envelope containing money entrusted to her for the school sports fund—twenty pounds in notes—that were to have been handed to me this morning. And that money has disappeared with the parcel!"

A low buzz of horror went up from the assembled school. White-faced, Vicky stared at her chums. At last she was beginning to understand Miss Appleby's dastardly plot.

The mistress did not know who had taken the parcel, though she had her suspicions, and with unscrupulous cunning she hoped to pin the supposed disappearance of the sports fund on to the present holder of the costumes.

"Oh—oh, my golly!" Vicky whispered. For suddenly she remembered where she had left that fatal parcel, and now, unmistakably, she saw Miss Appleby's vindictive gaze regarding Colin Forrest.

"In the circumstances, Miss Vernon," said the mistress in her high-pitched voice, "I understand that you intend to carry out an inspection of all studies while the girls are assembled here. I am certain that, in all fairness"—she spoke with a thin-lipped smile—"the staff would wish to be included in that inspection—just as a matter of form, of course."

There came a murmur of agreement from the masters and mistresses assembled on the platform.

The blood drained from Vicky's face. The headmistress, followed by Miss Appleby, was already leaving the platform. The rest of the staff were engaged in grave conversation.

Colin Forrest, she could see, was apparently quite unaware of the blow that awaited him.

Desperately Vicky tried to catch his eye, but in vain. She looked round at the prefects guarding the doors.

"Vicky, where did you leave that parcel?" hissed Merle in her ear.

"In—in Colin's study," gulped Vicky desperately, "and I've just got to get it back before it's too late!"

Will Vicky succeed in regaining the costumes before Miss Vernon finds them? You will find the answer to that question in next Friday's instalment of this enthralling serial.

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HELEN and Her Comical Pets

By IDA MELBOURNE

PREPARATIONS FOR THE PARTY

"WHERE'S Mollie?" That wrathful question was hurled at Helen Hurst by her grandfather as he looked into the large barn of her Aunt Jane's farm, where they were staying for Christmas.

It was Christmas Eve, and Helen was busy rehearsing her three pets—Mollie, the chimp, Jinx, the pup, and Popsy, the talking parrot.

"They were taking part in the children's party which Helen had organised and which was being held on Christmas Day in the village hall.

Grandfather was to be Santa Claus, and was now attired in rubber boots and a long red robe. He should have been wearing a flowing white beard to complete his outfit, but at the moment it was lacking.

"Isn't Mollie here?" he demanded, looking about him. "She's just taken my beard again!"

Helen managed to suppress a laugh, because she could see that granddad was really cross. The antics of her comical pets were often a source of amusement to her, but granddad did not always see things in the same light.

At that moment Mollie peeped round the door. The chimp was wearing a red jacket and a flounced red skirt—and a long white beard. Mollie was chattering with glee because she thought wearing the beard was great fun. Granddad, however, did not share her sense of humour.

"Give me that beard at once!" he stormed.

"Hush, don't be cross with her, granddad!" said Helen hastily.

"Mollie doesn't like it!"

"And I don't like having my beard snatched off every time I wear it!" retorted granddad. "Mollie doesn't like it, indeed!" he scoffed. "Ch! I hope she doesn't behave like this at the party to-morrow!"

"She'll be as good as gold," said Helen confidently, coaxing the chimp into the barn and gently removing the beard. "Here you are, granddad. Of course she'll be good!"

"Um! Well, I hope so, because Mr. Marriott will be there—that is, if he lets us have the hall!"

Helen gave a start of surprise. Mr. Marriott was the owner of the hall where the children's party was to be held.

"But, granddad, I thought it had all been fixed up," she said.

"So did I," frowned her grandfather. "Especially as he'd agreed to a rehearsal being held at the hall this evening. But now I hear from his young nephew, Francis Marriott, that there's some doubt. It seems this Mr. Marriott is worried about having animals there!"

"Oh, how unfair, when he's never seen them!" protested Helen, always ready to fly to the defence of her pets when there was the slightest

suggestion of criticism levelled against them.

"That's what I said. Anyway, he's coming here this morning," added granddad.

"Mr. Marriott?"

"No; I've never seen him. The nephew is coming," said granddad. "He's due here in about twenty minutes' time, so let's get on with the rehearsal!"

Helen nodded, somewhat disturbed to hear now that the use of the hall was in doubt, because there was nowhere else large enough to hold the party, to which all the kiddies in the district had been invited.

However, she temporarily dismissed the matter from her mind as she proceeded to put her pets through their paces. This was a preliminary rehearsal to get them ready for the full rehearsal due to take place at the hall that evening.

Jinx wore a quaint clown's cap with a sprig of holly on it, and a red harness with which he pulled a sled, loaded with Christmas presents.

The difficulty was to persuade Mollie that she must not tip out the contents. Her task was to drive the sled into the hall, where the gifts would then be placed in a large, decorated tub, ready for Father Christmas to distribute them to the kiddies.

But at last Mollie obeyed her instructions, and Jinx pulled the sled very nicely indeed.

"Merry New Christmas! Soppo New Year!" squawked Popsy from her perch on the sled.

"Popsy!" laughed Helen. "I believe you're getting mixed up on purpose! But I think everything should be all right now, granddad—"

She broke off, for at that moment her Aunt Jane called out to say that a Mr. Francis Marriott had arrived and was waiting to see granddad.

Granddad hurried away, while Helen undressed Mollie and removed Jinx's harness. By the time she had done that her grandfather came hurrying back.

"Well, what's the news?" Helen asked eagerly. "Is everything settled about the hall now, granddad?"

"Yes, Helen. We can have the hall because the nephew had told his uncle that he can be Santa Claus at the party."

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Helen, with a sympathetic glance at her grandfather. "You were so looking forward to doing that, weren't you?"

"As long as the kiddies have a good time, that's all that matters," said granddad, with a brave smile. "He'll probably make a better Santa

than I would. There's one thing, though, Mr. Marriott is coming along to the rehearsal this evening so that he can see the animals."

Helen's eyes sparkled. This was a chance to show off her pets—a chance to impress Mr. Marriott, with their cleverness and remove all his doubts about their being at the party. How could anyone not be amused by their quaint antics?

"That suits us, granddad," she said. "We'll be only too pleased to have Mr. Marriott at the rehearsal!"

Back went her grandfather to tell Francis Marriott that everything was in hand for the rehearsal.

"Good!" said that tall young man, and then prepared to take his departure. "We'll see you at the rehearsal, then. Make sure the animals play up and are safe. That's the great thing to please my uncle."

He hurried off to his car, accompanied by Jinx, who was jumping up and down, biting at the snowflakes which were now beginning to flutter from a leaden sky. It looked like being a real old-fashioned Christmas.

Granddad went back into the house, thinking that Jinx would want to be with Helen in the barn. But, in fact, Jinx went out into the roadway.

The pup liked cars, and he looked disappointed when he found he was not to have a ride in this one.

"Here, you'd better go back before you get lost in the snow!" grinned young Marriott.

Jinx retreated as the engine started. Then suddenly the young man called to him.

"Gosh, I nearly forgot! Something your mistress ought to know. Here; can you take a message, old chap?"

Jinx wagged his tail.

The young man tore the two centre pages from a notebook, scribbled a message, and gave it to Jinx.

"Definitely no Christmas carols outside his house," he had written. "Important.—F. M."

"Now, good dog, take it to mistress," said the young man.

Proudly Jinx took the note between his teeth and dashed off to find Helen. But Mollie, prancing in the snow, suddenly saw him, spotted the message, and tried to seize it.

Jinx held on tightly, however, with the result that the small double page tore in half. The pup growled, indignant with the chimp for interfering, and then ran on into the barn and barked excitedly as he saw Helen.

This Week Helen And Her Pets Go Carol-Singing

"Hallo, what have you got there?" asked Helen, as she saw the slip of paper held in his mouth. "Why, it's a message. 'F. M.—it's from Francis Marriott!'"

"What does it say?" asked granddad, coming in at that moment. "Christmas carols outside house—important," Helen read aloud. "He wants us to sing carols to please his uncle. What a lovely idea, granddad. We could sing on our way to the rehearsal. And if Mollie beats a gong or something and Jinx does his tricks, Mr. Marriott will love the animals right away!"

"A nice touch, Helen," agreed her grandfather enthusiastically.

And Helen, unaware that the most important part of the message was lying in the snow where Mollie, the chimp, had dropped it, made preparations to do just the very thing that Mr. Marriott disliked most!

THE PETS BARRED

"ARE we all ready?" asked granddad. "I'm glad I thought of this portable radio!"

"Yes; it was very clever of you, granddad," said Helen, with a smile. They had arrived at the Marriotts' home, on their way to the rehearsal at the hall, and had now paused for their carol-singing session to please old Mr. Marriott. They were standing in the porch of a large Georgian house, from which lights streamed out into the dusk and made the falling snowflakes sparkle.

Granddad had brought the portable radio because carols were being broadcast, and the choir would make a suitable background to his own and Helen's vocal efforts.

Mollie, too, was going to help. She was the percussion section. Helen held a gong, which Mollie would beat with a gong stick at the appropriate moments.

"Right!" said granddad. He switched on the portable radio and turned it up to full volume.

"Good King Wenceslas looked out—"

"sang Helen.

"Dong! went Mollie on the gong.

"On the feast of Stephen—"

"Dong, dong!"

Helen thought it very effective. But suddenly the door was flung open, and there stood a tall, bald-headed man with a long white beard, almost speechless with rage, a fire bucket in his hands.

"You—you impudent—you—" he bellowed furiously. "How dare you defy my notice!"

The carol singing ended abruptly. "Your—your notice—" began Helen in bewilderment.

"Be off with you!" shouted the irascible Mr. Marriott, and suddenly swung the fire bucket, which was full of water.

"Swoosh!" Mollie was the unlucky one. The cold water swamped over her, and never before had the chimp been so startled.

Chattering with anger, she leapt forward and made a grab at Mr. Marriott's beard. Mollie, of course, thought it was a false one, like granddad's, and her idea was to run away with it and show this man how cross she was with him.

She tugged as she ran; and where the beard went, Mr. Marriott had to go. The beard was part of him.

"Oowwwwww!" he yelled.

"Stop!" cried Helen in consternation. "Mollie—great goodness, stop!"

Whenever Helen used that violently stern tone, Mollie obeyed instantly. She released the beard.

"Oh dear, I'm so sorry, Mr. Marriott!" faltered Helen. "Mollie thought it was a Santa Claus beard like grandfather's!"

"I trust you aren't badly hurt," said granddad. "Although even a chimpanzee can't be expected to enjoy having water flung over it!"

"A—a chimpanzee!" Mr. Marriott, spluttering with fury as he rubbed his face and chin, suddenly goggled at Mollie. "Good gracious, so it is! I didn't realise it in the half light—a chimpanzee!" he repeated, and hastily retreated. "Take it away! I

don't like the way it's looking at me. It's dangerous!"

"Oh, Mollie's quite safe," Helen reassured him. "The children love her. They're awfully thrilled because she's going to be at the party—the Christmas party in your hall, Mr. Marriott!"

Mr. Marriott glared ferociously.

"The Christmas party?" he echoed. "Then you are giving the entertainment, are you? Preposterous! I had my doubts about the animals, and now I am convinced. I've given my permission for the hall to be used, but I absolutely refuse to allow this dangerous creature—or any other animals—to be there! I forbid it! You understand?"

And without another word he stalked inside the house and slammed the door.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS AFTER ALL

HELEN looked blankly at her grandfather. They had thought they would be pleasing Mr. Marriott by singing carols—and this was the result. Only too obviously it was the worst thing they could have done.

"But—but that message from Francis—" she began.

"Could it have said no Christmas carols?" asked granddad with a start. "Did Jinx bite a bit off?"

"Goodness knows," said Helen dismally. "This is dreadful—the pets not to be at the party! The children will be awfully disappointed."

She turned to dry down Mollie, who might easily catch a chill if she were allowed to go into the snow wet through. For the first time she became aware that the chimp was holding a big piece of cardboard.

"She didn't get as wet as I thought," said Helen. "This card acted as a sort of shield."

She took it from Mollie and shook off the water. Mollie tried to snatch it back, for it served as a hat and umbrella against the snow. As she did so, Helen turned the piece of cardboard and so saw the notice printed on it.

"NO CAROLS WANTED. SING ONLY AT YOUR RISK."

"I suppose this was hung at the gate, but Mollie took it and so we didn't see it," said Helen with a sigh. "Well, it's too late now, I'm afraid!"

They went out into the lane and trudged through the deepening snow to the village hall. Lights blazed, and Francis Marriott was already there, helping to hang the decorations for the party and getting everything ready for the rehearsal.

"My uncle will be along at any minute now," he said to Helen and her grandfather. "I'm sure he'll like the idea of your pets driving in the sled. He doesn't know how clever they are, never having seen them!"

"I'm afraid he has seen them—especially Mollie," Helen confessed, and told young Marriott what had happened.

"Gosh, I bet uncle was furious!" he said knowingly. "You only received half of my message. I warned you not to sing carols. We can explain that part of it, of course, but he won't forgive having his beard tugged!"

Helen looked dismally at her grandfather.

"If only we could think of some way of proving how sweet Mollie really is," she said, thinking desperately.

"It's out only hope of getting uncle to change his mind," young Marriott said. "The party's not going to be the same without your pets. The kiddies will be dreadfully disappointed. Is uncle still coming to the rehearsal?"

"He didn't say," Helen replied.

"He think he will. He's very keen on being Santa Claus. But he ought to be here by now. Uncle is always punctual!"

Francis Marriott looked at his watch again and then said he would drive back to the house and fetch his uncle.

"I'll explain to him that the carol singing was a mistake and try to make him change his mind about the pets," he added as he climbed into his car.

Helen thanked him, and she and granddad waited eagerly for him to return. A number of kiddies had gathered round outside the hall, excitedly discussing the party, and great was their delight when they were given rides in the sled drawn by Jinx.

Ten minutes passed, fifteen minutes—then Francis Marriott drove up, his car covered with snow. He stepped out, looking very worried indeed.

"I say, hasn't uncle arrived yet?" he asked. "He started out half an hour ago, walking. Apparently he intended coming through the wood."

"In all this snow—and in the darkness, too!" exclaimed granddad, looking concerned. "I hope he's all right."

"They all looked towards the nearby wood. Suddenly Jinx cocked his head to one side, listening intently. "He's heard something," Helen said.

Jinx had—a faint, high-pitched cry. He started running to and fro, whining in his throat. Helen at once knew what that meant.

"Yes, he's heard someone calling," she said. "My goodness, perhaps it's your uncle, Francis. We'd better go into the wood and search!"

They plunged among the trees. Ahead of them they saw the glow of a torch, and then heard a shout.

"I'm all right. I've slipped into a drift—finding it hard to get out!"

It was Mr. Marriott senior, and Mollie at once recognised the voice. Before Helen had a chance to catch hold of her pet, Mollie went loping forward.

"Oh goodness!" gasped Helen. "She knows who it is, and she won't have forgotten that he threw a bucket of water over her!"

"She wouldn't attack uncle?" asked the nephew in alarm.

"No, no! But she might try to pull his beard again!" Helen breathed worriedly.

Well ahead of them, having travelled at a speed they could not equal, crossing difficult patches by means of swinging from branch to branch, Mollie reached the spot where Mr. Marriott was floundering helplessly in a deep drift of snow.

Now, as he struggled to get back on the path, he slipped again. This time he landed on a ledge—and just below was an icy stream.

"I'll be all right," he said, hearing the sound of someone approaching, and waved his torch through the darkness.

Then he saw Mollie. The chimp was hurrying towards him, and Mr. Marriott stared in mingled anger and alarm.

"That chimpanzee! Keep back! Keep back!"

Gathering some snow in his hands, he made a snowball and hurled it. His aim was better than even he had hoped, for Mollie stopped the snowball with her face.

She chattered indignantly. Helen, hurrying on to the scene and a witness of the incident, gave a little gasp of dismay.

"Goodness, he shouldn't have done that!" she cried. "That will only make Mollie all the more cross! Mollie, come here—"

She broke off, staring in consternation. For Mr. Marriott, in hurling that snowball, had lost his footing. With a wild yell he went slithering downwards into the stream, his legs breaking the ice.

"Help! Help!"

He was an old man, and immersion in the icy water might have serious consequences. Desperately he clung to an overhanging branch, dangling there with half his body in the stream.

Helen and Francis plunged into the drift, but the snow was deep and they made little progress.

(Please turn to the back page.)



The IMPOSTOR AT THE WINTER SPORTS

By DENISE COWAN

A SHOCK FOR HAZEL

HAZEL RITCHIE, on a winter sports holiday in Switzerland, daringly agreed to assume the identity of a member of a skating troupe named Kay Rivers.

A mysterious man, who called himself the Domino, was after some fake "diamonds" which Kay had hidden in a pair of skates.

Kay, in hospital at Wulheim, learned that the Domino was planning a great coup for which he meant her brother, Cliff, to get the blame.

Hazel, in order to save Cliff, won a place in a skating trio to visit Schloss Konigen, where Kay's brother was secretary to Ernst Grafen, the owner. She meant to give Cliff the diamonds in the hope they would be a clue to the Domino's plans.

With the fake diamonds hidden in her skates, Hazel crossed the border with the rest of the party into Germany.

But a few minutes later a sleigh with uniformed Customs men stopped them. They searched the luggage and found the "diamonds." Hazel was denounced as an impostor and told that she was under arrest.

ARRESTED!

Hazel's face turned suddenly white.

She was disgraced—denounced as an impostor and smuggler. Not only had she failed to take the mysterious stones to Kay Rivers' brother, but her own hopes and ambitions seemed smashed. The sense of failure was the most bitter of all.

"Come, Fraulein Ritchie!" the grim-faced Customs official interrupted her thoughts. "It will be necessary for you to accompany us to police headquarters for questioning."

Hazel nodded, and as if in a dream saw her baggage being loaded on to the officer's sleigh. Miss Hardcastle, tight-lipped and contemptuous, was as pale as the staring Pat Kerry. Elaine Daly remained flushed and triumphant.

"An impostor!" she said sneeringly. "Didn't I always say she wasn't to be kept in the troupe—that there was something peculiar about her? Hazel Ritchie, a smuggler—"

"Stop it!" Pat Kerry sprang to her feet. "Shure, there's still a mistake, Elaine," she blazed. "Hazel will be able to explain it."

Hazel, a sudden lump in her throat, looked towards Pat and shook her head warningly. Whatever happened she would not see her loyal friend involved further.

"That's right, Pat. Trust you to stick up for her," Elaine sneered. "Of course, I forgot you were a smuggler's friend—perhaps you know something about the diamonds as well."

"Be quiet, Elaine. You will please

leave me to deal with things," Miss Hardcastle rapped. "It—it's all been a terrible shock to me."

"My apologies, fraulein," the waiting officer interrupted, saluting. "There will be no need to trouble you further."

Only Hazel's courage helped her to keep her head high when she half stumbled aboard the officials' horse-sleigh, the men sternly climbing in on each side of her.

A sharp order from the senior official made the driver of the sleigh crack his whip, and the horse-team began to surge forward.

Hazel had a last vivid impression of Pat gazing miserably after her, whilst Miss Hardcastle deliberately turned away. She saw the mocking smile on Elaine's lips—then everything was dimmed by the tears that welled into her eyes. In a matter of seconds the scene was hidden from view, and only its memory remained.

"And now I'm to be taken to the police!" Hazel murmured.

She clenched her hands and stared straight ahead. The invigorating keenness of the breeze, the glittering snow which hissed from beneath the sleigh's runners, had a soothing and quietening effect upon her whirling mind.

She was aware that the silent officer at her side still held the hollow-bladed skates and glass "diamonds"; the stones winked in the sunlight accusingly. For the first time she spoke.

"How much longer will it take to the—you know?" For some reason she was unable to speak the word out aloud.

"The police headquarters? About twenty-five minutes."

The officer wheeled on Hazel and regarded her queerly, but she was too weary to pay much attention; the minutes dragged on. After what seemed an age the speeding sleigh slowed to a halt before a lone chalet on the side of a slope.

"We have arrived, fraulein," the officer rapped. "You come with us, please!"

Escorted by the grim-faced officials, Hazel entered the chalet, to recoil with a startled, incredulous cry. For the gloomy, shadowed room bore no resemblance to a police headquarters at all! It was bare, deserted, and smelled faintly of mildew.

**The Domino Thought He
Had Got Rid Of Hazel—
But The Winter Sports
Girl Refused To Admit
Defeat**

"Where am I? I—I don't understand!"

Hazel tried to back to the door, but the men had locked it and now barred her way. Her first bewilderment changed to alarm, and her heart began pounding. What was happening? Where were the police?

"Answer me—say something!" She turned on the men. "I thought you were going to—"

"Yes, my dear Hazel. What did you think?" a soft, whispering voice came from behind her.

"Oh!" Hazel swung round with a gasp, for an interior door had just opened, and framed on the threshold stood a tall, broad-shouldered figure; a figure whose voice she recognised only too well.

"The Domino!" she murmured, aghast. "It's you! Then you escaped from the ski-hut."

Hazel's senses reeled—the Domino had been released after all. She recalled the green light she had seen flickering from the ski-hut when first the party set out from St. Cheville. It had evidently been a signal to waiting accomplices.

Without a word the Domino strode to the men by the door and took from them the "diamonds" and skates. Hazel, who watched him in horror, suddenly understood the full truth.

"These men—they're your hirelings," she cried. "They're not the real Customs officials. You had this all planned!"

Despair and utter defeat overwhelmed her. The Domino had recovered the vital glass stones on which the success of his great coup depended—that mysterious coup for which Kay's elder brother, Cliff Rivers, would be blamed.

"I've failed Kay—failed them both," Hazel breathed. "The 'diamonds' were the one clue we had. I can never take the stones to Cliff at Schloss Konigen now."

She looked up at the Domino as he spoke again.

"I must thank you, my dear; I'm very grateful for your smuggling," he drawled. "By safely bringing the stones over the frontier you allowed me to kill two birds with one stone."

Hazel said nothing.

The Domino was right, she thought. She had helped him—unwittingly played into his hands! Not only had she saved him from the risk of smuggling the fake diamonds himself, she had given the Domino the excellent means of bringing about her own disgrace from the troupe.

"And you hoped to outwit me," the Domino mocked. "You had the impertinence to think you might succeed."

His amusement suddenly vanished, and the cold eyes narrowed dangerously.

"What exactly did Kay Rivers tell you?" he rasped.

And it was with those words that Hazel understood why she had been brought to the chalet. The Domino wished to find out whether anything was known of his plans. Perhaps she could outwit him yet!

"You know already—know as well as I do," Hazel broke out in feigned recklessness. "The papers are burned, you've lost the hold you had over Kay. There's nothing you can do to her now."

She had twisted the answer to avoid mentioning what she knew of the coup.

"I see! Then what made you bring the stones over the frontier? Why were you taking them to Schloss Konigen?"

This time Hazel had to think quickly, for she dare not let the Domino suspect what her mission had been.

"Of course I took the stones with me," Hazel flashed. "I had been chosen to go to Schloss Konigen. Did you expect me to leave my equipment behind?"

Her heart gave a leap when she saw him relax. The Domino was satisfied she knew nothing of his intentions at Schloss Konigen, the mysterious coup he was planning.

"Thank you, my dear. So it appears I have rather spoiled your future," the Domino drawled. "But fortunately for you I'm inclined to be generous. I quite understand you can never return to the troupe."

Hazel flushed, for she realised the bitter truth of those words—her disgrace appeared final and complete. Once the story of her imposture leaked out, it would even be impossible to compete for the Adrien Trophy.

But what was the Domino getting at? What did he intend to do now?

With a queer smile on his face, the Domino brought from his pocket a roll of banknotes and one or two papers.

"I said I'm inclined to be generous," he added, "generous enough to know what it must feel like to be disgraced, without money or friends. I am arranging for you to catch the Continental Express into France, and from there to take the next boat back to England. Catch!"

The Domino, his lips quirked contemptuously, threw the bundle of notes in Hazel's direction. She drew back to let them fall on the floor.

"What! I wouldn't touch anything of yours," Hazel blazed. She regarded the Domino and the money with loathing. "I think you too despicable even to—"

She broke off as a wild thrill of excitement set her pulses tingling. The Domino was trying to get her out of the way, so—supposing she *did* appear to go back to England—could trick the Domino into thinking she had? After that the Domino would be off his guard: he would expect no further interference from her.

"I could use the Domino's own money to get to Schloss Konigen—warn Cliff Rivers after all," Hazel thought with growing excitement. "I can tell Cliff what the glass 'diamonds' are like, describe them in detail. There's a chance we might smash the Domino yet."

The very daring of the idea appealed to her. She gave no thought to the dangers and risks—she would be able to help Kay as she had promised. Determination and courage rose together.

In a superb piece of acting Hazel appeared to conquer her pride. Slowly she stooped to recover the wad of notes from the floor.

"You've changed your mind then?" the Domino sneered. "I had a feeling your big talk might be bluff."

Hazel nodded and made her lips quiver. But she was not prepared

for what happened next. The Domino whirled to his hirelings.

"You will take Fraulein Ritchie to the railway station at Walberg," he rapped. "Buy her a ticket to France and see her luggage on to the train."

And as Hazel stifled a cry of dismay the Domino looked towards her and added more grimly:

"And make sure Fraulein Ritchie boards the express—it doesn't stop till it's well into France. My French agents will meet her and escort her on to the boat."

Once aboard the non-stop express, Hazel knew she had no chance of escape—an escort would await her arrival.

How could she possibly take her message to Cliff Rivers at Schloss Konigen now? How could she get there to warn him?

A SHOCK AT SCHLOSS KONIGEN

"YOUR escort is waiting, my dear!" Hazel started as the Domino saluted her mockingly. Pale-faced and silent, she saw the door of the chalet unlocked and the Domino's two hirelings awaiting her outside.

"Hurry, fraulein, you have to catch the express," the leader of the fake Customs men rapped.

With a feeling which was close to despair, Hazel left the chalet and climbed aboard the horse-sleigh again. The waiting team finally sped on its way.

"I must warn Cliff—I must!" Hazel murmured. "If only there was a chance of escape."

But how? There seemed no way of escaping the Domino's hirelings. She could picture the Domino's sneering smile, sense the triumph he felt at the moment.

At last they arrived at the small Walberg Station, to find it teeming with people. Anxious tourists and travellers fussed and argued with station officials, whilst bags and sports gear littered the platform. The Continental Express was now due.

"You stay with Karl, fraulein. And if I were you I shouldn't try anything foolish," one of the men told her softly. "I'll get your ticket."

He returned with it a few moments later, then the gleaming express thundered in. Hazel stood helpless whilst her luggage was loaded on the train. She retained only her light case, which contained the most important of her personal equipment.

"Get aboard, fraulein!" Karl ordered.

Sheer desperation gave Hazel the power to think fast, and an excited flush mantled her cheek. She caught her breath at the idea which suddenly occurred to her. There was a chance of escape—wildly reckless, perhaps—but a chance.

"Get in, fraulein—quickly!" the man hissed.

"All right. I—I'm going."

By a supreme effort Hazel kept her tones normal. Slowly she entered the sleek, streamlined coach and made her way into the corridor. The men stepped back in grim satisfaction when they heard the piercing blast of the whistle.

With a hiss of released vacuum brakes the non-stop express began to roll forward, and Hazel saw the men turn away. Swiftly she darted to one of the doors on the farther side of the train, opened it, and poised on the step.

The train was gradually gathering speed as Hazel drew a deep breath.

"Now!" she murmured.

She closed her eyes, launched herself away from the train and jumped for the stained, heaped-up snow which had been swept in between the two tracks. The snow rose two feet high before her.

There was a rush of wind, followed by the sudden jolt of striking the track. Hazel, her light case in one hand, landed feet first on a cushion of snow, pitched forward, and finally fell sprawling. She was screened by the carriages going past.

In a twinkling she was on her feet and running in the direction of the station. Mounting the slope of the

platform she made for the ladies' waiting-room, and entered.

"Gosh, made it!" Hazel brushed herself down. "I had a bit of a fall," she smiled ruefully to the waiting-room's one other occupant.

Only then did Hazel wonder whether the Domino's men might have witnessed her daring leap from the train. She waited on tenterhooks for a while. Doubts and fears were replaced by triumphant delight.

"Seems they didn't," she decided, and laughed. It was funny how ridiculously easy it had been after all.

With a coolness which rather surprised her, Hazel first had a wash and brush-up, then started her journey to Schloss Konigen. She made inquiries, took the Alpine Railway to a neighbouring village, and completed the journey by sleigh. Her spirits soared with each passing minute.

She had outwitted the Domino! She chuckled at the thought that she was actually using his own money to do it!

It was late afternoon by the time Schloss Konigen, grey-stoned and turreted, rose into view against a purple-white background of mountains. It was approached by a long drive which ran through snow-covered pines.

All at once Hazel's coolness deserted her; her pulses commenced racing again. She recollected all the dangers and difficulties. Supposing Miss Hardcastle or Elaine Daly should see her? How could she gain her interview with Kay's elder brother, Cliff Rivers?

Hazel realised that Cliff Rivers, secretary to the great producer, Ernst Grafen, would know nothing about her or her mission. Should Elaine Daly or Miss Hardcastle set eyes on her, she might never have a chance to speak with Cliff Rivers at all. They would have her discredited as an impostor and smuggler.

"Whatever happens, I must speak with Cliff!" Hazel determined.

She paid off the driver of the sleigh, and, keeping well in the cover of the pines, hurried towards the looming outline of the castle. In the shadow of some bushes she paused, weighing up the situation.

"It'll be safer to find the servants' entrance—go in that way," she murmured.

She moved on. Everything was quiet, only the shivering sigh of the pines disturbed the silent air as Hazel cautiously felt her way along the side of the castle and reached a smaller porch with a single oak door. A metal bell pull swung suspended from the woodwork.

Hazel rang the bell. The door opened at once to reveal a warm, cosy-looking kitchen and two or three servants apparently finishing a meal. A kindly housekeeper smiled at Hazel inquiringly.

"Please, may I see Herr Rivers—it's most terribly important," Hazel pleaded. "I have a very urgent message from his sister."

"Come in, my dear. You are lucky," the old lady said. "Herr Rivers has only this moment returned. I will tell him you wish to see him."

She left the room, to return within a few minutes and beckon Hazel to follow. Hazel sighed with relief when she was ushered into a panelled study where a broad-shouldered figure sat writing. The old housekeeper closed the door after her.

"Herr Rivers, I'm from Kay," Hazel blurted. In her excitement the words tumbled over each other. "You're in danger—someone called the Domino is planning to—"

She broke off as the figure at the desk suddenly raised his head.

Hazel glimpsed bronzed features surmounted by a mass of coppery-red hair. Pale eyes regarded her from behind horn-rimmed spectacles. Yet despite his freckles and rather broad nose, there was something uncannily familiar about Cliff Rivers.

Where could she have seen him before? Hazel wondered. Of whom did Cliff Rivers remind her?

She was startled to find herself

shivering. Then the chill feeling increased to stark horror. Hazel could feel the blood drain from her lips. No, it couldn't be! Yet—

"How very interesting," came the Domino's voice, and he removed his spectacles. "I must congratulate you on your remarkable astuteness. It appears I have taken Cliff Rivers' place barely in time!"

THE DOMINO'S SUPREME BLUFF

FOR a moment the room seemed to be spinning about Hazel. This was fantastic—it just couldn't be true. But the Domino's voice still rang in her ears; the pale eyes behind the glasses gleamed mockingly.

The Domino had taken Cliff Rivers' place! The terrible fact began to sink in.

"What have you done with the real Cliff Rivers? What have you done with him?" She answered her own question in a low, accusing voice. "You've kidnapped him. You—"

"I've taken his place, my dear," the Domino drawled, "though I suppose you might call it kidnapping. I have taken the liberty of assuming the absent Herr Rivers' identity—and, of course, his appearance as well."

Hazel stood very still; now she could understand what was happening. The success of the great coup the Domino planned must depend upon his taking Cliff Rivers' place. And she had arrived too late to prevent it. Kay's elder brother had been kidnapped!

All at once Hazel recovered herself. Anger and determination swept aside all other emotions.

"You won't get away with this," she cried. "You can't stop me telling the truth. I'm not too late to do that!"

She raced to the door, only to pull up in utter bewilderment. The Domino, unperturbed, was actually smiling.

"Very praiseworthy, my dear," he said coolly. "Allow me to save you the trouble. Since you wish to raise an alarm, I suppose I might as well do it for you."

"What do you mean?" Hazel gasped, and felt suddenly afraid.

She saw the Domino unhook an old-fashioned speaking-tube, which connected with the servants' quarters below. He sounded the whistle and calmly lifted the mouthpiece.

"Is that you, Magda? Herr Rivers speaking. Would you be good enough to ask Fraulein Hardcastle and any of her troupe to step up? I will explain to Baron Grafen myself."

"You—you've sent for Miss Hardcastle?" Hazel echoed incredulously.

Excitement and uneasiness mingled together. Hazel's heart leapt when she recalled she would shortly see Pat Kerry again. Pat, who knew most of the story already, would be able to confirm every word Hazel said. This time the Domino had made a mistake.

"You won't bluff this out," Hazel flashed. "I'm not the only one who suspects. Even your disguise can't save you when any sort of investigation is made."

"A matter of opinion, my dear," the Domino shrugged.

He lit a cigarette and sat down again at the desk. Hazel's uneasiness grew to a definite dismay. Why was the Domino so unperturbed?

Hazel wheeled with delight and relief when the door opened to admit Miss Hardcastle, Elaine Daly and— But the third person was not her loyal Irish chum. It was Madge Brenner, not Pat Kerry at all!

Hazel's heart sank. She realised now it would have to be the Domino's word against her own; she could look to no one else for support.

But before Hazel or the startled newcomers could utter a word the Domino was already speaking. And his voice was totally unlike the one he used normally.

"Fraulein Hardcastle, I have a very painful duty to perform. I know my sister has given you a great deal of trouble—and now she has come here to see me."

Too late, Hazel saw the Domino's intentions. How, in his guise of Cliff Rivers, he was pretending to mistake her for Kay. The note of regret in his voice was superb.

"I have just had a long talk with Kay," the Domino went on very gravely, "but I'm afraid she treats the smuggling episode rather lightly. Perhaps if you—"

"Don't listen to him. It's all an act!" Hazel cried. Despair and anger stung tears to her eyes. "He isn't Herr Rivers at all—he's disguised. Please believe me—you must—"

"Kay! What are you saying?" the Domino burst out in horror.

"It's all right, Herr Rivers," Miss Hardcastle hastened to exclaim. "I'm afraid I've a terrible shock for you. This girl is not your sister. She is an impostor by the name of Hazel Ritchie."

And Miss Hardcastle looked scornfully towards Hazel.

"Yes, she's the smuggler, Herr Rivers," Elaine Daly echoed with spite. "It was this girl—not your sister, Kay Rivers."

The Domino appeared to start back with shock.

"I— I don't understand," he faltered. "There must be some mistake. I heard that my sister had been arrested for smuggling."

self, Fraulein Hardcastle. I assure you I attach no blame to you."

He smiled at Miss Hardcastle, whose anxiety was pitifully obvious, then used the speaking-tube to order a sleigh. Five minutes later Hazel was being escorted into the kitchen whilst a manservant prepared the horse-sleigh.

"So it's good-bye, Hazel," Elaine Daly said spitefully. "I think I ought to tell you Miss Hardcastle sent Pat back to the troupe. Madge came on here to replace her."

Hazel did not answer, for she hardly needed to guess what had happened. Pat had been punished for apparently being involved in the "smuggling."

"But the Domino hasn't beaten me yet," Hazel murmured. "When I leave here I will go to the police."

Her very anger and determination made her anxious to leave. The situation was far too serious now for Hazel to do anything else—only one move remained. She would go to the nearest police headquarters and tell the whole story from beginning to end.

"The sleigh is here, Hazel!" Miss Hardcastle snapped.

The manservant driver, his heavy furs powdered with snow, entered the



Suddenly Hazel realised why the secretary looked so familiar. It was the Domino—in disguise!

"You mean her impostor had," Madge Brenner said bitterly. "This girl, Hazel Ritchie. I suppose she came here to fool you, like she tried to fool all of us."

The white-faced Hazel turned to Miss Hardcastle imploringly.

"Miss Hardcastle, please fetch the police—please!" she pleaded. "Don't let this man get away."

"It'll be unfortunate for you if we do," Elaine sneered.

"It's been rather unlucky for Hazel that Pat Kerry isn't here to back her up," added Madge Brenner. "I suppose she depended on that. I expect Hazel came here to trick Herr Rivers into giving her money."

"I had already done that!" the Domino rapped.

In a final masterpiece of acting he turned to Miss Hardcastle and added:

"Fraulein, I beg you not to be too hard on the girl—if only because she is so like my sister. She is welcome to the money."

"Get out! Get out before we do call the police," Miss Hardcastle said grimly to Hazel. "I've no words to describe what I think of you."

"I'll order a sleigh to take her to the station," the Domino said in mock kindness. "Please don't upset your-

kitchen and nodded for Hazel to follow. But before Hazel left she and the driver had a hot drink to keep out the cold.

"Herr Rivers spoils you, girl," Miss Hardcastle said, and turned away with a shrug of distaste.

Unshed tears stinging her eyes, Hazel boarded the sleigh and watched the driver urge the team into motion. Her lips tightened when she thought of the kidnapped Cliff Rivers.

"I must get to the police at once," she determined, "as soon as the sleigh reaches the village."

Hazel's hopes rose, and the earlier despair started to fade. Flakes of snow drifted down on her whilst the jingling bells of the sleigh quietened her nerves; she felt very tired.

"The police—that's it, the police!" she whispered. "I can still wreck the Domino's plans. I—"

The words echoed queerly in her mind and a terrible giddiness made her sway in the seat. Then, without any warning, darkness seemed to rush in on her.

At the next heavy lurch of the sleigh Hazel fell forward limply, for unconsciousness claimed her completely.

What has happened? What is behind this dramatic development? Be sure to read next week's chapters of this exciting story.

THE SECRET OF THE CHRISTMAS CAKE

(Continued from page 228.)

The other nodded, and Osbert struck a match, applying it to the spirits.

There was a sudden flash, but instead of the eerie blue spirit flame they had all expected, there rose from the bowl a dense cloud of grey smoke that rapidly filled the room and started everyone coughing and rubbing their eyes.

But June, though her eyes were streaming, was on her guard.

"Look out!" she cried suddenly, springing forward. "Guard the door, too! Don't let Santa Claus escape!"

Osbert made a dash for the door, with several others, while June flung herself at the red-robed figure, seizing his sack.

The other turned with a snarl and a broken cry went up from the young guests as, through the coiling smoke, they could see a revolver in Santa Claus's hand.

"Let go that sack!" he grated, as June clung to it pluckily. "And stand away from that door, you boys, or it'll be the worse for—"

He got no further. At that instant, with a rasp of rusty hinges, a panel opened in the wall above the sideboard, revealing a dusty, disused serving-hatch. And from the dim cavity a tall figure leaped across the room, seizing the robed scoundrel.

"Munk!" cried June, recognising her uncle.

"Smart work, my dear," panted Noel. "And you, too, boys! Switch on the light, someone!—Ah, that's better!"

As the lights flashed on, Noel snatched off Santa Claus's white beard, revealing the glaring face of Fred Tregellis, the hall-porter!

"Here's the scoundrel who's been spoiling your Christmas," said Noel grimly. "You'll find the last three cakes in his sack!"

"But why did he do it, munky?"

"One thing at a time," said Noel, with a grim smile. "First let me explain that I discovered that old serving-hatch hidden behind the letter-rack in the reception desk in the hall. Even Mr. Penhale had forgotten its existence. Before I left the house this morning, I arranged with Penhale to have the reception

desk locked for the day, as a safeguard. Tregellis was forced to adopt another method of entering the room, and he hit on this Santa Claus plan, cunningly putting the idea into Frank's mind beforehand."

"But where—where is Frank?" asked Hilary anxiously.

"Shut in the store-room in the basement," said Noel. "Mr. Penhale has gone down to rescue him. Tregellis had no intention of letting Jim take the part of Santa."

"And Amy?" faltered June, her mind in a whirl. "How did she come into this?"

"She is here now, with her fiance," replied Noel with a smile, and opened the door to admit the maid and a good-looking young man wearing fisherman's attire. "And here's Mr. Penhale with Frank. Now that the party's complete, we'll try a little experiment!"

While Mr. Penhale kept the scowling porter covered with his own revolver, Noel felt in the man's pockets and took out two surprising objects—a steel knitting-needle, together with a phial of silver cake decorations!

The others watched breathlessly as the young detective demonstrated how the porter had probed the stolen cakes with the knitting-needle—and then, to avoid arousing suspicion of his motives, had cunningly filled the holes with silver balls.

"Now to clear up a few more points," went on Noel. "The first cake first—that's the one June and I found. Tregellis had taken it, of course, but he accidentally dropped the box over the cliff as he was opening it. For obvious reasons he was afraid to show himself and claim it."

"But while we were looking for the owner," Noel continued, "he slipped down to the beach. He found it wasn't the cake he wanted after prodding it with this needle, and then added the skull and crossbones design to throw suspicion on to Amy, who was known to have been connected with the Jolly Roger Cake Shoppe. Tregellis himself was anxious at all costs to prevent anyone examining the remaining cakes, before he could get at them."

"But why, Mr. Raymond?" came an excited chorus.

For reply, Noel picked up the last cake and thrust the knitting-needle into the icing. But this time there was an obstacle in the way. With a grim smile, he took a knife and

scraped away the icing-sugar and marzipan layer beneath.

A gasp went up as, from the remnants of the cake, he produced an exquisite golden salt-cellar, studded with gems.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Mr. Penhale. "That is one of the priceless curios stolen from the Graham collection—the robbery in which young Norton was supposed to be implicated."

"And of which he was innocent!" declared Noel, as he met the maid's smiling glance. "Tregellis was the ringleader in that theft—and his accomplice, who took the salt-cellar, happened to be employed at Heskell's Bakeries. Realising that the police were after him, he hid the treasure in the cake mixture, intending to smuggle it out later. But he was arrested and sent to gaol. He managed to get a message through to his accomplice—and it was Tregellis who persuaded Mr. Penhale to order that day's batch of cakes from Heskell's. They would not be delivered till Christmas Eve, but the scoundrel was quite willing to wait."

"I'm beginning to see it all now!" breathed June. "Amy suspected what he was after, and managed to get hold of one of the cakes—the second missing cake. She hid it on the beach, in a spot previously arranged with her fiance, and she added that warning message because she was afraid Tregellis knew that they suspected him."

"Right!" nodded Noel, smiling. "And on the way back to the house, Tregellis caught her—and threatened her fiance's safety if she dared to speak. It was her scream that we all heard. But pluckily she made a last attempt to find the precious object that would prove Bert Norton's innocence—that was when she was caught with the chocolate cake."

"And now—now Bert's innocence really is proved," whispered Amy, her voice shaking as she held tightly to her fiance's arm, and smiled tearfully from Noel to June. "Thanks to you, Miss Gaynor—and to Mr. Raymond—it's going to be a happy Christmas for us, after all!"

(End of this week's story.)

THE SCHOOLGIRL PANTOMIME STAR—look out for this thrilling long complete story in next Friday's **GIRLS' CRYSTAL**.

HELEN AND HER COMICAL PETS

(Continued from page 236.)

From Mr. Marriott there came an agitated cry.

"Quick! I can't hold on much longer!" he gasped, as he felt his fingers beginning to slip under the strain.

Desperately Helen and Francis plunged on through the drift, but they guessed they would not be able to reach the spot in time.

Someone else, however, was also hurrying to the scene.

Mollie!

The chimp was not thinking so much of rescue, but of Mr. Marriott's beard.

It fascinated her.

She could not understand why it did not pull off like granddad's!

"Swinging from bough to bough, the chimp at last reached the branch to which Mr. Marriott was clinging.

Wonderingly she gazed at that agitated face with its long white beard.

"Help!" he gasped. "I'm—I'm slipping. Save me!"

Mollie frowned, then, as Mr. Marriott gave another despairing cry, something seemed to stir in her chimp brain. Swarming along the overhang-

ing bough, she caught hold of the old man under the armpits.

She dragged him out to the bank, and when Helen and Francis and grandfather reached the scene, Mr. Marriott was, gazing at the chimp with goggling eyes, hardly able to believe that it was Mollie who had performed the rescue. And there was Mollie, tugging at the old man's beard, and still vastly surprised because it did not come away as did granddad's false one.

"Pull!" Mr. Marriott was saying with a smile. "Pull if it pleases you!"

"Oh, you clever chimp!" cried Helen excitedly.

"Clever indeed!" agreed Mr. Marriott, patting Mollie's head. "And forgiving, too. This is a lesson to me. I throw a bucket of water over her, hit her with a snowball, and she saves my life. Your pets shall be at the party, after all!"

He ended with a loud sneeze which made Mollie jump—and filled Helen with concern.

"You must get back home, Mr. Marriott, or you'll be in bed all Christmas!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Marriott nodded.

"Yes, I must look after myself tonight so that I don't miss the party to-morrow. Carry on with your rehearsal, young lady. And be sure that your pets are at the party!"

By quick action, a mustard loaf-

both and wrapping up, Mr. Marriott's chill was mastered.

He was at the kiddies' party the following day. And he chuckled delightedly, as Mollie, dressed as Santa Claus, drove in the sled pulled by Jim, with Popsy perched on her shoulder.

There and then Mr. Marriott announced that Mollie must remain as Santa Claus for the rest of the party, and granddad smilingly nodded his approval.

Mollie was only too willing.

Chattering with glee, she stood by the big, decorated tub, handing out Christmas presents to the excited kiddies.

The children were hilariously happy, and so was everyone else.

And after the party Mr. Marriott made a point of presenting Mollie with a special false beard which was to be her very own.

Mollie was delighted, and signified her appreciation by giving Mr. Marriott's beard a gentle tug before donning her own.

"Mollie, that's not the right Christmas spirit," reproved Helen.

"I'm getting used to it—and this is the happiest Christmas I've ever had!" laughed Mr. Marriott.

"Happy Christmas! Happy Christmas!" squawked Popsy.

(End of this week's story.)

Another amusing story of Helen and her pets next week.