

PACKED WITH SPLENDID STORIES
FOR CHRISTMAS READING

The SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN

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2d



**WELCOME
'CINDERELLA'!**

A very happy moment
in this week's Mor-
cove Christmas story.

The Chums of Morcove in an Enthralling Christmas Mystery

HELPED by the MORCOVE REVELLERS



By MARJORIE STANTON

CHAPTER I.

Snow on the Wold

"DON'T see them coming, yet, girls!"

"No! Hope everything is all right!"

"Oh, they'll turn up presently. Perhaps they will bring Joan Sunderland along, to have a go on one of our toboggans!"

"How jolly if they do!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove—"

"Bekas, we know Joan had a mis'ble Christmas Day! Not like us, with Santa Claus to give away presents from ze tree, after tea, and games, and dancing, and—"

"You needn't say the rest," came madcap Polly Linton's interruption. And, needless to say, it was uttered in that mock-withering tone which the Morcove madcap habitually adopted towards her royal highness, Naomer Nakara.

"For we all know," Polly added, "about the etables you got through yesterday—stuff, stuff, stuff, and then some more!"

"Perfectly twue, yes wather!" chortled amiable Paula Creel, whilst she paid attention to her personal appearance.

As Paula, five minutes ago, had been tipped off a toboggan at the bottom of a steep hillside run, landing in some five feet of drifted snow, she was far from looking as "pwesentable" as she liked to appear.

"All aboard for the next non-stop!" vociferated Polly's boisterous brother, Jack. "Come on, boys!"—meaning girls. "One more, and then a spell-o for hot choddies!"

This was in allusion to a great idea which was

IN strange contrast to all the fun and festivity which prevails this Christmas-tide at Cromlech Manor, where the chums of Morcove are staying, Skerrington Old Hall presents a gloomy picture. No wonder the chums are sorry for Joan Sunderland, of Skerrington, little dreaming how greatly their holiday is to be affected by the queer mystery which Joan is the central figure.

being worked under the superintendence of Master Robert Bloot, alias "Tubby."

Cromlech Manor, where all the chums of Study 12 at Morcove, and a Grangemoor contingent of schoolboys, were spending Christmas-tide, had provided Tubby with an old pail, some coke, an ancient tea-tray, and a few pounds of sweet chestnuts.

Now, on the snowy summit of Cromlech Hill, from which the toboggan-run started, Tubby had the pail—suitably punctured with big holes—serving as a brazier.

Over the glowing pailful of coke the tea-tray was set, having also been suitably perforated to let through the heat. And on the tea-tray were spread cooking chestnuts, giving an occasional hiss and splutter, and filling the nippy air with such a delicious, appetising aroma as kept Tubby beaming hugely.

"Come on, Paula darling!" cried Polly, making for one of the toboggans lying ready for the next rush downhill.

"Er—"

"With me, this time!"

"If I might be excused—"

"No tobogganing, no chestnuts!"

"That's quite all right, Polly dear. I am not greatly struck on chestnuts."

"But if you don't have any hot chestnuts, and don't toboggan you won't keep warm. One or the other, Paula, or both," the madcap sweetly insisted. "So make up your mind!"

"Ah, bah, she hasn't got one!" Naomer shrielled, and took upon herself to decide for long-suffering Paula by dashing at her from behind.

"Bekas, hurry up, queek—"

"Owch! Gah, stahp it! You goop! You—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A shame," said Polly, coming to help capsized Paula up from the snow; but she reckoned without Jack, whose "Allow me!" was no politer than his conduct.

Since there was all this politeness on the part of Jack, a stranger might have wondered at Polly's opposing his butting in.

But the few other juniors who were mirthful lookers-on knew brother and sister well enough to realise that any "scrapping" between them was merely a means of further teasing long-suffering Paula.

A few moments more and Paula, far from being helped up, was being half-buried alive in the snow. She squealed, she howled that they were "wetches, both!" and she dolefully appealed for "healp!"

"Sorry!" Jack puffed, as if still only imbued with the gallant desire to aid her. "Just a mo, Paula!"

That was the moment when he and Polly, having wrestled together until they both fell over in the snow, kneeled up to look at each other.

"See?" Polly sauced him, quite sure that she had come off best. "That's what you get!"

Jack recovered his cap, and put it on his head again. Then, with a kind of caveman roar, he suddenly stood up, picked up his sister, and carried her, kicking and yelling, towards the brazier.

His subsequent dandling of Polly over the coke fire as if minded to set her down on top of it, so alarmed Naomer that she shrielled:

"Hi, whoa! Bekas, mind ze chestnuts!"

"If it hadn't been for them!" Jack said finally, setting Polly upon her feet again. "But, come on, boys!" And he dashed to the waiting toboggans. "No waiting! Children, half price!"

"A weck, a wuin!" Paula complained, brushing snow from her clothes. "Haow I wish I had gone with Betty and Judy and Dave, instead of coming with all of you!"

"But, look—here they are!"

That was Helen Craig, happening to survey the snowy landscape just before she took her seat upon one of the toboggans.

Her right arm pointed directionally, and then from all her chums came gratified comments. Even Tubby, hovering around the brazier, forgot his chestnuts for the time being.

The hour of winter sporting up here on the snowy hillside had been full of fun and frolic. Nevertheless, those juniors had known that they would be all the happier when rejoined by those three chums who, for a certain important reason, had gone upon a little excursion of their own.

Now, as Helen had been the first to observe, those three were floundering towards the foot of the slope, giving a wave or so of the hand as if to imply an "All's well!"

"But they haven't brought Joan along with them, from Skerrington Old Hall," Pam Willoughby quickly commented. "Wonder if they saw her, or only saw that woman with whom she's living?"

"Here, let's run down and meet them!" was Polly's impatient cry. "Come on!"

"Yes, come on!"

Nor did Paula abstain, after all. Any dread of another tumble-off at the bottom of the run was ousted by her eagerness to hear what Betty, Judy and Dave had to report.

That eagerness Tubby was sharing also. He forsook his fire and the chestnuts to implant his bulky form upon one of the toboggans. As he was alleged to weigh as much as any two of the other passengers put together, it was little wonder that that particular toboggan lodged at the start.

But when at last the toboggan was off and away, Tubby's extra weight seemed to prove an advantage after all. At any rate, fellow passengers attributed a sudden hair-raising velocity to Tubby's being on board.

Behind the other two machines by several seconds at the start, this toboggan rapidly gained the lead. A third of the way down it passed its rivals to the accompaniment of wild cheering, and was answered with derisive booing.

"Bekas, sweendle!" Naomer yelled from on board one of the rivals, and she specified the grievance. "You've got Tubby—not fair!"

Whether the likely winner was benefiting by Tubby did not, however, matter much longer, for Tubby suddenly rolled over. The toboggan, steered by Jimmy Cherrol, went on as fast as ever, leaving Tubby wallowing in the snow.

"Ha, ha, ha! Wow!" Jack changed to a howl of pretended alarm as he steered his machine past his fat chum, only missing him by an inch or two. "O.K., boys!"

As there was still another toboggan to come, Tubby could hardly have felt that the danger was over for him. This machine, now a bad third in the race downhill, was the one Naomer had patronised.

Pam was steering it, and lucky for Tubby that this was so! He was right in its way, an inert specimen of youthful corpulence, and it needed the skill and presence of mind of a girl like Pam to "give him a miss."

Whizz! The toboggan was cleverly steered past him, and all that happened was that Naomer fell off at the back.

A shrill "What ze diggings!" came from the dusky Morcovian as she lost her seat, and there she was, sprawl on the snowy slope along with Tubby, wondering how she came to be there.

"I say!" Tubby jerked, goggling his eyes at her. "You all right?"

"Eggscrot that I am all over snow—sweendle! What about you, Tubby?"

"Bit winded—pouf, that's all!"

Then, kindred spirits that they were, first aid remedies were mutually suggested—hot chestnuts!

Which prescription they accordingly set about getting at once, whilst the other tobogganists came off the sledges all anyhow at the foot of the hill, scrambled to their feet, and ran to meet Betty, Judy and Dave, crying eagerly:

"Well, what? Have you seen Joan Sunderland?"

CHAPTER 2.
Sorry for Joan

"Oh, yes!" came Betty Barton's blithe response. "We've seen her, right enough."

"Good! Splendid!" were samples of the gratified comments; but Polly Linton was impatient for more details.

"That's to say—you saw her to speak to?"

"Yes!" Betty nodded and smiled. "No difficulty at all, either! The three of us—we just knocked at the door at Skerrington Old Hall, and in a minute Joan came outside on the drive, talking to us."

"The caretaker-woman opened the door," Judy carried on the narration. "She was quite decent, too—called to Joan to come and speak to us."

"But you weren't asked inside?" Polly frowned.

"Um!"

"Oh, but is there anything in that?" Betty lightly returned. "After all, perhaps the house isn't in a fit state for visitors. Joan and the woman are only caretaking for the new owner of the Old Hall, and very likely they have only a few sticks of furniture. Anyway, Joan came out to us—"

"And did she look all right?" Jack asked anxiously. "Mean to say, sometimes a person manages to speak cheerfully and all that, but you can tell, by the look—"

"Joan Sunderland was just the same as when we met her for the first time, a day or two before Christmas Day," Betty hastened to say reassuringly, and Judy and her brother Dave nodded to the same effect. "Looking perfectly well, and quite cheerful."

"So what?" asked Polly, most impatient of all the listeners. "How about last night—Christmas night—when we know that she came up to Cromlech Manor all through the snow, to peep in upon us when we were dancing?"

"But," Betty said, "we didn't say anything to her about that. We thought we had better not. She came and went in secret, and so probably she would be upset to know that we knew."

"That's right enough," nodded Jack. "But how about that scream four of us heard when we were outside the Old Hall last night? You surely mentioned that?"

"We did," Dave responded crisply. "And we have Joan Sunderland's own word for it: what the woman told us, last night down there at the Old Hall was perfectly true. Joan was going up to bed through that great old house, when she nearly fell down a flight of stairs. She screamed then—"

"I'm sure I'd have done the same in the circumstances," Judy gently caught her brother up. "It was a nasty scare."

"Ow, howwible!" shuddered

Paula. "That wretched old house—they shouldn't be there, with only candles and small oil-lamps probably, and dawk before five every day."

"Just what we said to Joan," was Betty's lively rejoinder. "But she only laughed and shrugged. 'Must get used to it, that's all!'"

"You did ask her, though, if she would join us at Cromlech Manor for the rest of Christmas, anyway?" Pam inferred.

"We did! And then, I think, she nearly cried," Betty related, a little emotionally. "You see, she had to say that she couldn't dream of coming."

"Couldn't?" Polly gaped. "Then she won't be joining us at the Manor? Oh, what a shame!"

"Don't think that we didn't try to persuade her," Judy put in, with that earnestness which she and her brother always manifested. "We used every possible means."

"Gave it as an invitation from our people; said that we had so looked forward to giving her a happy time," Betty continued. "But it wasn't a bit of use! She just couldn't accept."

"Why?" asked Pam sadly.

"Oh—they are caretakers, and so they mustn't leave the place."

"We washed out the idea of her coming to sleep at the Manor," Dave remarked. "We asked if she couldn't come up to the Manor for a few hours, at any rate; spend at least one evening with us all, and she would be seen safely back to Skerrington."

"And she couldn't see her way to doing that even?"



A wild lurch of the toboggan precipitated Naomer and Bobby into the snow. "Hi, what ze diggings!" Naomer's shrill protest arose. "Why didn't you hang on, Tubby?"

"No," Madge Minden was answered by Betty, ruefully. "Yet she would have loved to come—you could tell!"

There were some concluding murmurs of "Such a pity!" then the three toboggans were taken in tow for a general return uphill.

"You and Judy must have a go, Betty—and Dave, too," Polly exclaimed. "It's great fun—if only Joan could have been with us, to join in. Oh, and you three will want to patronise the roast chest—"

"I say, look at those two up there, scoffing the lot as fast as they can go!" Jack exploded, and so laughter came again, increasing to yells of merriment as he and Polly very grimly dashed uphill.

But those who took the climb more sedately were thinking of Joan Sunderland. The measure of their own happiness, this Christmastide, was the measure of their sympathy for that girl, to whom Christmas had brought no special treats of any kind.

What a life for her, they were thinking anew; what a life for a girl to be living at this season of the year! Skerrington Old Hall was a barrack, dilapidated old country house, standing all alone about a mile from Cromlech Manor down the valley.

"Oh, and another thing we told her," Betty suddenly exclaimed, during the floundering uphill in the snow. "We explained that this evening we were holding a Boxing Night fancy dress affair—if she could only manage to come to that!"

"You should have seen the look in her eyes then!" Judy supplemented. "But it was the same answer again: 'No, impossible!'"

"Yes, well, I think it cruel luck for her, that she can't," Pam deplored. "By the way! I hope it isn't because of that Headlam girl? Joan Sunderland knows that Elsie Headlam is staying at the Manor with her stepfather for Christmas, and we know that Elsie Headlam made herself nasty to Joan the other day."

"Nothing was said about that," Betty murmured. "But it may have something to do with Joan's declining the invitation. She may not wish to meet the Headlam girl again. Joan doesn't seem the sort to want to keep up a quarrel, but I'm not so sure about Elsie Headlam."

"Yes, wather! And, bai Jove," Paula said scornfully, "wouldn't Elsie Headlam wejoice if she knew she had been the means, perhaps, of preventing Joan from having a bit of Christmas fun."

"Quite likely!" was the agreeing chorus. And within an hour they knew it for a fact. As soon as the juniors got back to Cromlech Manor for lunch, some of the grown-ups wanted to know about Joan Sunderland—whether she had accepted the kindly invitation.

The girl whom Betty and Co. so disliked—"Miss Airs and Graces," as they had nicknamed her—was standing by when the burst of talk occurred concerning Joan. Many glances were cast at Elsie Headlam, to see what the effect of the talk would be on her.

At the first mention of Joan's name the spiteful girl had seemed to become uneasy. Now, as she heard it being said that Joan had reluctantly declined the invitation, it was impossible for Elsie to disguise her satisfaction.

Betty and others detected it, and they regarded it as proof positive. Elsie Headlam was not the one to want Joan Sunderland to have life brightened for her this Christmastide. She bore the girl too much malice.

But why?

They could not tell.

Nor did they even guess the magnitude of that malice—the potential menace that it was against Joan Sunderland, wanting to deny her far, far more than a few hours of Christmas gaiety among friends; wanting to exclude her forever from that life of ease and luxury which was Elsie's own, to-day!

CHAPTER 3.

Something Found

"**A**GGIE dear, look! Do look at what I've just found in an old cupboard upstairs!"

"Why, Joan dearie, what rubbish is that!"

"Rubbish, Aggie? Oh, no!"

And Joan Sunderland laughed as she advanced into the barely-furnished kitchen at Skerrington Old Hall, offering some strange-looking garments for closer inspection.

Her old nurse, Agatha, was up from a fireside chair, and staring a little derisively at what Joan had to show her.

"An old-fashioned petticoat, Joan? An old bodice and things like that? You don't want to get excited about such rags of stuff, my dear."

"But, Aggie—"

"We're not so put to it for something to wear, Joan—not so hard up as—"

"That we are not—don't I know it!" Joan laughed again. "But you don't see—"

"I certainly don't see what there is to be excited about," came with a smile, the falsity of which went unsuspected. "Unless you mean to take them to a wardrobe dealer, to see if they'll make a shilling or two—which you don't need, come to that!"

"Aggie, you must take a better look at these things. You must allow me to know! They're a great find, Aggie! They must have been lost sight of years and years ago, or they would never have been left behind in this old house, when the last tenants moved away. The dress—for it's a complete dress, Aggie—is an antique costume!"

"Oh, get along with your nonsense, Joan!"

"But look!"

Joan was laying one portion of her find over the back of a chair, and spreading another bit of the raiment upon the table.

"Lace—beautiful old lace, Aggie! Brocade, and the material of the skirt—lovely silk! But it's the style of the whole thing, Aggie, that so excites me! A period dress!"

"Huh!" laughed middle-aged Agatha. "Perhaps you'd like to say what period?"

"No; I'm not well-up enough in the history of dress for that, Aggie! But I should say, at a guess, somewhere about the time of the Georges—you know, Aggie, the great days when gentlemen wore knee breeches and powdered wigs, and the ladies wore their hair all puffed up!"

Still smiling in an enraptured manner, Joan took up the silk skirt, feeling the soft texture of it with a caressing hand.

"Don't you remember, Aggie, an engraving we had at home—"

"Now, then, you don't want to talk about home."

Joan winced, not because the reproof had come rather sharply, but because of the hurt she had done herself in using the word home.

"No, Aggie, it doesn't do," she admitted sighingly. "Anyhow, that's what the dress is—nearly

a hundred and fifty years old, at least! It may be even older than that, just fancy!"

Having brightened again, she turned animatedly to her old nurse.

"I found it in an attic cupboard, upstairs——"

"You shouldn't go prowling about up there, Joan. Where's the sense? This kitchen's the only room with a fire in it by day. It's the only room, except for the ones we sleep in, where there's any furniture."

"I went right to the top of the house, Aggie, to get out by way of that skylight on to the flat roof."

"Whatever made you do that?"

"Oh, well, ever since those girls and boys went away after their talk with me this morning I've been feeling a bit lonesome. You mustn't think me weak and silly, Aggie. I don't think there was much weakness in my refusing that invitation as I did."

"There would have been madness in your accepting, Joan!"

"Yes, I—I know."

"But what made you climb out on to the roof, anyhow?"

"Oh—I just wanted to get the widest view I could of all the country round about. I thought those girls and boys might be out again for the afternoon. But I didn't see any sign of them. Then, on my way down through the attics, I was loitering about—time does hang so heavily, Aggie!"

"And so you poked into some cupboard or other, and found those old rags! Well, now I've seen them they may as well go back. Joan, what's come over you all of a sudden?" Agatha demanded half-dismayed. "Looking like that!"

For a long moment Joan remained silent, a far-away look in her lovely eyes. Her expression was a half-smiling, half-anguished one.

"Aggie!"

"Well?"

"It has just flashed upon me! Up at the Manor, this evening, they're having a kind of fancy-dress ball, and here I have just discovered—a genuine period costume! Oh, Aggie——"

"Joan, you're not so silly as to think of——"

"But couldn't I?" the girl excitedly debated.

"Wearing a dress like that, Aggie—a grown woman's dress; but I could wear it, for I'm tall enough, and the older it makes me look the better the disguise!"

"I tell you, Joan, it would be madness——"

"No, Aggie, no! To have gone to the Manor for an evening wearing my own best frock—that would have been foolish, if you like. It's why I declined the invitation. But if I can go in disguise—such a disguise as this old dress means——"

"And still I say, Joan, you will be running a terrible risk! Or do you want to be recognised, and is it all humbug what you've said a hundred times over, these last few months?"

"Aggie——"

"Well, then! But it must be one thing or the other!"

"It is going to be one thing," Joan said, with tragic composure, after a moment of pained silence. "It is going to be this life for me, Aggie, until the new owner of Skerrington, who put us in as caretakers is ready to take over. Then, when we have to go from here we shall go somewhere else, that's all. Still in hiding——"

"Then, if you mean that, Joan——"

"Aggie, don't begin to doubt me. You only hurt me; you, who were my nurse——"

"There, there, Joan dearie, I wasn't meaning



"I could go to the Manor in this frock," Joan said eagerly, but old Aggie shook her head. "You will be running a terrible risk," she muttered. "Who knows—you may be recognised?"

to be unkind. We won't talk of such things now. Only, Joan, can't you see how it scares me to hear you talking of going up to the Manor after all!"

"In this dress, Aggie, which I say will make all the difference in the world! Listen, Aggie! I will try it on when it is aired and brushed out. It's awfully stiff with damp now. You shall see me in it, and then say if I still look the least bit like—Joan Sunderland!"

"Your face, Joan——"

"Oh, you don't understand, Aggie! I'm going to make up—for the first time in my life! You've got to understand, Aggie, all those boys and girls, and their fathers and mothers, will be making up to-night. It's like getting ready to act on the stage!"

"Yes, and a nice part you will be acting! I'll have nothing to do with it, Joan! My advice is—stay here!"

But Joan, with a smiling shake of the head in dissent, was even then arranging the various garments in front of the fire, to dry and soften them with the heat.

"The time now?" she almost gaily questioned, glancing at the clock on the mantelshelf. "Three! Oh, I have heaps of time. I don't intend to get to the Manor until eight. They'll have dined by then."

Five minutes later she strayed to the kitchen window.

"I'll have to wear my gumboots, this evening. Funny combination, Aggie—gumboots and a period dress! Oh, Aggie, don't sulk!"

"You're being a trial, Joan! Look what you did last night—ploughing your way through the snow, up to that Manor House, to peep in at the windows!"

"But there, again, I managed everything successfully!"

"Not quite so well as you may think, Joan! You were tracked back to this house by some of the boys and girls, I know. They'd seen you."

"Apparently. But they only imagined that I had done it, feeling a bit lonesome on Christmas night."

Joan returned to the fireplace and, having felt how well-aired the garments were by now, she took them up to go away with them.

"First rehearsal, Aggie! I'll be down presently, to let you see!"

Even if the old nurse had muttered and frowned angrily, that would not have dampened Joan's sudden daring ardour for the escapade. But Agatha merely gave a disapproving smile; such a smile as Joan had come in for how many times in all her nineteen years!

Not until the girl had gone upstairs, singing her way through the empty, echoing old house, did anything like an annoyed look come to Agatha's face. But then, what a raging look it was!

"Sick and tired of it all, I am!" the woman muttered savagely to herself. "Chuck the whole thing, I would, if it weren't for what I got that Elsie to promise me."

And a few moments later:

"That Elsie! She promised me—yes! But should I be content with just a promise—knowing what she is? Ah, well, I'll be seeing her again, soon. Then I'll get something on account out of her—even if it's only some of the fine jewellery that she is so fond of wearing."

The muttering ended there; but Agatha's thoughts must have continued in that sinister direction, for she retained a brooding, crafty look such as it would have horrified Joan to see.

CHAPTER 4.

Getting Ready

"MRS. DELANE! May we use these old curtains, please?"

"And—Mrs. Delane, please! May we cut up this old hearthrug?"

"Bekas, gorjus! Just ze thing for fancy-dress!"

"What about this, Mrs. Delane?" clamoured another of those Morcovians who were suddenly mobbing round the hostess of Cromlech Manor.

"This bedspread—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You may have what you like, my dears, and welcome! Anything," beamed good-hearted Mrs. Delane, "to help you make a success of our fancy-dress affair!"

"Hooray! Thank you, Mrs. Delane!"

"You're a sport, yes, and I must give you a hug for it!" yelled Naomer, suiting the action to the word. "And now, everybody—queek, queek! Bekas, no time to waste!"

"That there isn't," cried Polly gaily. "Come on, girls! Let's get busy!"

"Yes, wather! Owp—gow!"

"Zen don't tread on my tablecloth, Paula," protested the imp very excitably. "Hooray, I'm

going to make a grand patent dress out of this; a gorjus dress! I shan't want any help—"

"Oh, won't you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Betty and others knew only too well how much self-reliance their dusky chum was likely to exhibit, in regard to the devising of something to wear for to-night's grand display.

Of all the amateur theatricals which Naomer had taken part in, at Morcove School, never yet had she managed to see to her own costume unaided.

"And we don't know that you are going to have that chenille tablecloth all to yourself, either!" Polly remarked, suddenly twitching it away from Naomer. "We may see some better use for it!"

"What! Sweendle! Bekas, I found him!"

"Rabbits, kid! We are going to put all the things together—of course we are! And then arrange!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!" chortled Paula, who had private ambitions in regard to that chenille tablecloth. "I think it will be found that the chenille will just suit me, as—"

"Oh, no," said Polly sweetly. Having draped the great square of green chenille about her figure, she was already fancying herself in it. "I'm going to be something in this! A Russian Empress, circa—"

"Yes, you look as eef you had come out of a circus, you do," Naomer derided her teasing chum. "Hark, though! Bekas, what ze diggings!"

Now that they had returned to an upper floor of the Manor House, the joyous batch of girls could hear loud guffaws coming from a certain guest-chamber at the far end of the corridor.

"It's the boys," Polly stated the obvious. "Getting their fancy-dress togs ready."

"What are they going to be, each of them?" Helen Craig lightly inquired. "Have they said?"

"Not they!" Polly grimaced, as if their secrecy were a most reprehensible thing. "But they're not going to get the better of us!"

It certainly was a most varied, and therefore promising, medley of old clothes, faded curtains and other lumber-room stuff which the girls had routed together.

Set out for some picking and choosing, in a bedroom that was to serve the girls for terrific industry with scissors, needles, and thread, the multi-coloured oddsends did not leave much space for moving about.

"Talk about a Bargain Basement," laughed Madge.

Then there came a tap at the door, and it was Dolly Delane, ready to drop under a load of stuff which she wanted to add to the common stock.

As the daughter of the house, Dolly had been delving into likely corners known only to herself, with results that now gained her an applauding cheer from Betty and Co.

"Bekas, ze good old Doormat!"

It must not be supposed that this was an allusion to a doormat brought along by Dolly, as likely to be of service. A doormat there may have been, for Dolly had not been particular.

But "Doormat," with a capital "D," meant Dolly herself—as she had been fondly dubbed by the chums of Study 12, when she was a day-girl at Morcove.

"So now we're all right!" Polly exulted.

"Yes, wather, bai Jove! And, geals—er—this chenille—"

"Leave it alone, Paula! Here is something you can wear," the madcap sweetly suggested to

that chum whose leg was so often pulled. "This tea-cloth—"

"What-a-at!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now, look here, everybody! Bekas, first of all let me pick and choose what I want, and zen—"

"Out of the way!" requested Polly, and she elbowed the dusky one so vigorously that—of course—Paula got tripped off her balance.

Madcap and imp found the sight of Paula, all asprawl amongst the tumbled draperies and such like, too tempting.

They began to heap odds and ends upon her. Betty and others gaily joined in, and altogether it was a riotous hubbub which was interrupted by a loud banging at the door.

Then the merry-makers stopped their noise.

"What do you want?" Polly called out.

"Have you girls," inquired her brother, from outside the crowded room, "got such a thing as a tablecloth?"

"A green one?"

"Yes, green'll do nicely!"

"What do you want with it?"

"Oh—we just want it!"

"Well, you can't have it!"

"No, bekas—"

But already mirthful Polly was ready to strike a bargain. She called out:

"You can have a nice tablecloth, Jack, if you'll tell us what you boys are each going to be, to-night!"

"Not much!"

"Oh, all right then; buzz off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Jack hit the door again—bang!

"Aha, you in there!" he said exultantly. "You wait! Think you are going to outdo us chaps, do you? You'll see some sights, by-and-by!"

"No doubt we shall," Polly retorted sweetly.

"Sights! And you needn't take any tr-r-ouble, if you only want to be—sights!"

"Miaow—miaow!" said Jack, going away.

Then Polly, glad of the excuse, whipped open the door to give chase. But she did not succeed in glimpsing those preparations which were going forward in the boys' makeshift studio. Jack dashed into that room and slammed the door in Polly's face—just in time!

So Morcove was kept in tantalising ignorance of what Grangemore contributed to the Boxing night array of fancy dresses.

In return, the girls refused to breathe a word to the boys, when tea-time came, about the wonderful creations which Morcove meant to have to its credit.

Jack and his chums dashed upstairs again as soon as they had swallowed their cups of tea. Then Betty and Co. went storming back to their work-room. Only a couple more hours, now, in which to get everything ready! With panicky haste was some of the final cutting-out, and stitching, and trying-on, disposed of by the girls.

But if they were frantically busy, they were also in great delight all the time. Many a peal of laughter from the girls' work-room answered those loud guffaws which came, every now and then, from the boys' department.

Meanwhile, parents and other grown-ups were also pursuing secret activities. Not to enter heart and soul into the special "stunt" for Boxing night would have been a defection of which no adult guest wished to be guilty. And many an elderly brain had been racked for ideas.

As for Elsie Headlam, she had proved to be the one guest who had come prepared for a fancy-dress ball.

All she had to do was to put on, at dressing-time, that bought creation which had helped to fill one of the numerous trunks that had journeyed with her to the manor, several days ago.

Even so, "Miss Airs and Graces" was as much occupied in her bed-room, between tea-time and seven o'clock, as if she had had to contrive something.

At five to seven, Judy and Madge rustled past the Headlam girl's door, and they nudged each other and smiled, guessing what conceited poings and pirouettes were taking place in front of a full-length mirror.

"Are we first, then?" Madge exclaimed, on the way downstairs with Judy.

"Seems like it! Yes, I think we must be!"

They saw the hall below in a deserted state, with its fire made up for the evening with big oak logs. Judy was "Old Mother Hubbard," and it was wonderful to see her in that famous rôle. Madge, with equal success in "making do," had become transformed into a Spanish gipsy girl.

There was just time for them to warm their hands at the jolly fire, and then they heard a medley of voices and loud laughter, heralding the descent of numerous other characters, in one great flock of multi-coloured, freakish attire.

Down they came, affording Madge and Judy a most entrancing spectacle. They laughed to see a certain bank manager looming large as "Julius Cæsar." Madge's own father had become "Oliver Cromwell" with breastplate and high leather boots. Pam's lovely mother was an Indian rance—all shawls and blazing jewels. Mr. Willoughby was the rajah, and a finer-looking potentate the East could not have produced.

Then there were adults who were so diffident about their success with bath-robots, coats turned inside out, and other improvisations, that they hung back in the half-landing, roaring with laughter at one another.

But the girls! By ones and twos they came down, in the greatest state of merriment. Polly—she was a realistic specimen of a policewoman—looking ready to keep everybody but herself in order.

Betty was "Red Riding Hood," and Helen Craig a "Puss in Boots." Then Naomer jumped upon the scene as a goliwog, in striking contrast with Tess, who had become a hospital nurse.

It seemed just as well, too, that there was to be a nurse available, for Paula Creel, as a fairy queen, gave signs of swooning when the goliwog made a skittish rush at her.

They had made a Redskin squaw of Dolly Delane, in which character she was a bit of a Doormat still, for she was wearing one as part of her picturesque raiment. And Pam, by doing things to one of her party frocks, had contrived to appear as "Little Bo-Peep."

Thus, the hall filled up, with continual bursts of laughter and clapping, and the bestowal of praise and jocular comment. What a scene it was already! Yet some of the best, from a humorous point of view, were still to come. The boys!

"Oh, look!" the shout suddenly went up. "Look at Jack—ha, ha, ha!"

"Say, boys!" drawled a "cowboy" Jack, as he swaggered to join the throng, rolling one of his father's unlighted cigars in the corner of his mouth. "Of all the dog-gone pants this yer guy's ever had to wear— Whoa!" he addressed his hearthrug leggings, as they showed signs of coming down. "No, sirree, no you don't!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, but look at Dave—a lawyer! Bravo, Dave! The wig, too—ha, ha, ha!"

It was a good choice of character for Judy's

quiet and studious brother. Dave was no killjoy; but Morcove could never imagine him in the rôle of fun-maker.

He was followed downstairs by Jimmy Cherrol, who deserved more attention than he got. Jimmy's was not at all a bad representation of a Chinaman, with a ropelike moustache and pig-tail. But before there had been time for a good look at him, another calling-attention yell went up.

"Bekas—look at Tubby! Ooo, hooray, gorjus! Come on, Tubby!"

"Ha, ha, ha! But what is he?" was the wondering chorus.

The corpulent Grangemoorian, waddling forwards from the foot of the stairs, was most strangely dressed. It was hard to tell whether he was supposed to be man or woman!

It was certainly a borrowed skirt that swathed him from waist to knees. But above the skirt he wore a sort of sleeved jacket, weirdly adorned with stripes, and on top of his cannon-ball head there was a round fur cap, with a woolly knob.

"And why," asked Polly—"why is he pretending to eat a candle!"

"Yes, what ze diggings!"

"Eskimo," said Tubby, smiling fatly.

"Oh!"

The clapping was none the less hearty for being a bit belated.

"Say, pard," cried the cowboy, "where's your igloo?"

Tubby glanced himself down concernedly, fearing that he must have come away from the studio without a necessary part of his typical dress.

As there were those who had a vague idea that an igloo was an Eskimo's dwelling-house, the roars of laughter came again.

Then, to everybody's surprise, Mr. Headlam came downstairs simply as himself! He had become such a popular member of the Christmas house-party, and had so done his utmost up till now to enter into the Yuletide fun, it was instantly feared that he must be indisposed.

"No, no," he hastily assured his fellow-guests, with a sober geniality. "I am perfectly well, thank you, and I had intended to take part, as you know; but, somehow, when the time came to get ready—well, there, I just didn't feel like it. I hope you will excuse me."

Sympathetic murmurs answered him. There was the general realisation that an abiding sorrow, about which he never spoke, must be the reason.

"And how can my staying out of the show make any difference!" he smiled in his courtly way. "When it is such a wonderful array of costumes! Excellent! Ah, and here is my Elsie."

She came, with the stately air of a queen in a play, down the old oak staircase; Cleopatra, complete to the minutest detail!

That she was certainly a most lovely figure, nobody was going to deny. But Morcove could not forget that it was a bought costume. Making allowance for that, she was by no means more entrancing than Paula or Pam.

This was the opinion of Betty and Polly and many others. It may have been Elsie's own opinion, too, for she seemed to become a very sulky Cleopatra.

Her handsome eyes conferred slighting glances upon those Morcovians who rivalled her for sheer loveliness. As for the comedy characters—Cowboy Jack was given to understand by a look that he needn't expect to dance with her to-night! And Tubby, perseveringly pretending to eat

tallow, came in for a most disdainful glance that should have wilted him, but didn't!

The gong whang'd, and then there was a getting into most ill-assorted twos and threes, to go into dinner. What roars and peals of laughter there were still! To see Cowboy Jack giving his arm to Policewoman Polly was a scream in itself.

"Hi, Tubby," the goliwog hailed him; "bekas, something better to eat than a jolly old candle now. Stick him away!"

"How's the waistband, Tubby?" asked Jack.

"Bit tight," said Tubby, starting for the dining-room with the evident intention of making it tighter still.

"Well, Jimmy!" Pam smiled, finding John Chinaman close at hand. "I like the sleeves!"

"Don't think I'd better sit next to you at dinner," Jimmy mumbled, suffering badly from his shyness. "Shan't know how to keep this moustache out of the soup."

"Oh, you can tie it behind your neck, Jimmy."

"Had I better go upstairs and change out of all this?"

"No! Why?"

"Oh, I feel—I dunno!"

Pam laughed.

"Silly boy! But so do I!"

"You!" he gasped. "I say, Pam, it's as if a stage costumier had made that Bo-Peep dress of yours. You look—you look—like one of those china shepherdesses you see in old curiosity shops."

"On the shelf?" she took him up, her eyes twinkling. "All dusty—"

"Sorry!" he blurted. "I meant to pay you a compliment, really, but—oh, dash!" as his moustache fell off. "Here, I'm off back upstairs. Er—excuse me, Pam—"

But she checked him by simply touching his elbow with a small hand.

"You might keep the moustache off for dinner," she remarked serenely. "I don't mind! But don't we," she rippled, taking a glance round the big dining-room, "look an extraordinary collection!"

"Yes, wather, haw, haw, haw! Hallo, Pam dear, so theah you are again!" the Fairy Queen chortled. "Bai Jove, Jimmy, you look—"

"Awful—I know I do," Jimmy agreed.

Meantime, the Eskimo, having found his customary seat—next to Naomer—was spreading a serviette over fat knees, the short skirt failing to cover them.

Altogether it was a most hilarious sitting down to another sample of Cromlech Manor's Christmas cheer. The dinner went off quickly and gaily, and then came all the increased merriment of the withdrawal, comic characters jostling back to hall and drawing-room along with the more decorative ones.

"Mr. Headlam—do!" cried Betty, indicating a place for him in the Morcove circle, out in the hall. She had observed him moving about like one in a dream; not unsocial, but upset. Cleopatra had gone to the drawing-room, disdainful the more rough-and-tumble scene which the hall presented.

"Ah, thank you, my dears," he smiled, coming to sit amongst the juniors. "I still feel half-ashamed of not having dressed up; but—"

"Mr. Headlam, you mustn't let it trouble you!"

"Wather not, bai Jove! We quite understand, yes, wather!"

"You do, do you?" he returned, with a touch of sadness in the retained smile. "Ah, I wonder!

But I mean to look in upon you, presently, when you have all started dancing. It will be a wonderful scene—a memorable night for you boys and girls."

"No mistake, we're having a grand time!" Helen declared gaily. "If everybody else has enjoyed Christmas, this year, as much as we have!"

Rat-tat-tat at the outer door of the hall, and then the bell—*ting, ling, ting-ling!*

"Why, who is that, then?" A half-dozen of the dressed-up juniors emitted that startled cry whilst they and their companions all jumped up.

"Ooo—queek, queek! Bekas, perhaps eet is somebody who has lost his way!"

There was a general surging towards the hall door. Betty was the first to reach it. She had only to twist the knob and the door could be drawn open.

With most of her chums crowding around she pulled the door wide open, and then

"Oh!"

At the manor's threshold, with the snow and the darkness behind her, was someone in fancy dress, a most lovely young lady, looking just as if she had stepped out of the Long Ago to attend the evening's revel!

"I—s—s—say!" was Morcove's long-drawn-out cry of amazement and delight.

"Bai Jove!"

"Bekas—what ze diggings?"

"Good-evening!" the visitor voiced rather breathlessly.

"You did want me to come if I could, didn't you?"

"What!" the juniors yelled. "Joan Sunderland!"

"Yes," she shyly nodded and smiled. "Joan Sunderland, if I may be allowed in? Because I have so wanted to join you all, and I found I could manage—after all!"

"My dear!" cried Mrs. Delane, who had hustled forward in great eagerness to accord a hostess' welcome. "Now that you are here—oh, you must make a night of it! We might have slept you the night, you know! And you must have some refreshment, anyhow, after walking here!"

"The dining-room, Joan?" was Dolly Delane's equally hearty cry. "Or at the fireside out here? Just as you please!"

"Yes, bekas we can wait on her! Tubby and I—hi, Tubby! Queek, you are ze one!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was so amusing to see the Eskimo having



Creeping close, Joan bent over Mr. Headlam, looking down into his face; and the light of tenderness and sorrow in her eyes made Dolly Delane wonder. . . .

CHAPTER 5.

Welcome, Joan

"JOAN! Oh, but come in, of course—"

"Yes, yes, Joan!

We'll let Mr. and Mrs. Linton know!"

"How splendid, Joan—"

"Gorjus! Bekas, we have been thinking about you."

"And what a dweess, Joan, bai Jove! Geals, geals—"

"Marvellous! How on earth, Joan, have you—"

"Ah, bah, never mind about zat now!" Naomer's shrill voice overrode all others. "Bekas, has she had dinner? Bekas, she must have dinner!"

But Joan Sunderland, now that she was across the threshold, mobbed about by guests of all ages, hastened to say:

"I have had all I want, thank you. And I don't intend to stay more than an hour or so—"

to become on the instant, a waiter, under the orders of Naomer to ply Joan with catables.

The news had spread to the drawing-room, and now the hall became more crowded than ever. Everybody wanted to get a look at the surprise arrival for the party, to admire her fancy dress, and to convey delight at her having turned up like this.

Betty and Co., being nearest to her at the fire, come in for most of her remarks; but it was soon known to all that the wonderful dress was one that had been discovered at the old house down the valley.

"The genuine article," Mr. Willoughby said to his wife. "A real find, that!"

"And how gracefully she wears it," Pam's

mother responded. "A charming girl, altogether."

"A caretaker's daughter, isn't she?"

Mrs. Willoughby turned round to the owner of the sneering voice which had spoken just behind her. Cleopatra, in all her purchased finery, was curling a lip as she eyed Joan Sunderland from half the hall away.

"Why should you say it like that?" Mrs. Willoughby remonstrated. "As a matter of fact, the young lady—"

"Young lady—puh!" And Cleopatra, with a shrug of her narrow shoulders, sauntered off.

"How I do detest that Headlam girl!" the Ranee said to her Rajah.

"Envy, my dear, that's all—pure envy!"

AND now "Miss Pompadour," as somebody had admirably dubbed Joan Sunderland, had finished her slice of Christmas-cake and drunk her glass of ginger-wine.

In the room used for dancing the gramophone had started, and guests were now going in.

"Meet my brother, Joan!" cried the Policewoman, bringing Cowboy Jack to be formally introduced. "He wants a dance, but is too shy to ask!"

Shy! There was very little shyness about Jack. He could be seen keeping Joan on the laugh with a lot of his usual nonsensical chatter as he took her to the ball-room.

A few seconds later, Miss Pompadour was going round the floor with the Cowboy, and although they looked a strange pair, they were no stranger than many another couple. The Golliwog and the Eskimo, for instance! Or John Chinaman and Bo-Peep!

"I just can't get over the joy of Joan's turning up after all," Red Riding-Hood said to the Hospital Nurse. "Can you, Tess?"

"It's made the evening ten times jollier, Betty. I wish we could get her to stay the night."

"She won't do that; we've tried her. But we're going to keep her as late as possible, and then one of the boys will see her home."

"Dances perfectly!"

"Yes; something else Elsie Headlam to be jealous about! You know, I believe Cleopatra is the only one who hasn't spoken to Joan!"

"That doesn't seem to be troubling Joan," smiled Tess. "She's happy, Betty."

"She is—ever so happy!"

They all saw her, at different moments during the next half-hour or so, thoroughly enjoying herself. Old and young alike were eager to dance with her. The Eskimo and Cowboy Jack almost fought for possession of her at the start of a one-step, and the Policewoman was called in to settle the disturbance. But Polly referred the dispute to the Lawyer, who settled it by promptly dancing with Miss Pompadour himself.

Later on, however, she was to be missed from the floor. That was when Dolly Delane, whilst getting a dance with the "rage" of the evening, chummily talked of life at Cromlech Manor.

"If you're going to stay on down there at Skerrington, Joan, we ought to see a good deal of each other. For I live here, you know."

"And what a lovely old house it must be—different from Skerrington," Joan murmured, dancing on with Dolly. "So bright and jolly!"

"Oh, it isn't always like this! But we Delanes are proud of the place. Some time, I must show you over it."

"I should love to see what it's like. Couldn't we slip away now?"

Dolly was the last girl in the world to demur to such a wistful suggestion as that. So they slipped away in the middle of such a favourite quick-step none of the other dancers had a chance to notice the half-stealthy retirement.

Again and again, as Joan went with the daughter of the house all over the great old building, she exclaimed in delight at what she was being shown. Upstairs, one or two of the guest-chambers that Morcove had were looked at, then the Squaw and Miss Pompadour came down again, to go to the huge, raftered kitchens, where the staff was at supper.

After that, Dolly had the drawing-room to show to Joan.

"Perfect! There's nothing like this down at the Old Hall. But I expect the gentleman who has brought it will be making lots of improvements."

"And I must show you what we call the library," Dolly sparkled on, "although it's mostly used as a smoke-room by the men. There's rather a fine old bookcase that dad picked up. This way, Joan!"

Then, as they came to the threshold of the library, at the end of a ground floor passage, Dolly became hesitant about their entering.

She had expected to find the library empty on such a gala night as this, but one guest was there—Mr. Headlam.

He was sitting in his chair with his eyes closed, and his hands were folded in his lap—a strange picture of repose at a time when all other guests were so full of life.

"Look, Joan," Dolly whispered, "there's the bookcase."

But Miss Pompadour, for once, was not interested. Her starry eyes were regarding the fatherly-looking gentleman—a guest who had not "dressed up" for the evening, but had simply changed into evening clothes.

"Sh!" the Squaw cautioned merrily. "That's Mr. Headlam—such a dear; we all love him."

"He's asleep!" breathed Miss Pompadour.

Dolly nodded that she thought he must be.

"Other evenings, Joan, he has entered into all the fun—if only for his stepdaughter's sake. But he has been feeling down about something, to-day. Perhaps he didn't sleep well last night, because of the same grief that seems to come over him at times."

Joan Sunderland stood mute and still, agaze at the dozing figure in the chair. To Dolly, it seemed as if this Joan must be a very tender-hearted young lady; she looked so terribly sorry for Mr. Headlam.

At last:

"If he's asleep," Joan whispered, "we might go in?"

"If you wish, certainly."

On tip-toe the Squaw and Miss Pompadour advanced into the library. The lights were off; there was only the fitful gleam from the fire.

Dolly's noiseless footsteps took her across the carpet to that side of the room where the bookcase stood, and she quite supposed that her new-made acquaintance was tip-toeing after her, just as softly.

"Real Chippendale, Joan."

"Is it?" whispered back Joan, without looking at the lovely bookcase.

She was not as close behind Dolly as the latter imagined.

She was in the middle of the room, standing turned towards the man in the chair.

He had not stirred. Once he had sighed, as if

about to come out of his doze, and then his breathing had gone on as steadily as before. So it seemed to Joan as if the sigh had been due to sad thoughts invading his mind, even in sleep.

Suddenly she took a quick, silent step or two that placed her close to him, in the chair. She bent over, looking down into his face.

Dolly, over by the bookcase, turned round. And she was just in time to see Miss Pompadour drop a light kiss upon Mr. Headlam's greying hair.

"WHAT made you?" Dolly softly asked as she and Joan passed from the library, still on tip-toe.

"Oh, don't ask me," was Joan's only response.

Back at the doorway, she paused, looking back at the undisturbed sleeper, and Dolly, marvelling once again at the tender look in her companion's eyes, was moved to a whispered comment:

"How strange that you should feel so sorry for him. We have pitied him at times; but then, we have had the opportunity to realise what sort of a life his must be. Of course, he is wealthy, but money isn't everything. You seem to have felt instantly that he has some big sorrow on his mind."

Joan Sunderland sighed.

"Don't tell him what I did just then," she entreated, still looking back at Mr. Headlam from the doorway.

"Why not? It was—good-hearted of you, Joan."

"Oh, but I wouldn't like him to know. And now," with a forced smile, "shall we go back to the others?"

Dolly nodded eager assent.

"About Mr. Headlam," she continued; "his stepdaughter isn't always as nice to him as she might be. Yet he does everything he can to give her a happy life. She has only to ask and he—"

As abruptly as that the subdued voice broke off. Dolly and Joan, at the hall end of the passage, were suddenly face to face with Elsie Headlam.

In her Cleopatra finery she looked more contemptuous than ever, mistaking a kind of haughty insolence for a "queenly" air. And she was put out—biting a lip in vexation.

"Here, have you seen my stepfather?" she asked Dolly, as if the latter were worse than a servant about the place.

"Why, yes; he is in the library—alone, and fast asleep in a chair, so I wouldn't disturb him."

"Wouldn't you?" The fact that Joan Sunderland had tactfully hastened away, was causing Elsie Headlam to be even more supercilious towards Dolly.

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it—and you can put it on the bill, with all the rest," came the sneer.

"I only meant it kindly by Mr. Headlam—what I said," Dolly gently submitted. "He's tired, I fancy—"

"So am I, come to that, and bored stiff," cut in Cleopatra, patting back a yawn. "And I'm going up to my room, that's why I want to say good-night to him—if you have no objection, eh?"

"Oh, don't be silly!" Dolly could not help protesting. "But are you really going up now? I'm afraid you can't have enjoyed the party, so far."

"Have any of you wanted me to enjoy it?" was the fierce retort. "Asking that caretaker's girl to spend the evening here! I consider you

have all gone out of your way to insult me, so there!"

"You are a guest, so I won't answer you," Dolly said, and went quickly to rejoin her chums and Joan.

They were all in the ball-room, where gaiety was at its height. Such a brilliant scene it was, and so good-natured all the fun that filled in short intervals between the dances; Dolly Delane could not help thinking: How petty that Headlam girl's attitude! Talk about cutting off one's nose to spite one's face! Just because Joan Sunderland had come to the ball, Elsie Headlam had gone to bed!

But had she?

If she had, then who was it, half an hour later, changing out of a queenly fancy dress, behind the locked door of her bedroom, to put on ordinary day attire?

Who was it who, afterwards, put on an outdoor coat and slipped her stocking feet into gum-boots, donned a dark hat and gloved her hands against the bitter cold—and then unlocked the door, to creep out as stealthily as a thief in the night!

If this was not Elsie Headlam, sneaking down by a little-used back staircase—then who was it?

For someone there was who did all this, letting herself out by a side door into the starry darkness of the frosty night.

The deep snow had acquired a frozen crust. It broke like glass under the plodding feet—crunch, crunch!

Cromlech Manor, full of light and warmth, kept on with its Boxing night revels. Music and dancing, and scraps of fun and frolic, and the passing round of sweets, the pulling of more crackers; young and old alike enjoying themselves to the full. Joan Sunderland, enjoying herself for this one night, at least.

But Elsie Headlam—where was she? In bed? Or was this Elsie Headlam, floundering down the valley road that led to Skerrington Old Hall—and no one to be any the wiser when another day had come!

CHAPTER 6.

Back Again

"GIRLS, I really must be going now!"

"Oh, no, Joan!"
"Bekas, what ze diggings, zere is supper at ten o'clock!"

"It's awfully kind of you all," Joan Sunderland said fervently. "But you know that Agatha is all alone at the Old Hall. I mustn't be selfish and leave her too long by herself, in that grim old house."

"Very well then," Betty voiced Morcove's reluctant consent. "But what you should have done, Joan—you should have brought that old nurse with you!"

"Yes, wather, bai Jove!"
"Ah, that was out of the question," pleaded "Miss Pompadour," with a half-sad smile. "I'll get my things on now, and say good-night to Mr. and Mrs. Linton, then slip away."

"My brother and I are going to see you home," Judy Cardew remarked. "We'll be out here in the hall, ready, when you are."

"Oh, why should I drag any of you out of doors! It seems such a shame!"

"Judy and Dave want to do it," Betty smiled. "And we certainly wouldn't let you go alone. They'll soon be back and able to join in all the fun again."

"Bekas, we are going to keep eet up till two in ze morning—yes!" shrilled Naomer. "What ze

diggings, three in ze morning! In fact, all night—hooray! What do you say, Paula?"

What Paula said was a terrific: "Owp!" as her fairylike dress became a good deal disarrayed, owing to one of Naomer's affectionate onslaughts.

That was one of the last things to make Joan's eyes sparkle amusedly, before she was out in the snowy darkness with Judy and Dave. Her last minute or two, full of many more good-byes than she had expected to exchange, had been quite emotional on her side.

Almost Morcove could believe that she was on the verge of tears, at having to leave now. And Dolly, who knew what had happened in the library, did not fail to notice that "Miss Pompádour" drooped her head and became agitated as she passed Mr. Headlam, where he stood amongst other menfolk to see her go.

His courtly "Good-night, young lady!" mingled with the chorus of farewell murmurs; but Joan did not devote a special parting glance to him.

"Feels a little embarrassed now," Dolly thought to herself, "of what impulse made her do, in the library. But she needn't be. It was sweet of her, really; it shows the girl she is!"

CRUNCH, crunch! through the frozen snow went three pairs of feet that, only a few minutes since, had been fox-trotting round the dance-floor. Crunch, crunch!—down the valley road, Joan Sunderland being the one to set a rapid pace.

She wanted to hurry, for her companions' sakes. Had she been alone, then, in spite of the darkness and the solitude of this wintry scene, she would have dawdled.

To have gone back slowly to Skerrington Old Hall would have seemed, in a way, like prolonging the night's thrilling adventure. In spirit, at least, she would have been still at the manor.

But she had Judy and Dave with her, and she wanted them to be kept away from the rest of the gaiety for as short a time as possible.

"How I wish we could have kept you all night," Judy exclaimed towards the end of the trudge. "It seems like Cinderella come true—your having to go back to that gloomy old house, after all the fun it's been!"

"But Joan can come up to the manor in the morning," Dave quietly rejoined.

"Can I? Don't imagine anything of the sort," she laughed. And then she sighed. "Oh, no. I have had—my treat. As you say, I'm like Cinderella!"

"If you don't look us up, we shall come and call for you," Judy chummily threatened. "Oh, and that reminds me. We're going to get some skating on a flooded meadow which we have heard about, close to the Old Hall."

"An ice carnival would be the thing," Dave murmured. "After dark, one evening, with lanterns and torches."

"Lovely!" Joan cried. "Yes—after dark, I might manage that."

"Why, are you afraid to be out by day?" Judy joked. "I should have thought it would be the other way about with you, Joan."

"Do most of the guests stay on for New Year's Eve?" she asked gently. "When do the Headlams leave?"

"Oh, Elsie Headlam would like to be off back to town to-morrow—we know that," was the answer. "But her stepfather is saying it is unfair to cut short the visit. How different her nature is from his! That's because she is only his stepdaughter. If only he had had a daughter of his own— But," Judy sharply broke off, stopping dead to peer the better across the night-

bound wastes, "Dave—Joan—over there! Can you see someone flitting about?"

"Out there on that waste land?" Joan exclaimed, amazed. "Yes, it is someone. Goodness! Hard enough work for anyone, plodding along this road! The drifted snow, over there on the open fields, must be awful in places!"

Dave had run to the low snow-capped hedge. "There she goes—plunging down into a hollow!" he exclaimed. "I expect she belongs to the district, and can trust herself to take a cut across the fields, in spite of the snow."

"Somebody going home, I suppose, after a Boxing night party," Judy murmured.

Joan Sunderland murmured agreement. Now the barrack Old Hall was looming into view; a dark mass in the whitened countryside. Not a light was to be seen, and so was it a wonder that her heart was sinking a little?

The change, from Cromlech Manor, with all its lights and music and gaiety, to this desolate old house, only furnished as to three rooms, the rest stark and icy cold!

Yet though her spirits were ebbing, she stoically appealed to those who had companioned her thus far upon the homeward journey.

"Do turn back, both of you. I'm nearly home now."

"We'll see you to the door," Judy quietly insisted. "We're in no hurry, are we Dave?"

"Not a bit!"

"I'm afraid," Joan sighed, "I shan't be able to ask you in. We have only the kitchen to live in, apart from our two bed-rooms."

"Then we can say good-night at the back door," Judy rejoined, "and perhaps, have just a word with Agatha."

But when, at the back door, Joan had let herself into the house by simply lifting a latch, she came back in a few moments to say that her old nurse must have gone up to bed.

"I'm not surprised, for she must have found the evening long and dull, without me," Joan added. "So good-night, both of you, and thanks ever so for everything! Good-night!"

"Night, Joan!" brother and sister answered together. "See you again soon!"

Their confident belief, that—to be shattered in how sensational a manner!

Judy and Dave turned away from the Old Hall, setting their faces towards that other country house, a mile away, where so soon they would be caught up in all the Boxing Night fun and merriment, whilst Joan, after closing that back door, stood conscious of a deathly silence, broken only by the ticking of the kitchen clock.

THE kitchen fire had been made up as if to stay in against her return at a later hour. On the table a lamp was burning.

At last she took up the lamp and went with it out of the kitchen to the foot of the bare staircase.

Not a sound! Silence and bitter cold possessed the almost empty house.

At one moment she was inclined to call upstairs: "You in bed, Agatha?"

Then she decided to refrain. Pity to call out to Agatha when perhaps she had already fallen asleep.

So, treading softly, Joan mounted to that floor on which she and the old nurse had each a poorly furnished bed-room. Joan's came first, but she stole along, lamp in hand, to Agatha's door, farther down a bare, icy corridor.

At a standstill outside that bed-room door, Joan listened intently, and so sure was she that it

would have been possible to hear the nurse's measured breathing if she were in bed and asleep, the absence of that or any other sound became trying to the nerves.

Impulsively, at last, a hand went to the door-knob and turned it. Joan opened the door a few inches and peered into the bedroom.

Empty!

It was a bewildering surprise for the girl—an astounding state of things.



"Dave—Joan!" Judy suddenly cried out. "There's somebody over there, floundering through the snow!" Joan saw that distant figure, and voiced tensely: "I wonder who it can be?"

Puzzled and vaguely alarmed, she presently went to her own bedroom, setting the lamp upon the cheap chest-of-drawers.

"But where can she be?"

As a sense of utter loneliness often results in a person doing, Joan was talking softly to herself now.

"Out and about in the snow—at this time of night? But why? Unless she has gone to meet me, and we missed each other. Or, perhaps," came the more reassuring thought, "that was Agatha whom Judy and her brother saw, just now? Agatha, seeing that I had those two with me, struck aside? That would be it, I dare say!"

On this theory Agatha should be back at any moment now. Meantime, Joan not only cast off her outdoor things, but decided to change out of her fancy dress into her everyday clothes. She knew that her old nurse had felt provoked by her wearing the old-time dress.

"'Miss Pompadour'!" Joan murmured the title that had been conferred upon her at the fancy dress party.

She was taking a last look at herself in the swing mirror which stood upon the chest-of-drawers, not a vain, admiring look, but one that was half-amused and half-pathetic.

"Anyhow," she smiled, in that half-sad way, "it served my purpose. And no one at the Manor will ever suspect!"

Then, as she made the first movements to divest

herself of the elaborate old frock, a shock went through her.

The little mirror suddenly reflected a face that wore a stricken, horrified look.

"My gold brooch—the one that I used to fasten the dress—where is it!" she gasped dismayedly, with a hand clutched to the front of her bodice. "Lost! Oh, my goodness—I must have dropped it up there at the Manor!"

She dropped down into a chair, overwhelmed by a sense of appalling misfortune. Her eyes became enlarged with their frightened look.

"What can I do about it?" she panted to herself. "What is it going to mean—oh, what an awful thing it will be, if that brooch is found up there at the Manor—found and recognised!"

CHAPTER 7.

Nobody Knows

HARK! That sounded as if Agatha had got back—a faint noise from the region of the kitchen below.

Joan Sunderland got up from her bed-room chair, pulling herself together.

As quickly as possible she took off the fancy dress, more than grieving the while over the loss of the gold brooch, but feeling that she must say nothing to Agatha.

In spite of the girl's haste to change into her ordinary clothes, she was not yet ready to go downstairs when a voice called to her hollowly:

"You in, Joan?"

"Yes, Aggie dear!"

"I wish you'd come down, Joan! There's

something I want to speak to you about—something I—I can't make out."

"I'm just coming, Aggie!"

Another minute and Joan was hastening downstairs again, carrying the lamp. She found her old nurse in the kitchen, warming hands at the poked-together fire.

"Oh, Aggie dear, it gave me such a scare to find you not here when I got in, just now. Did you go to meet me?"

"Oh? No, I haven't been out!"

"You haven't!"

"No," Agatha repeated, looking round whilst she still huddled before the fire. "What made you think that?"

"When I found you hadn't gone to bed, Aggie, it was the only thing I could think. And besides, the boy and girl who came back with me from the Manor—they had seen somebody, or so they imagined, some way off in the snow."

"What do you mean? Where?"

"Oh, just drifting across one of the fields. I wondered, afterwards, if it might have been you."

Agatha received this with a shake of her head. "Twasn't I. Don't know who it could 'ave been. I'm sure!"

"Then, Aggie, what had become of you?"

"You'll soon know. I've had a nice jumpy time of it to-night, in this old house, all alone."

"Oh, Aggie dear, I'm so sorry! Had I known—"

"Ay, well, you would have your own way, Joan! Never mind now. But there was a noise—like from somewhere down in the cellars, and it got on my nerves. Fair scared me stiff, it did. At last I lit a candle and went down to the cellars. I must 'ave been down there, you know, when you came in."

"Taking a look—to see—"

"Ay! For I felt, even with you in the house, I would never sleep a wink to-night, Joan. I felt I must find out what that noise meant—what caused it."

"And did you?"

"No, I didn't," was the frowned response. "And so I want you to come down with me now, Joan."

"Into the cellars?"

"Ay, with the lamp, this time. You can carry it, Joan. We are not going to be waked up in the middle of the night—that is, if we get to sleep—by some nasty horrid noise. Something down there may be going to fall—you know what I mean—sort of worked loose—"

"Yes, Aggie, I get you; but let me go by myself—"

"Oh, no! Two of us, Joan—that's best."

It was said with a smile so unpleasant Joan would have felt, for the first time in her life, a strange aversion from this trusted woman, but allowance had to be made for Agatha's unnerved state. She was a-tremble, shuddery, and in such circumstances even a better-looking woman's smile might have become a rather ghastly leer.

"There, did you hear something then, Joan dearie?"

"No, I can't say I did, Aggie! But it certainly would be as well to take a good look round down there. You are sure that first sound came from the cellars?"

"From underground, Joan—ay. But, do you know, there's more than cellars, down under the house."

"Is there?"

"Ay, you'll see! A door, Joan, and it opens

into a passage. But, come along, and I'll show you."

They left the kitchen's one bit of warmth and, in a passage just outside, went through a side doorway giving on to some cellar steps.

Lamp in hand, Joan went first down the worn brick steps, with grimy, whitewashed walls to right and left. She and Agatha emerged upon the chief cellar, with its cobwebby beams just above their heads.

This was a place that had been put to good use in former days. Recesses had old wine-bins, and there were dusty shelves where possibly food used to be kept in semi-cold storage.

But there was a way into a second cellar, and beyond the cellar a third, and Agatha urged Joan on with the repeated remark:

"Farther in, Joan dearie; farther in. I've been as far as this before to-night. The sound I heard was from much farther along, underground."

"Oh, and here's a door," Joan exclaimed, when they were to the third cellar, "that opens on to something beyond! I say, what a lot of places there are, down here."

"Nothing wonderful, Joan, for such a big old house. I saw that door before, but I haven't been beyond it. Will it open?"

"Yes; if you'll hold the lamp, I can draw back the bolts. Fancy, bolts!" was Joan's thrilled comment, whilst the lamp changed hands. And a few moments later:

"There! The bolts went back easier than I expected. I should have thought they would be quite stuck with rust. Oh, Aggie—the lamp again! Why, here's a sort of underground passage!"

"Really?" Behind Joan as she was, the old nurse was free to grin to herself. "Well, we're going along it, Joan—eh? Now we must be getting to where that sound came from."

"Rather!"

Joan had the lamp again.

"The air must be all right, or the lamp would go out, Aggie. But, oh, what an eerie place this is! There's no brickwork, either—do you notice? Only the chalk through which this underground tunnel was made."

"Anyhow, don't be afraid, Joan. I'm close behind you!"

"Oh, I don't suppose there's anything to be afraid of! I call it frightfully interesting, anyhow. Here's a bend, Aggie—and still it goes on!"

"Does it really!"

"Ah, but I can see the end of the tunnel now. Why, there's another door at the end!"

"Never!"

"But there is, Aggie! Goodness," Joan laughed, excitement quickening her stooping progress along the last bit of the tunnel, "are we in what was a secret passage at one time?"

"Shouldn't wonder, Joan! In the old days, folk as lived in great country houses often had places ready to hide in. They used to get mixed up in political bothers, and—"

"This other door, Aggie; take the lamp again, and perhaps I can manage as before. Yes," Joan panted, as she got one bolt to squeak backwards, clearing the rusty hasp; "we'll open this door, too."

A second bolt, lower down, caused her more trouble; but at last she had it undone and could draw the door open.

Her first look beyond the newly-opened door was taken with the lamp behind her, in Aggie's hand. Then Joan took back the lamp and held it before her as she passed into what proved to be a remote underground chamber.

Its walls were lined with ancient brick, and there were great black beams across the roof, with here and there a massive upright, rising from the uneven brick floor.

"Well!" Joan gasped, standing to gaze around. "Who ever would have imagined it! This must have been a secret chamber, Aggie. I can't believe—"

Joan's voice changed, at this instant, to a wild cry. It was with sudden and increasing terror that she protested:

"Aggie, stop! Oh, Aggie, what do you mean by it! Don't—don't! Aggie, what are you doing!"

WHAT was old Agatha doing, then, that the one whose lifelong trust she had enjoyed was screaming out like that?

What had Agatha done when, presently, she came panting up the cellar steps—alone?

What was this that had happened at dead of night at Skerrington Old Hall, whilst at the manor house the Yuletide gaiety was still in full swing!

With the violence of great haste and an agitation as great, Agatha closed the cellar door, then rushed into the kitchen, but only to supply herself with a lighted candle.

Then she hurried upstairs to her room, there to prepare for immediate flight.

She became fiendishly calm again, during these preparations, and so she was able to do everything like one who meant to leave nothing to chance.

What to wear, what to take with her in a bit of hand-luggage; money to aid her in the flight—she took her time in seeing about all this.

But in a few minutes she was gone from the house, floundering away through the deep snow.

Craftily she set her hurrying feet in those deep footprints which already dotted the earth's white mantle. So she made her way out of the private drive on to the valley road, where there were even more footprints to render any she might leave altogether untraceable.

Like a dark phantom she vanished into the wintry night, and then indeed Skerrington Old Hall was that lifeless building which it had so grimly seemed to be to Betty and Co., when they had gazed at it.

No light anywhere, and soon the kitchen could have been entered and found to be dark and cold, the fire black-out.

Nor was there a sound from anywhere about the place. Above and below—deathly silence; a

(Concluded on the next page.)

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stillness that remained unbroken even when, at last, the wintry daylight came creeping back.

Down here at Skerrington Old Hall, it was only the song of a robin, amongst shrubs growing rankly round the building, that came with the morning light.

And once again, how different; how dreadfully different now, the silence here, from all the happy stir of life at Cromlech Manor, now that another day had come.

Never mind the lateness of the hour at which the fun and frolic had ended, overnight; Cromlech Manor was early astir this morning.

Dolly Delane might think she was going to be down, with her father and mother and the willing servants, long before her chums; but she was mistaken.

Already Betty and others were rushing through their morning toilettes, with a liveliness which caused one of them to remark:

"We don't get up quite like this in the morning, at school—do we?"

"Not quite," Polly was answered by blithe Betty. "Why, listen! There's Paula, in the next room—actually Paula, up with the dawn! And at Morcove she'd still be lying in."

"A morning like this, she certainly would be," laughed Pam, peeping out of window. "It's bitterly cold outside."

"And so—some skating; that's the next item on the programme," Polly cried, tearing a comb through her hair.

"Jolly! But first of all," Betty rattled on, "we'll lend a hand downstairs, won't we—before breakfast?"

"Oh, rather," Pam agreed heartily. "There's going to be an awful lot of clearing up, after last night."

"And so I'm off!" cried Polly, casting down the comb.

This, however, was not to mean her getting downstairs before her room-mates. Polly's usual skittishness induced her to hang about in the corridor, administering playful poundings to other bed-room doors. She even made it her duty to burst in upon Naomer and Paula and treat them to a lively harangue.

"Only just out of bed, Paula! As for you, Naomer—"

"What zo diggings, I can't find my stockings! And I know I left them on my bed!"

"That bed!" snorted Polly. "I should think you had nightmare in the night. Hurry up, anyhow!"

"Not ze bit of eet; bekas, so long as I am down in time for breakfast—"

"Those who are not down, in time to help put the chairs to rights before breakfast, won't get any," the madcap threatened. "Here is one stocking, kid!"

Having found and picked it up, Polly rolled it up, and then took careful aim with it, the intended target being Paula's head, just then bowed over the washbasin.

Biff! the balled stocking smote Paula on the right ear, afterwards plopping into the basin of water. Whereupon the madcap, indifferent to Naomer's indignant cry, backed into the passage, drew the door shut, and scampered along to the stairs.

She overtook Betty and one or two others, going down all a-chatter about last night's party.

"And now—thought so!" Betty chuckled, as they reached the hall. "Here's Dolly, flying around, wanting to do the work of half a dozen. 'Morning, Dolly darling!"

"'Morning, Betty—all of you! Twenty degrees in the night, dad says!"

"Hooray! Ska-ting!"

Polly must have been imagining herself as wearing skates even then, and the oak floor so much smooth ice. She went with skating motions towards that room which had been used for dancing on Boxing night, and which now called for the most tidying.

And then suddenly she pulled up sharply. Those who were coming after her saw Polly stoop to pick up something.

"Hallo!" cried Morcove's madcap, gazing at what she could display on an upturned palm. "Who's lost a gold brooch?"

The others gathered round.

"It's none of ours. Wonder whose it is?"

"One of the other guests must have lost it last night," Betty inferred.

"You take it, Dolly, for the present," Polly said, offering the gold brooch to that good chum.

"And you might put it up on show, somewhere in the hall, for all to see?"

Dolly Delane nodded.

"That's best," she agreed. "And so it will soon be claimed!"

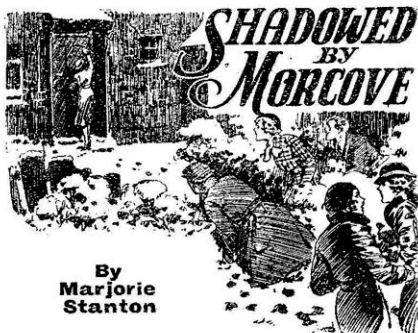
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