

Magnificent LONG COMPLETE MORCOVE Story Inside

The SCHOOLGIRLS' 2nd OWN

No. 777. Vol. 30.
Week ending
December 28th, 1935
EVERY TUESDAY.



All Aboard For Fun
and Excitement
with
Her Harum-scarum
Highness!

See the topping COMPLETE
laughter-story inside.

There Are FIVE ENTHRALLING FEATURES in This Issue

The PHANTOM STRIKES



Christmas at Priors Wold! The Morcove Chums; the Grangemoor Chums; a Strange, Uninvited Guest, and—The Phantom Horseman, That Ghostly Figure Who Descends Upon the Gathering With Startling Suddenness—

Dave Keeps His Own Counsel

POLLY LINTON, coming into the coat-room at Priors Wold, to join Betty Barten in getting ready for going out, exclaimed wrathfully:

"Oh, I do get so wild with Dave!"

"What is it now, dear?"

"He won't tell you anything!"

"Does he ever?" chuckled Betty.

"No! But I do think he ought to say, for once, what's in his mind!"

"You mean, Polly, about this mystery of the Black Rider?"

"Well!" Polly exploded again. "Doesn't it concern all of us who are staying here for Christmas? After all, it does look as if the Black Rider—whoever he is—caused us a nasty upset on Christmas Day. The ruining of all our frocks and other things we'd got ready for our play on Christmas night—that was no joke, Betty!"

"It was not!" Betty agreed, with emphasis. "But in what way has Dave so rattled you, just recently?"—with another smile.

"I happened to say to him: 'More snow in the night.' And then he said: 'Yes—pity.' Now, why should it be a pity?" Polly demanded. "When a fresh fall of snow only makes it better for winter sports!"

Betty, opening a dressing-table drawer to find a fresh handker-

chief, offered this question calmly:

"The Black Rider—is he really the phantom that all the local folk are saying he must be?"

"Phantom!" Polly snorted. "Nonsense! There's no such thing as a phantom, a spook, a ghost—anything like that!"

"Then isn't that why Dave said it was a pity there'd been more snow in the night? More snow, Polly, means that any tracks left by a real horse, ridden by a real man—"

"Of course! I never thought of that!"

"But Dave did, evidently," Betty laughed.

"Then why couldn't he say so!"

"You know Dave by this time, Polly! The more puzzling a thing is, the more likely he is to be the only one of us to rumble the meaning of it all. And the bigger the mystery—the less he has to say."

AGAIN!



Complete
This Week
By
**MARJORIE
STANTON**

"Anyway," the madcap of Morcove smiled grimly. "I'll soon let him know he's not the only one with brains!"

And this plan of action, in regard to reserved Dave Cardew, she put into force as soon as the entire party of juniors had set off from Priors Wold on an excursion that had been discussed overnight.

The girls and boys were going to take a look at a certain lonely old manor house, now deserted and shut up, in which they were feeling strongly interested.

The start-off from Priors Wold was a most boisterous one, with some lively snowballing between the Morcove girls and the Grangemoor boys. But in a little while there was a settling down into steady plodding, and then Polly could roguishly come to Dave's side, as she walked a little apart from the rest—thinking, thinking, as usual!

"Yes," said Polly blandly, "it is a pity, Dave!"

"Eh?"

"The Black Rider visited Priors Wold last evening," Polly casually announced, as if Dave could not possibly have been thinking of this. "And as he must be a real man, not a phantom, he must have left footprints and probably hoof-marks after he'd got back to his horse and ridden away. But there's nothing to be done by any of us now, as it snowed in the night."

Dave shrugged.

"Well, is there—is there anything to be done, Dave? You know very well you've got some theory already."

—No Wonder Betty Barton
and Co's Yuletide Festi-
vities are the Most Dramatic
and Exciting They Have
Ever Known!

"It might be all wrong, Polly."

"It wouldn't be—couldn't!" she quickly resorted to wheedling. "So, Dave—do say what your idea is! The Black Rider is not a spook—we all know that. He was in the house on Christmas Eve, or those Xmas stockings, hanging outside a bed-room door, would never have been moved. He came again, last evening—fell through that snow-covered skylight, as no spook could ever have done! Well, then, who is he?"

"How on earth should I know, Polly?"

"But you've some idea! And if you don't tell me," Polly delivered the ultimatum, "I won't speak to you again over Christmas, so there!"

He laughed.

"I mean it!" she threatened grimly. "So, are you going to, or not?"

"Supposing I can't, Polly?"

"But you can, if only you choose!"

"No, Polly, I really don't think it would be right. Here, we've rather got away from the others, and this looks like a ditch to cross—too wide for you to jump. Let me help you, Polly—"

"No, thanks!"

As frigid as the very snow choking that ditch, was Polly's manner now. Shaking off Dave's hand from her arm, she drew back a pace or two so as to take a flying leap.

Next moment she was over the ditch—had cleared it so beautifully that facetious cheers were given by her brother Jack and other skittish spirits.

"Oh, look out!" Jack cried, in mock terror of his madcap sister. "She's in one of her paddies, boys!"—meaning the girls as well. "Wow!" as a snowball from Polly took him full in the chest. "Now what have I done!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Another general set-to started. Once again progress over the whitened wilderness was held up for large-scale operations.

It was Morcove versus Grangemoor again, with the taking of prisoners by either side. And Morcove felt quite entitled to bury captured Tubby alive in the snow, because Grangemoor had got Bunny Trevor and wouldn't give her up.



Ultimately, what with having wasted so much time and being so breathless after the drawn battle, they found they must hurry on, if they were to get a good look at that empty old house. They wanted to do that, for it was likely to be most fascinating.

Nor were the juniors forgetting that, if Medcombe Manor had been still tenanted at this time, there would have been no uninvited guest for Priors Wold to shelter, this Yuletide.

Tramping on again, some of them fell to talking about that uninvited guest—young and pretty Bella Darrington, who had turned up so strangely one evening just before Christmas.

"I wonder if she would have wanted to come with us to see Medcombe, if she had known we were going?" Pam Willoughby murmured. "She was all for making out, yesterday, that it wasn't worth the fag."

"We ought to have done as we wished, then," said Bunny, "and gone without her, leaving her to turn back. It's only fair for us to keep in with her, to avoid unpleasantness. But we really don't want her with us all the time!"

"Well, we haven't got her with us now," Judy said, with quiet gratification. Like her brother Dave, Judy Cardew had a way of saying little, and of saying that little very earnestly. "Bella set off for a walk before we started."

"I know she did," cried Polly. "And I thought—thank goodness, for that! What does your mother think of Bella Darrington by now, Judy?"

"She thinks she might be nicer to the servants, considering she was made welcome to the place on account of having nowhere else to go for Christmas. I'm afraid she's a girl who doesn't consider others. It looks as if she suddenly made up her mind to spend Christmas at Medcombe Manor, then she found the people had moved from there."

There came an interrupting shout from Polly.

"Why, look, all there is Bella Darrington! And she is coming this way!"

The Manor of Mystery

"Oh, bother!"

"Bekas—sweendle! We don't want her—no!"

But Betty Barton, for one, saw no reason for feeling annoyed.

"Surely she won't be coming with us? Isn't she on her way back to Priors Wold? By the look of it, she is. I suppose she felt she ought to turn out of her way to speak to us."

"She needn't have bothered," said Polly bleakly. "It's a pity some people are so eager to speak—and others aren't!"

Dave came in for a flashed look as those last words were added. And Betty chuckled to herself. She had a correct notion as to how matters stood at present between Polly and Dave!

Now there was a most friendly waving of a hand by Bella Darrington as she came towards them all over the trackless snowfield. Some of the juniors waved in return; but there was nothing like that eagerness with which Morcove always ran to meet a friend.

"She's coming back from the way we're going," Pam commented. "I wonder if she's been to Medcombe Manor?"

A few moments more and Bella reached them.

"Hallo!" she called out very sweetly. "Not going to Medcombe, are you?"

"Yes—why?" Some of the voices which made up the answering chorus were slightly curt.

But Bella Darrington did not appear to sense any dislike. Her manner was that of a well-grown girl determined to be on good terms with the scholars.

"Pity I didn't know," she purred. "I could have gone with you, instead of going alone. I thought you would be tobogganing. You'd have done better to have the toboggans out again. That old manor house is not worth going to see!"

Winningly she added:

"Aren't you going to be kind and turn back with me, now I've met you?"

This caused an awkward pause. Her suggestion, of course, could be taken as a friendly gesture; to Morcove, it seemed only another instance of this girl's wish that everybody should put her first.

"We have been out such a little while," Betty gently demurred. "Still, if you feel lonely, Bella—"

"And afraid of seeing the Black Rider!" Bunny jokingly put in. "Although he doesn't usually ride by day!"

Bella laughed.

"You seem to know a lot about the Black Rider. What else do you know? I'm absolutely mystified about that story of his being seen, these dark winter nights, galloping about."

"Ask Dave," said Polly, by way of another "dig" at him. "He knows!"

"Oh?" And Bella turned so eagerly to Dave, some of the others burst out laughing.

"Something appears to be amusing you," she commented, with a slight edge to her voice.

"We're only laughing," Betty explained, "because it will be wonderful if you do get Dave to tell you anything. He is famous for saying now!"

"But do you know something, then?" Bella appealed directly to Dave bewitchingly. "If the others won't walk back with me, perhaps you will—"

"If you want me to," Dave agreed. "Fraid I shan't be very entertaining company. Polly will tell you—"

But Polly was already walking on, with Bunny Trevor and one or two more who did not mind treating Bella rather brusquely. They felt she had asked for it. In the end, this effusive young lady came in for a big enough escort, however.

It consisted of Pam, Madge, Paula, Judy and Naomer, also Messrs. Jimmy Cherril and Tubby Bloot. Naomer had suddenly decided that it would be just as nice to get back to Priors Wold and have a mid-morning snack, and Tubby was similarly minded.

Betty and the rest pushed on for Medcombe and soon their first sight of the rambling old manor house gave them quite a thrill.

Never in their lives had they seen a gloomier, lonelier-looking dwelling. It was cupped by barren hills, the slopes of which were all the more desolate in their snowy state.

The Munros had not been long gone from the manor, yet already it seemed past ever being occupied again. Very likely it had been in a dilapidated condition when they were there. Many such archaic, lonely, gloomy homesteads are dotted about on the bleak Cotswolds, shut off from the outside world.

Bella Darrington had left footprints in the snow; they were the only tracks, except those made by the hares and rabbits.

The present visitors saw how she had gone in at the shabby entrance to the low-walled grounds and had ploughed her way up to the old stone porch. Then she had wandered all round the house, possibly looking for a chance of entering.

She had found one, too—that was evident. A kitchen window was broken, and a lot of the snow had been knocked off the low sill by the girl's clambering in.

"What an awful place!"

"Creepy!"

But this feeling did not mean that they wished they had been guided by Bella, and had given the place a miss. Far from it!

Eagerly the girls followed Jack, Dave and Tom over the sill of that broken window.

To reach the deeper gloom of the interior was an experience worth having. In connection with the Black Rider, they had all stoutly agreed that there could be no such things as ghosts. But if ghosts there were, then this was the place for them!

There was a chill dreariness about the deserted house that gave it an air of being—haunted! A light laugh from one of the girls came back in the form of a hollow echo.

Right through the decaying building they wandered; upstairs, downstairs. Most flippant of them became hushed, oppressed by the gloomy spirit of the place. In one of the rooms they saw the relics of a fire that had been kindled perhaps by some tramp sheltering here since the last tenants went away.

Those charred remains, lying amidst damp ashes on the old wide hearth were bits of boarding wrenched from the floor itself.

Cobwebs, rat-holes, broken windows and falling ceilings; nothing was lacking to complete the suggestion of an old and lonely house abandoned—forever.

Wanted—A Clue!

"**W**HERE'S Dave?" It was Polly Linton who suddenly voiced that inquiry; Polly, who had talked as if she were not going to have anything more to do with him!

He was suddenly missing from the party, which otherwise was keeping together.

"Hi, Dave!" bellowed Jack.

Eerily came back the faint echoing of the hailing cry, and again the tone of it was so changed that it put a stop to the girls' talk.

"Why doesn't he answer?" Polly demanded impatiently.

"Why should he?" Jack said. "You can't expect to keep old Dave on a string!"

"I don't, at all! It's the last thing—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But he is always so—so strange," Polly said furiously. "He comes with us, and yet—"

"It's all right so long as Dave hasn't fallen down a well," Bunny remarked half-seriously. "I think the whole place is in a dangerous state."

"But I'm glad we came," Betty exclaimed. "It's so romantic!"

"Better outside than in," Tess Trelawney gave her opinion. "I want to come along some other time and do a water-colour. Those mossy old walls—the stone tiles—wonderful!"

"You may think so," grimaced Polly, who had no great sense of the picturesque. "Anyway—"

She was the first to turn to go from this upper room; and downstairs they found Dave calmly standing about outside in the snow. There he was—his manner as puzzling and tantalising as ever; a companionable fellow, really, looking glad to have them rejoining him, and yet with nothing to say!

"Well, have you seen him?" Jack gravely asked.

"Who?"

"The Black Rider, of course!"

"No," Dave answered mildly; "I haven't seen any Black Rider. It's not his time."

This left Polly looking harder than any of the others at Dave's inscrutable face. At last she unpursed lips that had been tightly compressed.



As Polly threw open the door, the chums fell back. The floor of the coat-room was inches deep in water which poured from a dozen different places in the ceiling. Coats and hats were sodden. Was this an attempt to prevent Betty and Co. visiting the manor of mystery?

"But you have seen—something! Oh, don't tell me—"

"He isn't likely to," chuckled Betty.

"Wow, now you've done it," said Jack, for his sister had flung off, keeping to the tracks which Dave had left during some recent wandering round the place alone.

The others, including Dave, went after Polly, overtaking her at some of the old stone out-buildings.

"These are the stables," Betty panted out.

"Yes, here we are," Jack said cheerfully. "This is where the jolly old Black Rider keeps his Also-Ran."

"Oh, funny," said Polly. She was pettish, feeling that she was failing to detect something that had previously left Dave thinking!

She faced round at the stable doorway, almost glaring at imperturbable Dave.

"But it can't be so!" Polly asserted. "There are no hoof-marks, so no horse can possibly have been here!"

"Did I say one had been there?" Dave calmly smiled.

"It isn't what you said! One could wait for ever for you to say anything! It's the way you looked!"

"Sorry," Dave pleaded. "I can't help my looks."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Whoa!" Jack roared, catching Polly as she made as if to "go" for Dave. "Now, Polly-wolly—no scratching! Cats, cats! Oh, come on, boys! We want to get back for some cold turkey and plum-pudding."

He released Polly.

Very comically, too, on the way back to Priors Wold, Polly was alternately keeping away from Dave most pointedly, and then gravitating to his side.

Her curiosity prompted her to try, again and again, to get him to open his mind to her.

But he never did!

Bella Darrington was one of the first to greet them when they all trooped indoors at Priors Wold. She was laughing.

"Well, what did you think of that place? Isn't it awful? I can't think how my friends, the Munros, can have lived there! A good place to keep away from, I think! Dangerous!"

"Why dangerous?" asked Dave, taking off his scarf.

"Oh—well." She seemed to become slightly confused. "The stairs are rotten; the roofs unsafe, I'm sure; and you don't know what nasty pitfalls the snow is hiding."

"I prefer Priors Wold, I must say," jested Bunny. "Not being a spook myself. We thought Medcombe an ideal place for the Black Rider, didn't we? Nice old-world stables!"

She drifted away to discard outdoor things in the large lobby, which had been set apart for hats, coats and gumboots. Some of the others went with her.

Betty stood waiting for Polly, who was looking at Dave—seemingly because he was looking at Bella Darrington, as that elegant young lady stalked to the hall fire to find a light for a cigarette.

It did not please Polly when, a few moments later, she realised that Betty was ready to burst out laughing.

The madcap's annoyance with Dave had evidently been aggravated. Going upstairs afterwards, with Betty, to get a wash before lunch,

Polly was grumpily silent. It was too much for Betty, and a continuance of her best chum's mood caused her, in the bed-room, to laugh outright at last.

"Ha, ha, ha! Really, Polly dear—"

"Oh, don't laugh," stamped Morcove's headstrong scholar. "I want to think! I simply refuse to let Dave be the one to—"

And there she broke off, her brows going up, her mouth forming a round O as if an idea had flashed upon her.

"Whew!" she gasped, after a moment.

"Betty!"

"Well?"

"There were hoofprints at those stables!"

"What! Why you yourself said there weren't!"

"I said I couldn't see any, but there were some—there had been! Now do you get me? No, you don't!" Polly rushed on in rising excitement. "We found no hoofprints because somebody had stepped into them, changing them into foot-prints!"

"You mean, Dave?"

"I don't mean Dave at all," Polly said, sinking her voice to a whisper. "I mean—Bella Darrington!"

Accident or Design?

NOW Betty's brows went up. "Oh!" she gasped. "I—see! She was at the house before us. You think her picking her way about, in the snow, all round those buildings, caused her to step—for comfort's sake—where the snow had already been trodden down?"

"Comfort's sake, nothing!" Polly shrugged. "Although there is that to be thought of, of course. One does, naturally, tread where somebody else has stepped, when there's deep snow. But, Betty—Oh, it's a crazy notion I've got now, and yet—"

"Out with it, anyway!"

"Well, I will! I'm not a Dave Cardew, to be like some wise old owl! Betty"—whispering again—"did Bella Darrington hurry along to Medcombe in advance of this, this morning, so as to remove any trace of—of hoofprints?"

Betty stared incredulously.

"Call me potty if you like," Polly spoke on, "but has Bella something to do with the Black Rider? After all—no one knows anything about her."

"But the story she told—"

"Oh, convincing enough, I admit; but I suppose she could have made it up? Anyhow, we know very well the Black Rider must be a real man on a real horse. It's this district he haunts. And there's that empty house—miles from any other house—which he might use for himself and the horse, and nobody would be any the wiser. Whilst Bella Darrington is taken in by Mrs. Cardew, here at Priors Wold—"

"But why, Polly? Why should Bella be connected with—"

"Why? How on earth can I say? But, remember, it's Priors Wold that the Black Rider is paying such attention to!"

After considering this for a little while in silence, Betty exclaimed:

"What made you think of all this, Polly?"

"Dave did!" was the prompt reply. "He annoyed me by keeping things to himself, and I've done nothing but rack my brains all the morning! And then, just now, down in the hall—he exchanged one remark with Bella. That was

all. But he looked at her. When Dave looks at anybody like that—"

Polly, another idea seizing her, brought her hands together with a clap.

"And now—oh, I see what we must do! I have it, Betty! Steal a march on Dave—how lovely! Serve him right! I like Dave, of course. You needn't grin—"

"I felt sure, dear, you still liked him—just a little!"

"Why shouldn't I? He's my brother's best chum. Oh, yes, Dave is a ripper, really. Only—he does so annoy me! But I'll tell you what we'll do, Betty—we girls, I mean—we'll go again to Medcombe, without the boys. We'll go this afternoon, and stay on till dark!"

"But, Polly—"

"We can easily find an excuse for being back late. In any case, nobody will worry, knowing we are all together. By staying on until it's dark, we may see the Black Rider again!"

"Yet why not tell the boys

—"

"No, Betty. Dave has got to be taught a lesson!"

Polly's eyes were sparkling now.

"We don't want the boys, Betty! If you tell them, I'll never forgive you! Moreover is going to solve this mystery—not Crangemoor!"

"All right. There's the gong for lunch, anyhow. We'll have another talk about it presently."

They had their wash, and after combing their hair, they saw Bella Darrington going into her room, farther along the passage.

Hearing them, she looked round, flashed a winning smile, then sauntered on, humming as if in the best of spirits.

"Always so very nice to us," Betty muttered, going along to the stairs with Polly. "But—we have never really liked her, have we?"

"You said just now that we'd talk about it later," Polly frowned. "My mind is made up, though. If you others won't come with me, then I shall go—alone!"

As if it were likely to come to that! No sooner were they out of the dining-room, after enjoying cold roast turkey and more Christmas pudding and mince pies, than the whole Morcove chummary went into conference.

Excitement was all the greater because Polly, as a rival investigator, seemed to be running a race against Dave; and, of course, Morcove wanted to see Polly win. The proposal to visit Medcombe Manor in secret fashion, later on, was "carried unan."

"And it means we must do a getaway from here rather secretly, or the boys will want to come with us," Betty chuckled. "Better not all go down to the coat-room together."

"Two or three at a time—that's the idea," Polly eagerly approved. "Come on, then, Betty—and you, too, Pam. We three, for a start!"

A minute later, those three were congratulating themselves on having got downstairs without encountering any of the boys.

Better still, familiar voices told them that Jack and his pals had resorted to the billiard-room, where they were amusing themselves with the cues.

On tiptoe now, Betty, Polly and Pam made their way to the temporary coat-room that such a huge Yuletide party had necessitated.

And then, suddenly, they all three went the last few paces at a rush in amazement and alarm.

(Continued on the next page.)

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A curious, inexplicable noise of water dripping loudly had come to them, from the coat-room, whilst their startled eyes beheld water flowing out from under the closed door.

"Goodness, is it a thaw, or has a pipe burst, or what?" gasped Polly.

She, like Betty and Pam, was treading in a pool on the passage floor as she threw open the coat-room door.

Then they all three skipped backwards, for more water came flooding out as the door was opened.

The floor of the room itself was inches deep in water that teemed down from the ceiling in a dozen different places.

And, on its way from ceiling to floor, this cascade was pouring over hats, coats, mufflers, outdoor boots—everything the girls and boys needed for a walk in the snow!

"Gracious!" ejaculated Betty in horror. "Oh, help!"

She flashed about and ran to the billiards-room.

Tubby, at that very moment, was looking like a stranded whale as he lay half-across the billiard-table to pot at a ball. Jack and Tom, whilst waiting for their fat friend to make his great stroke, were fencing with billiard-cues. Dave and Jimmy were chatting.

"I say, quick!" Betty panted. "There's a flood in the house—"

"A wha-a-at!" howled Jack.

"It's coming through the ceiling of the coat-room! And our coats and things are getting absolutely soaked! We don't know what it means!"

"Gee!" cried Jack. "Come on, boys!"

Tubby, his shot spoiled by the dramatic interruption, rolled off the billiard-table. Betty was already darting back to the coat-room.

She found that Polly and Pam had been joined by several of the grown-ups, including Mrs. Cardew. The girls' first horrified outcry had been heard in the lounge hall.

But, even as Betty got back to the scene of the catastrophe, all those grown-ups were running off again. She guessed that they meant to dash upstairs to see what explanation could be discovered there, and whether any emergency measures could be taken.

"Our things!" Polly was stressing the worst feature of the affair. "Soaked! We'll not be able to go out again—oh, bother! What a sickener!"

"The water must have been coming through quite a good while," Pam exclaimed. "It's a bath-room overhead isn't it?"

The boys were now able to realise the full extent of the havoc.

"Boat, ahoy!" Jack shouted. "Oh, boy—ha, ha, ha!"

"Quack, quack!" Tom imitated a duck.

"It's nothing to laugh about!" raged Polly.

But even she was laughing the next moment. Tubby had come along with a billiard-cue, and Jack, seizing it, made pretence of angling for a catch in the lake which covered the coat-room floor.

Meantime, an outcry above stairs helped to make the excitement widespread. Down here, the girls and boys could hear Naomer's shrill yelling on the floor above, and Paula squealed:

"Ow, howwows!"

The next minute was one of wild rushing about. The cause of the disaster had soon been discovered and dealt with. In the bath-room above the coat-room a housemaid's tap had been running water

all over the floor for perhaps half an hour. It had now been turned off, and so all that could be done was to mop up water from the floor above and this other floor beneath.

But how that tap had been left so carelessly running nobody could say. It was not a tap that any guests would use. Nor would any of the housemaids need to draw water from it after their work upstairs had been completed for the day—by eleven o'clock at latest.

Betty and several of her chums were now helping to cope with the flood in the coat-room. Long-handed mops and many a piece of flannel were transferring the water into buckets.

The boys, too, were making themselves useful, although their industry was distinctly negated by Tubby's blindly kicking a bucket over—just when it was filled.

"Oh, out of it!" Polly raved at poor Tubby, menacing him with her mop. "Now knock another over—that's right!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

For Tubby really had knocked over another in his eagerness to evade that mop.

Suddenly one of the housemaids appeared, looking as if she had already lent a hand upstairs. It was that girl, Maisie Turner, whom Morcove liked so much—the one who "did" their rooms every morning.

"Hallo, Maisie!" Betty greeted her. "How's things now, overhead?"

"They've got the worst of it wiped up. Mrs. Cardew told me to come down here and—"

"But it's all right; we can manage!"

"Young ladies, why should you? No!" said Maisie, hastily taking a mop away from Pam. "You leave it all to me now. Dear, dear, the worst damage is down here! All your outdoor things are sopping wet!"

"Yes," Polly said grimly. "When we particularly wanted to go out!"

"I'm ever so sorry," Maisie murmured, setting to work with energy. "Mrs. Cardew seems to think I ought to know how it happened; but I haven't the faintest."

"I hope she doesn't suspect you of carelessness?" Pam exclaimed. Morcove knew that up till now Maisie had stood very well with Mrs. Cardew.

"Oh, no, that's all right, miss! I had only to say, and she took my word for it. But it's a real mystery how it did happen. Almost makes you feel that somebody must have turned the tap on on purpose!"

"Hallo! Oh, what a state you are in, down here!" a girlish voice rippled, and there was Bella Darrington, looking in at the doorway. "I didn't know it was as bad as this! I have been upstairs—"

"Helping?" Polly questioned curtly. She could tell, by Bella's unblemished daintiness, that the young lady had been only a looker-on.

"Well—no. There was nothing I could do! I say, all your coats and hats—soaked! What a shame! I'm so sorry!"

And, lighting a cigarette, she sauntered away. Maisie's homely face resumed its pleasant smile.

"About your wet things—I'll soon get them dry for you!"

"Oh!" Polly for one said in great delight. "Maisie, that's ripping of you! We did so want to go out—"

"Go where?" asked Jack, who had been within earshot.

"Never you mind!" his sister crushed him, so that he retired with a look of pretended terror. Morcove lost sight of him and his pals, and so

the girls might have set off as planned, if only—

"Bother!" Polly still fumed, leaving the scene of havoc along with Betty and others. "Fancy being held up like this!"

"I never knew such a Christmas for accidents that affect us," Betty declared. "The vanished Christmas stockings, then that skylight falling in on all our dresses for the play, so that we couldn't give the show after all, and now—this!"

"This is by far the worst," Polly said, unable to hide her disappointment. "And my belief is—"

Pausing, she looked about to make sure that only her companions would hear.

"If you ask me, girls—she did it!"

"She?"

"Bella Darrington! You and I, Betty, were talking about going to Medcombe again in the bed-room, before lunch. She must have been outside, listening!"

The Voice in the Darkness

"GOODNESS!" Betty gasped. "You mean that she made up her mind to force us to stay indoors? She turned on that tap knowing that the water would leak through to the coat-room below!"

"If she didn't do it, who did?" was Polly's grim argument. "But it won't serve her purpose after all. We're going! Maisie has promised to have all our things dry in a little over an hour."

And that promise Maisie fulfilled.

Ardently the girls thanked her when, in the middle of the afternoon, coats and hats that had received such a deluging were presented to them, quite dry again. Moreover could be off now.

If anything, the girls had even benefited by the "accident"! The boys had gone out together in the meantime, taking it for granted that Betty & Co. intended to stay indoors.

Nor did the girls have any fear that Grangemoor had set off for a second visit to Medcombe at the instigation of Dave.

He and his pals had been seen to leave Priors Wold, taking the toboggans out in the snow.

There was a wonderful change in Polly's spirits now! The sense of stealing a march on Dave was giving her great joy.

At heart she was only his friendly rival over the race to solve the mystery of the Black Rider; but she was none the less a determined rival. Moreover must have the credit, not Grangemoor!

So short were the wintry days at this dead season of the year that the light was already waning by the time the girls again beheld the ruinous old house, lying remote and lifeless-looking in its hollow amongst the hills. Only the whiteness of the landscape kept the feeble daylight from giving place to a cheerless nightfall.



Amid the shadows of the old stables Betty & Co. listened intently. That whispered voice they could hear was not Bella Darrington's. Whose then was it?

Not even the trill of a redbreast broke the dead silence as Betty and Co. closed in very warily upon the range of buildings.

They had taken care to approach by a round-about course which enabled them to keep out of sight of anyone who might be lurking there, and the snow helped them to make a silent advance.

All talk had ceased. Those who led the cautious advance made signals to those who followed, when to check for a moment and when to prowl on again.

One thing several of them noticed during this wary creeping nearer, nearer. No smoke issued from any of the old chimneys to rise lazily into the still, frosty air.

But then, a man so secretly using the old house for his refuge would be hardly likely to risk lighting a fire, except by night.

At last Betty and Co. were all gathered in a tumbledown cart-shed that was one of the most outlying buildings on the place.

The open-fronted shed did not face towards the house, which was fully two hundred yards away. But the girls found that the rough timbers forming the back of the shed offered many chinks through which they could peer, keeping the main building under observation.

They waited, watching and listening intently. All were convinced that they would easily hear the slightest sound.

The stillness of the spot, pent in by the surrounding hillsides, was profound.

They themselves were keeping so silent the ticking of a wristwatch was even heard by its owner now and then.

The last of the cold grey light gave out, and gathering darkness caused the steadfastly-watched scene to serve the girls' eyes queer tricks.

Polly heaved one of her impatient sighs presently. She who always wanted immediate results would be furious if this vigil came to nothing. She plucked Betty by the sleeve and then made signs that she was inclined to go off on a stealthy prowl.

And then, suddenly, they all heard—a voice! No effect more eerie could have been provided for them than this that thrilled them now.

A girlish voice, whispering—coming to them on the air as if by means of wireless, only at half strength. That was how the voice sounded to them—a girl's voice!

Bella Darrington's?

And yet, as that whispering voice still went on, coming to them all from they could not tell where, the chums had to decide—no!

That was not Bella Darrington's voice after all. They were familiar enough with her voice to be able to recognise it anywhere.

Whose, then—whose was the voice that they seemed to know? Whose?

A moment after this, Betty gasped to herself as if she had identified the voice at last.

"I know," she said, under her breath to those who stood nearest. "That housemaid!"

"Who?"

"Maisie Turner!"

And now, only a half-minute after Betty had made known her convinced belief to her chums, the eerie whispering ceased.

"It was Maisie," insisted Betty, under her breath. "I'm positive!"

"And you are right," Polly nodded. "For I recognised it, too!"

Rival Investigators

THIS was no moment for the chums to debate amongst themselves what this latest development meant.

The whispering had ceased. Did that mean she was creeping away now? Eagerly they put their eyes to the best use that darkness and intervening buildings would permit, hoping to glimpse also the person to whom she had been speaking; the person to whom she must have made her way across the snowy wastes in secret!

Would it prove to be the Black Rider? Or was there, after all, no connection between this desolate place and that phantom-like being who had so terrified the district by night just lately?

Was this lonely farmhouse merely the trysting-place for Maisie and some friend of hers? That had to be considered as a likely explanation, as several of the girls realised.

The next few minutes was spent by them all in creeping this way and that.

With extreme caution they explored the ground lying inside the yard, walls, and the broken-down garden fence. They prowled into the old barns, the stabling, and many other sheds.

Nothing! No sign of life anywhere.

"Then I'm going into the house itself!" Polly suddenly announced in a desperate whisper. "We have a torch; I brought one with me. Any of you coming?"

"Yet I don't see how we can use a torch." Betty demurred. "If we do, we shall give ourselves away."

"Then do without it! Come on!"

"Have to be very careful, though."

This, from Betty, did not mean she was only half-hearted over the idea of searching the farmhouse itself, after nightfall and without a light. She was just as eager as the others to find out!

But headstrong Polly was in such a state of mind, by now, that she needed some cautioning. Others besides Betty were aware of this.

"We'll do it," Pam softly agreed. "Although I feel that we are bound to be heard or seen by anyone who may be in hiding there before we hear or see—"

Her guarded voice died suddenly away. At the same instant, every advancing step was checked, and every heart beat faster.

With only a few more paces to go to reach that broken window on the ground floor by which entry could be gained, the girls had heard a faint footfall in the house.

It was a footstep that had sounded in the very room which the broken window served.

So, heart-in-mouth, they stood arrested, bunched together, feeling that it was too late to turn back—too late to make any movement to conceal themselves. They could only stand dead still, watching the window in case a figure should become discernible there.

And there, sure enough, after a moment or two a figure did appear.

At first they saw it only as a very dark, masculine shape, that might be the Black Rider himself.

Then the vaguely-seen figure came out over the low sill and stood erect before them in the eerie light which snow gives off, even by night, and they knew him then.

Dave!

"DAVE!" The recognising cry burst from Betty and many others. "Oh!"

"Oh, bother!" Polly instantly raged. "Of all the—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" some of her chums had to laugh outright. "How very funny—ha, ha, ha!"

"Funny!" Polly echoed witheringly. "Dave, what do you mean by doing this?"

"I might ask you girls that," he retorted, smilingly. "Anyway, isn't it time you all got back to Priors Wold?"

"Yes," Polly snorted. "Leaving you, of course, with a clear field!"

"No"—very calmly and amiably, "I'm going back myself now."

Betty laughed.

"There, Polly, that's fair, I think? But, Dave—where are the other boys?"

"Oh, hanging around!"

"What!"

"We thought you boys went tobogganing," Bunny gurgled.

"Oh, no," Dave airily responded. "That was—well—"

"Just a ruse, of course!" Polly caught him up furiously. "Ugh! Wait till I get hold of Jack!"

She very soon had an opportunity of doing that. Another minute, and he, along with Tom, Jimmy, and Tubby, had appeared. Medcombe Manor, from being the dead-silent, eerie spot of a few minutes ago, was now the scene of much merriment.

Betty and Co. always knew when the laugh was against themselves. It was so now. They could only laugh at the way Grangemoor was able to twit them about their having failed to detect the presence of rival investigators.

"Still, you didn't do so badly—for girls!" Jack grinned. "We didn't hear a sound from you."

"Nor from anybody else?" Polly suggested, hopefully.

"Oh, yes," said Jack. "Four of us, anyhow, in hiding out here, heard a girl's voice. We don't know if Dave heard it as well. Perhaps not, as he had crept into the house, to hide there."

"Yes, I heard it."
"But you didn't recognise it?" Polly asked hopefully.

"Yes."
"Then who was it?"
"Oh—just someone I rather expected might be here."

Morcove howled:

"Wha-a-at!"

"He's only kidding us!" Polly stamped. "How can he have expected? We know as much about it all as he does—and more! Come on back to Priors Wold, girls. Now I want to get hold of—you know who, and ask her a few questions!"

"She won't be there," said Dave.



Some of the boys and girls rushed to the door. There was the Black Rider, as the startled servants had declared, galloping away into the night. Once more the phantom horseman had eluded them.

"What!" the girls stared.

"It's her half-day off."

This superior knowledge on the part of her rival "detective" fairly took Polly's breath away. Her chums had to laugh again.

"Oh, you know everything!" she flared out at Dave.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It can't be Maisie's half-day off, either, so see!" Polly asserted wildly. "For she was still about when we left Priors Wold, and that was in the middle of the afternoon."

"She stayed on for a bit, to dry your things. But she was going to have her time off, right enough," Dave insisted. "She won't be in until ten, at the earliest."

"She told you all that?"

"I had a little talk with her this morning,"

Polly looked at one and another of her chums in the eerie light, then glared again at Dave. His chums were still grinning, proud of him and his astuteness!

"Oh, I see," said Polly. "And perhaps she told you that she would be coming here—to meet somebody in secret? She even told you that the someone was—the Black Rider!"

Dave, smiling, shook his head.

"No, she didn't tell me that. But, as I say, I rather expected it."

"But why—why?" asked Polly. "How could you expect it? Why should Maisie have anything to do with the mystery?"

"When she learned that the Black Rider had visited Priors Wold on Christmas night—she fainted."

"Whew!" Betty gasped. "Polly, even you never thought of that!"

"No! I'm not Dave! I—oh, are we going to stand here all night? What," Polly flared out, "is there for all of you to laugh about?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Here, Polly-wolly," Jack chuckled, darting to prevent her from walking away, "you and Dave shake hands—come on! Make it a partnership of brains now! Ladies and gents, on my right Detective Dave, the master solutionist! On my left Priceless Polly, the lightning calculator! And now, you two can compare notes all the way back!"

But although Dave was glad enough to be "forgiven" by Polly he had no idea of going back to Priors Wold at once.

He had a clever suggestion to make. As they had all made such a row in the last minute or two, it would be a good plan to make a boisterous retirement, as if they had all "given up," and were going back in one jolly batch. Then, at a safe distance from the manor, he and several others would creep back—to keep watch again!

By this means, they stood a good chance of discovering if anyone had been hiding amongst the



buildings. A lurker would be tricked into thinking himself safe to make a move, having heard the noisy retreat take place.

Polly and Betty, with Dave and Jack and Jimmy, were the ones who crept back, a few minutes later, with as great stealth as ever.

On and on they waited, and this might have been a midnight hour instead of barely six o'clock, so dark and silent was the spot where they kept their eager vigil.

And they waited motionless—only in vain. Nothing happened.

Forced to give up at last, they finally arrived at Priors Wold just in time to get changed for the evening. The others had got indoors an hour previously, after an anti-climax in the way of a most uneventful trudging back.

If only for appearance' sake, Morcove and Co. would have thrown themselves heart and soul into more Yuletide gaieties that night. As it was, they were inclined to "shelve" the mystery, as it were, and enjoy an interlude of fun.

Morcove and the boys gave their roaring farce, "The Ghost of Priors Wold!" and it went with a bang.

For an hour they had their audience—including a couple of back rows of servants—in convulsions of laughter.

It was like the revellers to have afforded cook and others from the servants' hall a chance to see the rollicking farce. And it was evident that Dave had been right about Maisie the parlourmaid. She was out for the evening.

As for Bella Darrington, her conduct was such as to make the juniors wonder if there could be any association between that young lady and the mystery of the Black Rider, after all. She was so much the happy guest, without a care in the world—enjoying her evening to the full!

"Bravo—ha, ha, ha!—bravo!" went up the last shouts of laughter along with applauding cries and handclapping, when at length the makeshift curtain fell. "Bravo! Wonderful show!"

And there were calls first for the principal players—Polly and Bunny and Tom, whose comedy had been great stuff—and then a special raising of the curtain for the Ghost to make his bow. Jack, still in his white sheet, came in for a great ovation. He had earned it!

Naomer and Tubby—they had to take their call together, their parts having thrown them, sometimes literally, together. Finally, the whole company lined up, and bowed repeatedly to the continued applause.

No livelier moment had there been, so far, than this, when Morcove and the boys were all dashing away to change out of their stage things and wash make-up paint from their faces. Yet at this very moment Priors Wold was due for the greatest sensation of all in connection with—the Black Rider.

Suddenly there were such terrified shrieks from the kitchen regions that they made the blood of all the girls run cold.

For an instant the guests, both old and young alike, feared that the servants had returned to their own part of the house to find it on fire. There was dire panic in the wild outcry.

But grown-ups and juniors, rushing to find out, encountered no signs of fire.

Instead, they came crowding into the large servants' hall to find several of the maids in a half-swooning state of terror that was inexplicable until two or three of them screamed:

"The Black Rider! Oh, that Black Rider! He's here—we've seen him again—that awful Thing—the Black Rider!"

"Where, where?" clamoured Morcove and the others frantically. "Where?"

Many a servant then gestured wildly to the windows. Some moaned and wept hysterically as they pointed as if to say:

"There! He was there—there!"

Another moment, and every window in the kitchen was being thrown open, letting in a flurry of white flakes—for it was snowing again.

At the same instant, some of the menfolk and the boys rushed to get an outer door open.

Outside, the wintry night still derived that eerie light from the snow-whitened ground, and, whether Morcove and others looked from windows or peered from the hastily opened doorway, it was just the same.

All—all could see him!

The Black Rider—there he went, galloping off upon that black steed which was as phantom-like as the man himself.

"After him! Oh—hi—after him now!"

Yet even as the girls shouted like that, along with so many others, they knew that it was—too late. Vanished, already!

Seen for only that brief instant, and then swallowed up in the darkness; so the Black Rider had disappeared once again!

Startling News

THREE hours later it was midnight at Priors Wold, and there were no sounds of revelry now.

The juniors, at any rate, had come up to their various rooms, to close their doors for the night.

In the room which Betty shared with Polly, Paula, and Naomer, bed-time was providing some serio-comic effects.

Paula was already in bed and snuggled down. She looked as if her pretty head would go under the bedclothes as soon as the light was switched off.

Naomer was treating herself to a final warming at the fire, which was in a very low state. Squatting in front of the hearth, she glanced half-fearfully over her shoulder now and then—to the window, where Betty and Polly were peering out.

"Frightening ze servants out of zeir lives—sweeendle!" shrilled Naomer.

"And not the servants only," Polly slyly added, side-glancing Paula.

"Er—are you wewefwring to me, Polly deah?"

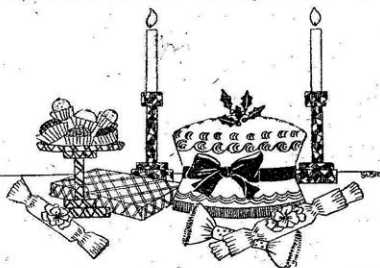
"I notice—you haven't been long in getting to bed!"

"Fow the simple weason, Polly deah, I am—er—wather fatigued at pwesent. Aftew all, it has gone twelve—"

"The witching hour—"

"Ow, don't! Not that I am at all nevvous—wather not, bai Jove! Widelicious, to imagine that—"

"Hark!" Betty requested—and Paula's head at once went under the drawn-up coverings.



In the ensuing silence they heard someone going by their closed door, humming a tune.

"That was Bella Darrington," muttered Betty, after they had heard her go into her room and close her door. "In the best of spirits—or wants us to think so, anyway!"

"But I think she really is pleased at the scare there has been," Polly frowned. "Suits her book, I suppose! Ugh, what a strange business it is, Betty!"

"Amazing! There is something about that girl that I can't make out. And then—we know that Maisie Turner came in at ten o'clock, calm and pleasant as ever! Although we have been connecting her, too, with the Black Rider!"

"Er—excuse me, you geeals, but I—I twust you are not going to keep on talking about the Black Wider all night?" Paula plaintively protested. "I am not thinking of my own newwes—oh, no! But, Naomer—"

"Me? You zink I am afraid! What ze diggings! Ze Black Rider can do what he jolly well likes to scare everybody—he won't scare me!" Naomer was going to finish, but a sudden tap at the door struck her to open-mouthed silence.

"Come in!" Betty called out, after exchanging a wondering look with Polly.

Then Judy Cardew entered, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Girls, I thought I had better let you know at once, for it means a cruel upset to all our plans. The whole house-party will have to break up in the morning."

"What!"

"Mother has just told me. It is a terrible grief to her to have had to tell the grown-ups. She can't possibly do any entertaining after to-night."

"But, Judy—why ever not?"

"Bekas—sweendle! Zis smashes up ze holiday when eet has only just begun!"

"There will hardly be a servant left," Judy distressfully explained. "They have let mother know. It was a painful scene, mother tells me, for they are very attached to her; but this Black Rider business is more than their nerves will stand. Some of them are still in a bad state, after to-night's scare."

"I don't wonder," Betty promptly murmured. "It was too uncanny for words. And this is such a lonely, rambling old house. You may feel all right by day, but when the night comes, and you have to go up to bed—"

"That's just it," Judy nodded. "The maids' rooms are in distant parts of the house, some of them. Anyway, cook and others have begged mother to let them go, and she simply had to agree to arrange accordingly. The house must be shut up for the present. Hopeless to expect new servants to come along."

"Is Maisie Turner leaving with the rest?" Betty asked.

"No; strange to say, she is willing to stay on." That reply drew a "Just so!" nod from Polly. "She could say what it all means, only, of course, it won't be possible to drag anything out of her," Betty murmured. "What a rotten shame, though, that we should have to break up long before our time! If only your mother, Judy, would let us stay on and manage for ourselves! We could, you know!"

"Yes, bekas, I am a gorjus cook, come to zat!" "You had better suggest it," Polly said eagerly to Judy. "Hang it all, we just can't pack up, when, by staying on, we may even solve the mystery! We want to see this business through. Oh,

in the morning we girls must all beg and pray to be allowed to stay on!"

Betty, who had taken a thoughtful turn about the room, stood still again to speak.

"Is it the Black Rider's idea to smash up the house-party by haunting Priors Wold like this? A trick, to scare all the servants away, and so force your mother, Judy, to close the house?"

"But why?" Judy asked bewilderedly. "For what reason? I say, though, I mustn't hang about talking. I'm supposed to have gone to bed. Good-night, then—and leave everything now until the morning!"

"I suppose we must," Polly sighed glumly. "Good-night, then, Judy!"

"And don't lie awake too long worrying," Betty added, with a cheering smile. "Oh, we'll work it somehow—we'll manage!"

Be sure to read :

"WARNED BY THE PHANTOM"
BY MARJORIE STANTON

which appears in the next issue
of The SCHOOLGIRLS' OWN

On sale Tuesday, December 31st.

Yet Betty herself was to be a long, long while getting to sleep that night. For a full hour she and Polly talked in whispers after their room-mates had both fallen asleep. And, even when the last deep whispers had been exchanged, with the room in darkness and the fire dead, neither the one girl nor the other could stop thinking about the Black Rider and the deep mystery surrounding him.

At last Betty knew that Polly had joined Paula and Naomer in Dreamland, and then she was glad to feel a drowsiness stealing upon her.

She dozed, became wide awake again, to be aware of a silence as complete as ever, and then she went off into deep, dreamless sleep.

"**B**ETTY! Betty dear!"

She opened her eyes and—like one whose mind has been ready for some fresh alarm, even in sleep—had her wits about her instantly.

It was still dark in the bed-room. Someone had come to her bed to rouse her before causing the other to wake up.

"Judy! Why—what—" Betty jerked, lifting herself upon an elbow. "Anything happened? It isn't morning yet?"

"It's past six; but I wouldn't be up, of course, only—there's something wrong. Jimmy Cherrol came to mother's door just now, and knocked. I'm sleeping in mother's room, you know, because the house is so full."

"Yes—well, dear?"

"Oh, Betty!" Judy burst out. "It's about Dave—"

"Why, what, Judy—what?"

"His room's empty. His bed hasn't been slept in, and it's the Black Rider to blame again, Betty—we know it must be! Oh, Betty, suppose Dave has gone too far in his eagerness to solve the mystery—"

"Hush, dear. Oh, don't upset yourself so!"

But Betty, drawing Judy down to her with a comforting clasp, had to hear that poor girl sobbing on as if her heart were broken.

(END OF THIS WEEK'S STORY.)