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A Splendid, Long School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

&

BRITAIN INVADED!

A Thrilling War Story.

GRAND CHRISTMAS DOUBLE NUMBER

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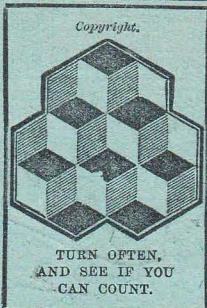
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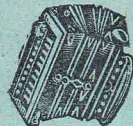
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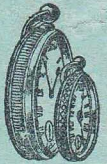
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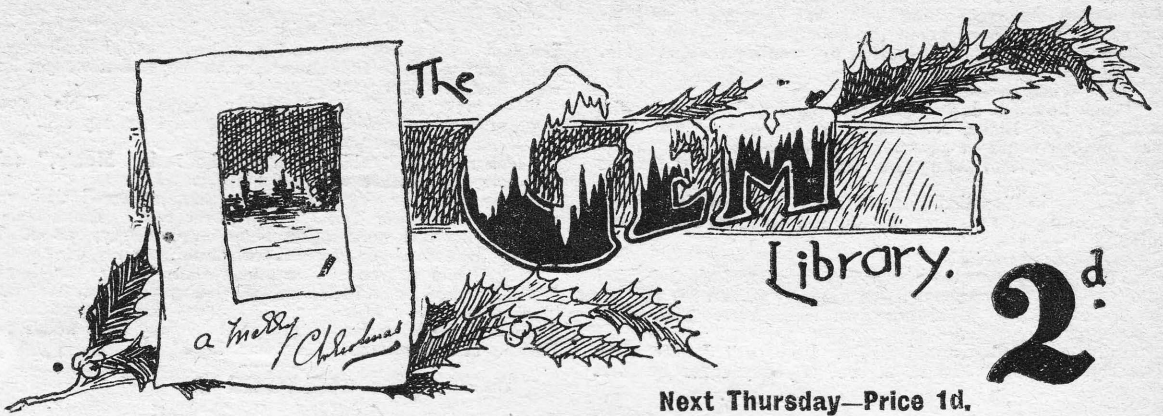
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An Extra Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

One Good Turn Deserves Another.

"CHRISTMAS weather, and no mistake!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The mist was thick in the quadrangle at St. Jim's. Tom Merry stood at the door of the School House, and he sniffed expressively as he looked out into the quad.

In the dim, grey mist he could hardly make out the outline of the old stone steps of the School House. The old elm which stood near the door was completely swallowed up in the mist, though Tom Merry could hear its leafless branches sagging in the wind.

"Whew! It's thick!"

Tom Merry sniffed, and looked doubtfully into the mist. He had his cap and scarf on, and had come down from his study to go over to the New House. But the thick vapour in the quadrangle was not inviting.

He was debating the matter in his mind, when he received

a sudden slap on the shoulder which sent him through the doorway. His feet slid on the slippery stone, and he came down in a sitting posture on the top step, and, as the step was slippery too, he slid on, and disappeared into the mist.

Jack Blake, of the Fourth Form, stared after him in amazement.

"My only hat!" he ejaculated.

There was the sound of a bump at the bottom of the steps. Tom Merry had tobogganed down them in a sitting posture, unable to save himself, and he was sitting in the quad now, somewhat dazed. Blake gave a roar.

"Well, of all the duffers—"

"You utter ass!" gasped Tom Merry, picking himself up.

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh!"

Blake said "Oh!" as he received a sudden push himself from behind, which hurled him through the doorway, and sent him sliding down the slippery steps just as Tom Merry had done.

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He had no time to save himself; he was at the bottom of the steps before he knew what was happening, and his feet struck Tom Merry about the knees, and the hero of the Shell, who had just picked himself up, went sprawling again.

"My hat!" gasped Blake.

"Oh! What the—who the—"

"What howling duffer was that thumped me on the back?" roared Blake, scrambling to his feet. "To think that anybody could be ass enough to thump a fellow on the back like that, and send him sliding! Of all the crass idiots—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Tom Merry. "It was tit for tat. What about you thumping me on the back, you shrieking duffer?"

"Oh, that was a lark!"

"Then I'm jolly glad there was another larkist behind you," grinned Tom Merry, as he gingerly picked his way up the steps again. "Mind how you tread here. This stone is slippery."

"I know that," grunted Blake. "Haven't I just come down on my back? To think that anybody could be idiot enough—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, don't cackle! Why, it's that chump Lowther!"

Monty Lowther was staring out into the mist with a grin on his face. Manners was just behind. Blake glared at them as he came in, rubbing some of his bones that ached from contact with the stone steps.

"Had a pleasant slide?" asked Lowther affably. "I came downstairs just in time to see you thump Tommy, and I thought you'd like some of the same."

"You utter ass—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther laughed in chorus. Jack Blake glared at the Terrible Three, as if meditating immediate assault and battery upon the three of them. But the chums of the Shell were standing ready to seize him and send him sliding down the steps again, and Blake thought better of it. He snorted, and turned away.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"I'm glad I came along in time to give that funny merchant some of his own funny medicine," he remarked. "Curious how a practical joker never does seem to appreciate his own wheezes when they come home to roost."

"Ha, ha! I've noticed that."

"Have you been over to the New House, Tom?" asked Lowther. "We came down to see. It looks a bit thick in the quad."

"It does," agreed Tom Merry. "It's the thickest we've had so far, and the snow is beginning to come down, too. It's a foretaste of Christmas. I'm blessed if I think I could get across to the New House in this fog. More likely to find myself at the gym, or the porter's lodge. We must see Figgins about the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly,' though."

"Wait a bit, and see if it clears off," said Lowther. "Or suppose you send a message across, asking Figgins to come over here. As the editorial office is in this House, he certainly ought to come over."

"Good! Will you take the message?"

"No fear!" said Lowther promptly.

"You, Manners?"

"I don't think!" said Manners.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Hallo! Here's Binks," said Lowther. "Binks will do. Binks—Binky!"

Binks was the new School House page. The previous Buttons had lately departed, and Binks had taken his place. He was rather a curious lad. He had a flighty manner, which had led some of the School House fellows to wonder whether he was what they described as "off his rocker." Sometimes, when he thought himself unobserved, he would be seen muttering and gesticulating. But Tom Merry, who had once seen a well-thumbed copy of "Deadwood Bill, the Broncho Buster," drop from under Binks's tight tunic, had formed the more charitable theory that Binks fed his imagination upon cheap American fiction, and that Deadwood Bill had "got into his head."

"Binks—Binky!" called out Monty Lowther.

Binks came towards them.

"Did you call me, Master Lowther?"

"Yes, I did, Binky. I want you to take a message—"

"Oh, rats!" broke in Tom Merry, laughing. "I can get across in the mist quite as well as Binks can."

"Rats! Tip Binks a tanner, and let him go," said Lowther. "Here, Binks, Merry wants you to take a message across to the New House—"

"A tanner!" murmured Binks. "Tip Binks a tanner! Har, har, har!"

Lowther stared at him.

"What are you chuckling about, Binks?"

"Nothing, Master Lowther. What is the message, Master Merry?"

"Oh, it's all right!" said Tom Merry. "Shut up, Lowther! You'd get lost in the mist, Binks. It's all right. Look here, you two fellows come with me, and if we get lost we'll find one another."

"Oh, very well!" said Monty Lowther. "No good arguing with an obstinate ass! Wait till I get my cap."

"Buck up, then!"

"Get my scarf while you're about it, Monty," said Manners, as Lowther went for his cap.

Monty Lowther grunted, but he soon returned with cap and scarf, and the Terrible Three set out. Binks stared after them, and nodded his head emphatically, as if in answer to some thought in his own mind.

"Tip Binks a tanner!" he murmured. "Har, har, har!" Binks laughed as he had heard the heavy villain at Wayland Theatre laugh. "Har, har, har! They little know! They little dream of the hisping soul that may beat under the buttons of a huniform! Har, har, har!"

CHAPTER 2.

A Mistake in the Mist.

"BY Jove, it's thick!" "Yes, rather! Don't lose yourself. Where's Manners got to?"

"Manners—Manners!"

The mist echoed Tom Merry's call in a dozen different directions. But Manners did not reply. He had separated a few feet from his chums in the mist, and that had been enough. Manners was lost now.

"Here, we'd better keep hold of one another!" exclaimed Tom Merry, grasping Lowther. "We—, What's the matter?"

"Ow! That's my ear you've got hold of."

"Never mind—"

"But I do mind," howled Lowther. "I'll take your ear instead, you ass—"

"Oh, I don't think it's necessary to hold one another! Just keep close, that's all. Where has that ass Manners got to? Which way is the New House?"

"Here's the path."

"Good! Stick to me."

"Rats! You stick to me."

"I— Hallo! There's Manners!"

There was a footstep in the mist, and a form loomed dimly up. In the thick mist and the falling of the powdery snow it was impossible to recognise whom it was, but Tom Merry and Lowther had no doubt about it.

"Here you are, Manners! This way, old man!"

The dim form approached closer, and a handful of snow was flattened into Tom Merry's face. The hero of the Shell reeled back with a gasp. There was a chuckle, and the dim form disappeared in the gloom.

"Figgins!" yelled Monty Lowther.

He knew that chuckle.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came echoing through the gloom. "Hear me smile!"

"I'll make you smile, you boulder!" exclaimed Tom Merry wrathfully, rubbing the snow off his features. "I'll—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on!" exclaimed Lowther. "There he is!"

The form had disappeared; the footsteps were lost in the echoing mist. The chums of the Shell rushed wrathfully on, however, in blind search of the humorous Figgins. Blindly in the mist they biffed against a body and clutched it.

"Got him!" yelled Lowther.

"Gr-r-r!"

"Roll him over!"

In a twinkling the prisoner was rolling in the snow. He gave a wild howl, and then gasped breathlessly. He had no chance to speak. He was rolling in the snow, and Lowther and Tom Merry were jamming it in handfuls in his face.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lowther. "It's our turn to laugh now."

"Hear us smile!" chortled Tom Merry.

"Give him another roll!"

"Let him have a handful down his neck!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear us smile, you New House rotter!"

And the chums of the Shell, yelling with laughter, released their victim at last. The snow victim sat up and gasped.

"You silly owls!"

Tom Merry jumped.

"Manners!" he yelled.

"Manners!" murmured Monty Lowther feebly.

"You utter, crass, shrieking dummies!"

"Manners! My only aunt!"

"You howling duffers!" yelled Manners, staggering to his feet. "Whom did you take me for—ch? What do you mean by rolling me in the snow?"

"BRITAIN INVADED!" ANOTHER SPLENDID NEXT THURSDAY.
LONG INSTALMENT



Tap, tap, tap.
It was too much for the nerves of the juniors. With one accord, the terrified youngsters dashed for the door, and poured pell-mell out of the study.

"Ha, ha! Sorry—we took you for Figgins!"

"Thought you were Figgy—honest Injun!"

"You crass duffers—"

"Keep your wool on, Manners, old man. It was your fault for getting lost—"

"I didn't get lost!" yelled Manners. "It was you two dummies got lost, and I was looking for you!"

"Ha, ha, you found us!"

"You—you—you—"

"Oh, don't get excited—let's look for Figgins! It's all his fault!"

"B-r-r-r! I'm going back to the School House to get cleaned up!" growled Manners. "Of all the crass idiots—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners disappeared in the mist. Tom Merry and Lowther laughed till their tears ran. The mistake had been a natural one, under the circumstances, though they had to admit that they had been a little hasty. It was rough on Manners, but it was funny.

"Oh, let's get on!" said Tom Merry, controlling his merriment at last. "This stuff is getting into my chest. Blessed if I feel inclined to go and see Figgins after the trouble he's given us! Better keep on, though."

And the chums of the Shell groped forward in the mist. Exactly where they were they could not tell. The lights of the School House had disappeared behind them, and the lights of the New House had not come into sight. They were surrounded by a thick and almost impenetrable mist.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry, at last. "I wish I'd thought of bringing a lantern. The worst of it is that you can't tell one path from another in this beastly mist. Hallo, there's something! Is that the New House?"

"It's an elm, fathead!"

"By Jove, so it is! Where's the New House?"

"Blessed if I know! Sunk into the earth, I suppose."

"Hallo, there's a light!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Good—right on, then!"

Tom Merry had caught a dim glimmer in the mist. The chums of the Shell marched on, keeping it carefully in sight, and it grew stronger as they advanced. Tom Merry uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Rats! It's only Taggles!"

Taggles it was. The school porter was coming from the direction of the stables towards his lodge, and he was carrying a big hurricane lamp to light his way. Taggles's gaze was fixed straight ahead, and he had no idea of the proximity of the chums of the Shell. Tom Merry squeezed Lowther's arm.

"Quiet, Monty—look at Taggy's nose!"

"What's the matter with it?" asked Lowther, staring at the features of the school porter, which were quite plainly visible in the light of the lantern, though the mist swallowed up the juniors from the sight of the porter.

"Look at the colour scheme of it!"

"Ha, ha! It's red—a study in scarlet!"

"Exactly! Taggy has been paying an evening call to the gin bottle lately. See how he's carrying that lantern—zigzag!"

"Horrid beast!"

"Now, Monty, you know what Shakespeare says—"

"Eh? What has Shakespeare to do with a giddy school-porter?"

"Nothing in particular; but he says: 'Oh, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains!'"

"The enemy wouldn't get much change out of Taggles. He'd have to come back empty-handed!" chuckled Lowther.

"Ha, ha! And Shakespeare also says—"

"Look here, this isn't a penny reading! Give Shakespeare a rest!"

"Philistine!" said Tom Merry severely. "Shut up, and listen to your uncle! Shakespeare also says: 'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn—'"

"I shall yawn, too, if you don't shut up!"

"When churchyards yawn—"

"Oh, come on!"

"When churchyards yawn, and—something about ghosts. Now, there's a ghost at St. Jim's, as you know—if there's any truth in the old legend of the school, as we are bound to believe, as loyal Saints. Why shouldn't Taggles see a ghost, and be cured of his foolish ways?"

"Oh, I see!" murmured Lowther. "Good wheeze!"

"Come on, then!"

Taggles had gone on his way, but the light was still in sight. The chums of the Shell hurried after him, their light footsteps making no sound on the powdery carpet of snow. Tom Merry hastily whispered to Lowther, who chuckled assent. They separated as they came near the school porter. Taggles was murmuring aloud to himself, and Tom Merry caught some of his words.

"Which I ain't going to stand it," murmured Taggles. "When it comes to going down to the post-office in the fog, I says it's young Binks's dooty, not mine. That's what I says. Why can't they send young Binks? What's he for, I'd like to know? Don't I 'ave enough trouble already? Don't I 'ave to get a drink in the stables now, 'cause Maria won't stand the smell of gin in the 'ouse? Ain't that enough to turn a man's 'air grey? Why can't they send young Binks? That's wot I say!"

Taggles broke off suddenly.

From the misty gloom to the left came a deep, hair-raising groan. The school porter stopped abruptly, and held the lantern higher, glaring into the mist by its light. He had turned pale—excepting his nose.

"W-w-wot was that?" he muttered. "My 'evings, wot was that?"

Groan!

"Oh, 'evings above!"

A deeper groan than before, from a different direction. Taggles's hair stood on end. He blinked round him like a frightened rabbit.

"'Evings!"

Then a deep voice came from the mist. Taggles's knees were knocking together.

"Wretched man! Repent!"

"I—I—oh!—ow!—who are yer?" gasped Taggles. "I says, who are yer?"

"Aha! I am the ghost of St. Jim's! Tremble!"

The word "Tremble!" came in a blood-curdling hiss.

Crash! went the lantern to the ground, and Taggles bolted. The light went out, and the tearing footsteps of the porter died away in the mist. There was the distant slam of a door.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared back Lowther.

And the chums of the Shell hugged each other in an ecstasy of merriment. Taggles, inside his lodge, was locking and chaining the door, heedless of the amazed questions of Dame Taggles.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "I am the ghost of St. Jim's! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tremble!" gasped Monty Lowther. "Oh, my ribs!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 3.

Tap, Tap, Tap.

FIGGINS came into his study in the New House at St. Jim's with an expansive grin on his face. Kerr and Wynn were there. Kerr was roasting chestnuts before the study fire. Fatty Wynn sat in the armchair, his fat legs stretched out, and his hands in his trousers pockets. His fat, smooth brow was wrinkled now into an expression of deep thought. Fatty Wynn was turning something over in his mind.

"Hallo!" said Kerr. "Have some chestnuts?"

"Yes, rather!" grinned Figgins.

"Anything up?" asked Kerr, noticing his leader's grin.

"No," said Figgins. "I've just met Tom Merry in the quad, that's all. He took me for Manners, and I plastered him with snow. I say, these are ripping chestnuts! I say, Fatty, what's the matter with you?"

"Eh?" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"What's the matter? Why aren't you eating?"

"Eh? I've been thinking, Figgy—"

"Then you will want something to buck you up, after an effort like that," said Figgins sympathetically. "Try some chestnuts."

"Thanks, I will!" said Fatty. "But I say, Figgy—" & "I'll have some more, Kerr. I'll say this for you, you can roast chestnuts!"

"I say, Figgins—"

"Hallo! Want some more, too?"

"Well, yes; as a matter of fact, I'll have some more, though that wasn't what I was going to say. I say, Christmas is getting jolly close—"

"Quite right!" agreed Figgins. "I've noticed that Christmas generally does get close towards the end of the year. It's due to the calendars, or the almanacs, or something!"

"Oh, don't rot, you know! I don't know whether you've observed it, Figgy, but one gets a jolly lot hungrier as Christmas draws near."

"I've noticed it about you."

"And we've had a fall of snow, too—and I've always noticed that the snow seems to give a sort of edge to my appetite."

"It doesn't need it."

"Well, I've got a healthy appetite," said the Welsh partner in the New House Co. "I don't deny it."

"Wouldn't be much use if you did, Fatty," grinned Figgins. "Actions speak louder than words, you know!"

"I'll have some more chestnuts. What I was going to say is, that, as Christmas is approaching, we ought to get up a little celebration."

"Celebration of what?"

"Christmas, of course! I'm not thinking of celebrating Easter or Whitsuntide at this time of the year!" snorted Fatty Wynn.

"Oh, all right! Shove the chestnuts this way!"

"We sha'n't be here on Christmas Day—"

"Rather curious if we were."

"That's nothing to do with it. We sha'n't be here on Christmas Day, and so, before breaking up, we ought to have a little celebration."

"No objection that I can see," assented Figgins. "It all depends upon the form the celebration takes. Are you thinking of giving a dance in the woodshed?"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Figgy!"

"Or a fancy-dress ball behind the coach-house?"

"Really, Figgins—"

"Well, I don't see what else you can give. You're not thinking of a magic-lantern entertainment, are you?"

"You know jolly well I'm not, Figgy. There's only one sort of celebration that can be given to do justice to the occasion, and I believe you know what I've got in my mind, all the time."

Figgins grinned.

"Oh, a feed, of course!"

"Well, and why not?" demanded Fatty Wynn. "One gets awfully hungry at this time of the year—I know I do—and you say yourself that we ought to have some celebration. Christmas comes but once a year—"

"Yes, I've noticed that, too!"

"Christmas comes but once a year," repeated Fatty Wynn obstinately; "and when it comes it ought to be celebrated—"

"But you're proposing to celebrate it before it comes—"

"Look here, Figgins, if you can't be serious on a serious subject—"

"I stand corrected," said Figgins. "I had forgotten what an awfully serious subject it was. Well, the idea of a celebration in the form of a feed is passed unanimously, adopted, resolved, and becomes law forthwith. You shall stand us a feed—"

"Eh?"

"You shall stand us a feed—"

"I wasn't thinking of anything of the sort. My idea is to have a really first-class feed to celebrate Christmas. Of course, the arrangements could be left in my hands, as I am a first-class cook and caterer. But the cash will have to be raised by subscription, and I think that the School House chaps ought to be asked to join in the idea."

"They would want to run it," said Figgins, with a shake of the head. "They never will admit that the New House is cock-house at St. Jim's."

"Still, at Christmas-time, you know," urged Fatty Wynn.

"Eh? What's Christmas time got to do with it?"

"Peace on earth, goodwill to man," said Fatty Wynn severely. "Is this a time for House rows? Really, Figgins, I'm surprised at you! At this time of the year fellows ought to unite, and stand shoulder to shoulder, and stand—"

"A feed?"

"BRITAIN INVADED!" ANOTHER SPLENDID LONG INSTALMENT NEXT THURSDAY.

"Oh, really, Figgy—"

"Ha, ha, ha! It's a good wheeze," said Figgins, patting the fat Fourth-Former on the shoulder; "we'll ask Tom Merry, and Jack Blake and his lot, and make up a party of us for the feed. Why not?"

"Why not?" echoed Kerr.

Fatty Wynn beamed upon his comrades.

"Now, that's what I call chummy!" he exclaimed.

"That's all right, then, I say," remarked Figgins pensively, "how ripping it would be if Cousin Ethel could come down before we break up—"

"Rather!" said Fatty Wynn. "We could have her to the feed—"

"Oh, blow the feed— Hallo, come in, fathead!"

There was a tap at the study door. It opened, and Tom Merry and Monty Lowther presented themselves. Figgins, remembering the incident in the quadrangle, reached out for an inkpot. But Tom Merry raised his hand in sign of peace.

"Pax!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, right you are!" grinned Figgins, releasing the inkpot. "I thought—"

"Yes, it was a guilty conscience."

"Ha, ha ha! How did you like your chivvy done up in snow?"

"Never mind," said Tom Merry. "I am going to let you off punishment, considering the time of year it is—"

"You needn't bother."

"Besides, we've got business to attend to. We are coming over to speak to you. As you three are sub-editors of Tom Merry's Weekly, you naturally want a voice in the matter."

"What matter?" asked Figgins & Co. together.

"About the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.' We are thinking of bringing out a double number—"

"Good wheeze!" exclaimed Figgins heartily. "I hadn't thought of it; but it's a good idea. I can give you a double-length instalment of my Red Indian serial—"

"Ahem," said the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly," "that isn't exactly—"

"Oh, I can manage it!" said Figgins. "It's surprising how easy it is to write stories. I just take a pen in my hand and it runs off, you know."

"Yes, that kind of story," murmured Monty Lowther.

Figgins fixed a freezing glare upon Lowther.

"What are you muttering about, Lowther? If you think there's anything wrong with my Red Indian serial—"

Lowther grunted.

"What about your own rotten poems?" demanded Figgins, a little excited. "Sonnet to an Expiring Frog—"

"It wasn't!" exclaimed Lowther, getting a little excited himself. "It was a sonnet to a Dying Chaffinch."

"I don't care whether it was a dying chaffinch or an expiring frog. I know it was piffle."

"Well, old chap," said Lowther, "if I said what I thought about your Black Chief of the Red Braves—"

"Well, that's a bit above your intellect, of course," said Figgins loftily. "Why, French told me the other day that parts of it read as if they were written by a chap who had lived there."

"I suppose they're the parts you've borrowed out of Mayne Reid and Gustave Aimard?"

"Borrowed? Why—"

"French was pulling your leg, I expect."

"I'll jolly well pull your ears if you don't get out of this study!" exclaimed the exasperated Figgins. "What are you School House rotters doing in a respectable house, anyway?"

"Hold on," said Tom Merry, "we've come to talk business! We think that Christmas ought to be celebrated—"

"Just what I was thinking!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn heartily. "Were you thinking of a feed, too, Tom Merry?"

"A feed! Rats! It's a Double Number of the 'Weekly.' I'm talking about! We were thinking of celebrating Christmas by issuing a double number, and we think—"

"That's all right," said Figgins; "I'll do you a double instalment of the 'Black Chief of the Red Braves,' as I said; and I can do a lot of jokes, puzzles, and conundrums to fill up space, too."

"Well, as a matter of fact, Figgy—"

"I'm considered rather good at conundrums, and I can do a couple of columns of them for the Christmas Number. There's a rather good one I made the other day—'When is a door not a jar?'—no, that isn't quite right."

"No, I think it isn't," said Lowther, "and when you get it right, it's a jolly old chestnut, too. Speaking of Figgy's jokes, I'll have some of those chestnuts, Kerr."

"Here you are," grinned Kerr.

"The idea really is—" began Tom Merry again.

"As I said—that's all right," interrupted Figgins. "You can depend upon me for a double instalment of the 'Black Chief of the Red Braves.'"

"The fact is, I was thinking that it's about time that serial closed down, Figgy. As editor, I have to keep an eye on these things, you know."

"Yes, and as sub-editor, I have to see that you don't shut the best contribution of the lot out of the magazine," said Figgins calmly. "The Black Chief goes on."

"I've had a lot of letters from readers on the subject—"

"Praising the story, of course?"

"Well, I'll show you the letters, if you like, if you call in at the editorial office," said Tom Merry diplomatically; "but this is the idea—to hold over the usual stuff, and fill the Christmas Number up entirely with Christmas matter."

Figgins nodded.

"Well, that's not a bad idea, Merry. I can meet you on that. I'll knock off a ripping ghost story."

"Lowther is going to do a Christmas poem—"

"Is he? What will you do with it?"

"Put it in, of course."

"Is that quite fair on the readers?"

"Look here, Figgins—" began Lowther wrathfully.

"Oh, keep the peace!" said Tom Merry. "I am going to tackle the ghost of St. Jim's myself. I suppose you know the legend—the School House is haunted. I was thinking of working up the legend into a story for the 'Weekly.'"

"You mean St. Jim's is haunted?" said Kerr.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No, I mean that the School House is haunted. You know perfectly well that the School House, with the lecture-hall and the Principal's house, forms the old original building of St. Jim's. It was there that the monk Rufus was slain by the wicked abbot Wolfram, as the stains of blood testify."

"Bosh! I've never seen any stains."

"You New House fellows blink plain facts. There isn't a fellow in the School House who can't see the stains on the oak perfectly plainly."

"With a little imagination to help."

"Oh, it's no good arguing with an obstinate bounder who won't hear reason! What I was going to say is, as the School-House is haunted by the ghost of the murdered monk—"

"As St. Jim's is haunted—"

"Now, do be reasonable, Figgins. How could the New House possibly be haunted by the ghost of a giddy monk who was murdered five hundred years ago? The New House hasn't been built more than a hundred years."

"I should think that settled it," said Lowther. "The ghost belongs wholly to the School House. I'm surprised at Figgins's cheek."

"The ghost would naturally haunt the whole place," said Figgins obstinately. "It's simply absurd to say that he would keep to one side of the quadrangle."

"He kept there for four hundred years—"

"Then it stands to reason he would want a change, and he would come over this side."

"Oh, it's no good arguing with Figgins!" said Tom Merry. "I really thought the cheek of these New House bounders would stop short of claiming a share in the School House ghost—"

"The St. Jim's ghost!"

"Oh, rats! Let me get on with what I was saying when you interrupted me with your utterly unfounded claim to a share in the ghost of—"

"St. Jim's."

"Of the School House. But never mind. I was thinking that the legend would make a splendid Christmas yarn for the 'Weekly.'"

"So it would, in capable hands," agreed Figgins. "Don't you think you had better leave it to me?"

"No, I don't," said Tom Merry, with very clear emphasis; "I don't think anything of the sort. You know the yarn, I dare say—"

"I dare say I do," said Figgins sarcastically.

"The monk Rufus was blind," went on Tom Merry, unheeding; "he used to go about tapping with his staff, and wherever he went, you always heard the tap, tap, tap! And the abbot, being in a black mood one day—"

"In a which?"

"A black mood," said Tom Merry. "That's what the legend says. It means in a jolly bad temper, of course. And the abbot, being in a black mood one day, slew the blind monk when he came along with his tap, tap, tap! It was rather rough on Rufus, and he got his own back by haunting the abbot, and ever afterwards the wicked Wolfram could always hear the tap, tap, tap, of Rufus's staff."

"And a jolly tall story, too," grinned Figgins.

"Yes, a little steep, perhaps," admitted Tom Merry; "but I've looked over a lot of the old manuscripts in the library, and there's a lot of testimony that others, besides the wicked abbot, have heard the tap, tap, tap. Wolfram

killed the monk when the snow was on the ground, and the story goes that every Christmas the tap, tap, tap, is still heard in the School House——"

"In St. Jim's——"

"Oh, rats! It's not on record that it's ever been heard in the New House, and there are dozens of witnesses to attest that it's been heard all over the School House, up to fifty years ago."

"Ha, ha! The evidence of a yarn like that always gets weaker as it gets near our own times," grinned Figgins. "I rather think we can say for certain that the tap, tap, tap, has been heard in the New House quite as often as in the School House."

And the Co. chuckled assent.

"Oh, hang it!" said Tom Merry. "I like a fellow who can believe in the legends of his own school. It's jolly respectable to have a ghost. There isn't a building as old as St. Jim's in England without a ghost. And as for the tap, tap, tap, you wouldn't hear it in the New House, anyway, as it is a School House ghost——"

"A St. Jim's ghost," grunted Figgins. "Whether it's a real ghost or not, he belongs to us as much as to you. We're just as likely to hear the tap, tap, tap, in this study as you are in yours."

"Rats! You——"

Tom Merry broke off suddenly, a strange look coming over his face.

For, at that moment, as if to bear out Figgins's words, a low, muffled sound echoed through the apartment.

Tap, tap, tap!

CHAPTER 4. A Mystery.

TAP, tap, tap!

The juniors stared at one another spell-bound!

The sound was so weird, so utterly unexpected, that for the moment they could do nothing but stare at one another helplessly.

In the breathless silence that ensued, the sound was heard again, faintly, yet with curious distinctness, coming they could not tell from whence.

Tap, tap, tap!

Then dead silence!

Tom Merry was the first to find his voice.

"Did you hear it?"

The question was superfluous. The pale and startled faces of the juniors showed plainly enough that they had heard it.

"My hat!" murmured Monty Lowther. "Wh-what was it?"

"It was somebody tapping," said Fatty Wynn vaguely.

"It—it can't have been the gh-gh-ghost," stammered Figgins. "I—I d-d-don't believe in gh-gh-ghosts."

"Of course it can't," said Tom Merry, recovering himself a little. "It's some fellow japing us."

The juniors recovered something of their spirits at the suggestion. The weird sound had quite unnerved them.

"I suppose that's it," said Figgins, looking relieved.

"Of course it is."

"But it's curious," said Kerr. "You know what the old legend says. The spectre monk appears when the snow is on the ground. To-night is the first fall of snow, in these parts, at all events."

"That's curious."

"And Christmas is jolly near," said Fatty Wynn; "and the spectre only appears at Christmas time."

"Well, fellows only play ghost at Christmas time, too," said Tom Merry practically. "It must have been a trick."

Figgins looked round the study with a puzzled air.

"Then where's the joker?" he demanded.

"We shall find out. It's curious that the sound should follow what we were saying, but that's a coincidence, of course."

"Oh, of course," assented Figgins, but just a little dubiously. "It's curious, as you say."

"Oh, just a coincidence. Now, the question is, where is the chap who was tapping? The tapping didn't come at the door."

"No; that's a cert."

"Then it must have been on the wall of the next study."

"It didn't sound as if it came from the next study," said Kerr.

"I couldn't quite tell which direction it came from," said Tom Merry. "It sounded as if it came from a distance, through the thickness of the wall."

"That's it," said Figgins; "and it seemed to me to come from this side, as far as I could judge at all."

He laid his hand on the end wall of the study. Figgins's study was the last in a row, and beyond it in that direction was—so far as the juniors knew—a mass of building, where

the supposed joker certainly could not have found entrance. Tom Merry shook his head.

"What's on the other side of that wall?" he asked.

"Only stonework, I believe," said Figgins, with a helpless look. "This is where the New House joins on to part of the old building, you know. On the other side of this is the old refectory, and you know how thick the walls of that are. I've heard that they're over eight feet thick. No chance of anybody making us hear by tapping in the refectory. Besides, how would he know where to tap?"

"True! The tapping can't have come from that side."

"It sounded as if it did," said Figgins.

"Still, you say yourself that it's impossible."

"Yes; unless it was—was——"

"The ghost!"

"Well, of course, it wasn't the ghost," said Figgins uneasily. "But it's queer. You know the story runs that that old blind monk used to go tapping with his stick up and down the refectory, and—— Of course, it's not!"

"Yes, of course it is," agreed Tom Merry. "Now, the tapping couldn't have come through a solid wall eight feet thick, and it didn't come from the door, nor yet from the window. It stands to reason, therefore, that it was tapping from the room above."

"That's only a garret, with nobody in it."

"A joker might be up there. Or else from the next study."

"That's Pratt's."

"Or else from the room underneath."

Figgins shook his head.

"It's a prefect's room underneath. You can't imagine a Sixth-Form prefect tapping on his ceiling to scare us?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"I suppose not. Look here, we're going to look into this thing. If we don't clear it up, it will get about that the school is haunted."

"Well, it's been haunted about five hundred years or so."

"Yes; but really haunted I mean. The tapping came either from the garret on top, or from Pratt's study."

"It didn't sound like it."

"Perhaps not; but it must have. We were so taken by surprise that we didn't listen very carefully. Now, let's have a peep in the garret, and if there's no sign of the joker there, we'll interview Pratt."

"Good!"

The juniors quietly left the study. There was no one in the corridor. Kerr lighted a bicycle lamp, and led the way up the narrow stairs. Tom Merry tried the garret door, and found it locked. There was no key.

"I remember, now," said Figgins. "That room is always kept locked."

"You might have remembered that before we fagged upstairs," grunted Lowther. "Just like a New House ass."

"Oh, come down," said Tom Merry. "It must have been Pratt."

The juniors descended again, and stopped at Pratt's door. Figgins tapped at it, and opened it, and the investigators looked in. Pratt's gas was burning, and Pratt was standing by the table with a hammer in his hand.

The sight of the hammer was enough for the juniors. They immediately connected it with the mysterious tapping. They did not stop to ask questions. They streamed into the study and collared the amazed Pratt, and bumped him over on the floor.

"Hallo!" yelled Pratt. "Oh! What's the matter? Ow! Groo! Help!"

"I'll teach you to tap on the wall of my study," said Figgins, as he sat on Pratt's chest, and jerked the hammer away from him. "I'll tap on your silly head!"

"Eh? What? Ow!"

"Bump him over!" exclaimed Tom Merry wrathfully. "The silly ass! The howling duffer to play ghost!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Monty Lowther.

"What are you cackling at, Monty?"

"I was thinking of Taggles and the ghost of St. Jim's."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Oh, that was different, of course. We did that to cure him of his bad habits of soaking gin in the stables. As for this ass——"

"This dummy!" said Figgins.

"This howling idiot!" said Kerr.

"This shrieking duffer——"

"Hold on!" yelled Pratt. "What's the matter? Lemme gerrup! What have I done? Are you all off your silly rockers?"

"You've played ghost."

"I haven't."

"You've tapped on the wall with that hammer——"

"I didn't."

"To make us think it was the ghost of the old monk."

"I never did anything of the sort."

"You don't mean to say you've got the cheek to deny it?"

"Yes, I do," roared Pratt. "You howling dummies! I haven't tapped on any beastly wall. You ought to be shoved into a lunatic asylum."

"You didn't tap on the wall?" gasped Figgins.

"No, I didn't."

"What were you doing with that hammer, then?"

"That hammer? I was just going to nail the leg on my chair. It came off this afternoon when Fatty Wynn sat on it."

"Had you been doing any hammering?"

"No; I'd only just got the hammer out of the box."

Figgins allowed the rumpled and dusty Fourth-Former to rise to his feet. It was becoming clear that the investigators had been a little too hasty, and that Pratt was not the guilty party after all.

"Look here, Pratt!" said Figgins impressively. "Didn't you tap on my wall, honour bright?"

"No, I didn't. Honest Injun."

"And nobody else in your study did?" asked Tom Merry.

"Nobody's been here except myself."

"Then I'm blessed if I know what to make of it," said Figgins. "I'm sorry we bumped you, Pratt. It was a mistake."

"That's all very well," growled Pratt. "That won't get the dust off my clothes, or take this bump off the back of my head, will it?"

"I suppose not," said Figgins. "Can't be helped, though. Accidents will happen in the best-regulated studies, you know. You ought to be thankful."

"Blessed if I can see anything to be thankful for."

"Well, you might have a black eye and a thick ear," said Figgins. "We let you down lightly, you know, considering that we suspected you of playing ghost."

Pratt grunted. It was evident that he did not feel very thankful. He rubbed the back of his head, and the juniors, more puzzled than ever, crowded out of the study.

"I don't know what to make of it," said Figgins candidly, in the passage. "Of course, ghosts are all rot!"

"Of course they are."

"But if it wasn't a ghost, what was it?"

There was a general shaking of heads. The juniors gave it up.

"All the same, I don't believe it was the ghost of St. Jim's," said Tom Merry; "and we're going to look into it. You New House chaps do the same, and between us we'll discover the jokist."

"Right you are," said Figgins.

And they parted. Tom Merry and Lowther groping their way back through the mist to the School House, decidedly puzzled by the strange occurrence.

CHAPTER 5. Another Mystery.

MANNERS was waiting for the chums of the Shell at the door of the School House. He looked relieved when he saw them.

"You've got back, then," was his greeting. "Blessed if I hadn't begun to think that you were lost in the fog. I had a lot of trouble getting back myself. It's getting thicker."

"Yes, by Jove!"

"Anything up?" asked Manners, looking at them. "You look as if something has happened. A row with Figgins & Co.?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No; but something has happened." And he explained the mysterious occurrence in Figgins's study. Manners listened with a curious expression on his face.

"There, what do you make of that?" asked Tom Merry.

"You didn't have anything to drink in Figgins's study, I hope?" said Manners.

"Why, you ass—"

"Well, that sounds like a yarn that a fellow would tell after an evening at the Golden Pig," said Manners. "Of course, imagination will supply the place of whisky."

"Look here, Manners!"

"Oh, of course, I believe in the ghost if you do," said Manners. "As a patriotic member of the School House I'm bound to back up the ghost."

"We heard a distinct tap, tap, tap—"

"That's it," said Lowther. "Tap, tap, tap!"

"Ahem!" said Manners. "You had been talking ghost, I suppose?"

"Yes; I was saying to Figgins—"

"Well, that was it, then. You worked up your imagination with a ghost yarn, and your nerves did the rest," said Manners, with an air of superior knowledge. "Young fellows like you—"

"Hark at the rotter! How old are you, you duffer?"

"Old enough not to believe in ghosts," grinned Manners.

"It's all right, my sons. It was a case of nerves on your part."

"And it's a case of confounded cheek on your part!" growled Lowther. "I tell you we heard the tap, tap, tap—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, let's get away from that cackling ass!" said Tom Merry. "We've got to see Blake about the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.' Come on!"

They went upstairs, leaving Manners still cackling. The ghost story seemed to amuse him very much. Tom Merry knocked at the door of Study No. 6, and there was a sound within. He opened the door and went in with Lowther. The study was quite dark.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What the deuce are you sitting here in the dark for?"

There was no reply. A faint sound came indistinctly through the darkness, and that was all. Dead silence followed.

"Look out," muttered Lowther. "This means a jape, I suppose."

The two Shell fellows drew closer together and put up their fists. Between the chums of the Shell and the Fourth-Formers of Study No. 6 combats were frequent.

"Look here," exclaimed Tom Merry, peering into the darkness round him, "we know you're there, because we heard you move. Show a light. It's pax, you asses! We've come about the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.'"

There was no reply.

"You duffers!" roared Tom Merry, growing exasperated. "If you want a row, come on, and we'll give you a jolly licking to start with!"

But there was still dead silence in Study No. 6—not even a sound of breathing coming to the ears of the listening chums of the Shell.

"Strike a light," muttered Tom Merry.

Lowther hesitated a moment. He guessed that the chums of Study No. 6 were waiting for the visitors to strike a light in order to rush them out of the study, or perhaps to drench them with ink, or some little pleasantry of that sort. But with his eyes on the alert for an attack, he struck a match. The light flickered and glimmered over the study, and showed it to be empty excepting for themselves.

"They're—they're not here!" gasped Lowther, in blank amazement.

Tom Merry's face was a study.

Monty Lowther mechanically turned the gas on and lighted it. The illumination showed up every corner of the study. Tom Merry looked round, from the dark-panelled walls to the cupboard, from the cupboard to the coal-locker, from the coal-locker to the table and under it. But there was no sign to be seen of Blake, Digby, Herries, or D'Arcy—the chums of Study No. 6.

Lowther gave his leader a startled look.

"Where are they, Tom?"

"They can't have been in here."

"But somebody was in here. We heard 'em before we came in, and then—"

"It might have been a rat."

Lowther shook his head.

"It was more noise than a rat could make."

"I don't know. This is the oldest part of the School House, and this oak panelling has been up here for hundreds of years," said Tom Merry. "The place is very likely full of rats. Though, as a matter of fact, I'd almost swear that I heard a footstep."

"It's queer! I say, Tom—" Lowther paused.

"Well, Monty?"

"I—I—I suppose it's not the—the—"

Tom Merry laughed rather constrainedly.

"The ghost again! I suppose not. It's a far cry from the New House to Study No. 6, in the School House, Monty."

"I—I—I suppose so. But it's queer. I don't like it."

"The place seems to be getting full of mysteries," said Tom Merry. "Let's go and look for Blake."

They left the study, leaving the gas burning. Jack Blake and his chums were soon run to earth. Blake and Herries were talking football in the common-room, and Digby and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were playing chess near them. Arthur Augustus was looking at Blake with an injured expression as the chums of the Shell came in.

"Weally, Blake, I wish you would go farthah off to talk all that wot," said the swell of the School House. "You are puttin' me off my stwoke—I mean my game."

"Your move," said Digby.

"Yaas, but Blake is intewwuptin' the thwread of my thoughts."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Jack Blake. "Can't you

take your chess somewhere else?" As I was saying, Herries, when we were playing Greyfriars—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"That chap Wharton was very good indeed. He was almost up to my own form—"

"Blake, deah boy—"

"And a long way ahead of Tom Merry or Figgins—"

"Your move, Gussy," said Digby. "If you're not going to move, I'll have a nap, and you can wake me up presently."

"I am goin' to move, Dig. But these wotten boundahs are intewwuptin' the thweed of my thoughts, you know, by talkin' footah in my ear. I weally cannot concentrate my bwain on the game while these uttah asses are chattewin' their silly football close to me. Howevah, I will make an effort. Yaas, wathah! I will shove my wook alone."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy moved his rook. Digby grinned gleefully, and as soon as the swell of St. Jim's had let the piece go, he jammed down his knight.

"Mate!"

"I weally do not see that, Dig, deah boy."

"You did it yourself by moving your rook," grinned Digby. "If you had left it on that file, I couldn't have put my knight there. You'd have had it."

"Bai Jove, I think you're wight! I will move my wook back."

"No, you won't," said Digby.

"Yaas, I will, Dig, with your permish. Take your knight away, and I'll move my wook back where it was, and we can go on again."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"We'll have another game if you like."

"I would wathah continue this game."

"But this game's finished."

"Not at all, deah boy, if you weplace your knight, and I move my wook back. I am convinced that I shall win this game if we continue."

"Yes, I dare say you will, if you take back every faulty move," grunted Digby. "That's the worst of you beginners; you want moves back, and when you've badgered your victim into losing, you think you've won the game."

"I am convinced that I shall win this game if we keep on long enough, Dig. Besides, I weally made that faulty move by bein' bothered by Blake and Hewvies. How am I to mate you when those silly duffahs are chattewin' football bosh in my ear all the beastly time?"

"Hallo, has Gussy lost?" asked Blake, glancing over the board. "I expected as much. How a chap like Gussy expects to be able to play chess is a puzzle to me."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Hallo," said Herries, "look at the time! I've got to go and feed my bulldog."

"Don't get lost in the mist, kid."

"Weally, I wish Hewvies had gone to feed his beastly bulldog before, and I should not have moved my wook. I can see now that I should have bwrought up the queen to bishop's fifth."

"And I should have wiped it off with my bishop!" shrieked Digby.

"Bai Jove, so you would! This is a game that requires thinkin' out. I will now weplace my wook—"

"Rats!"

"Weally, Dig, I do not considah that the wules of a game are a reason for lackin' politeness. I weally think—"

"More rats!" said Digby. "I'll begin a new game if you like. I've won this."

"I refuse to begin a new game."

"Well, it's about time we did some prep.," yawned Digby, sweeping the pieces off the chess-board into the box.

"Bai Jove! Now you have wuined the game!"

"The game was finished."

"Not if I had weplaced my wook—"

"Oh, blow your rook!" said Digby, getting up.

"Oh, vewy well," said D'Arcy, with dignity. "As I had pwactically won the game—"

"Eh! You had what?"

"Pwactically won the game."

"Why, you ass, and I mated you with—"

"I refuse to be called an ass."

Tom Merry laughed as he joined the chums of the Fourth. "It's rough on Gussy," he said. "If he were allowed to retract every move, and move the pieces as often as he liked, he would win every time."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy unsuspectingly. "But Dig is wathah an obstinate bwute, you know. He thinks he won that game."

"So I did!" said Digby warmly.

"Yaas, but if I had weplaced my wook—"

"Oh, let it drop!" said Blake. "What do you want, Merry? Another toboggan down the School House steps?"

"No," said Tom Merry, laughing. "I want to consult you about the Grand Christmas Double Number of 'Tom Merry's Weekly.'"

"Good!" said Blake. "Let's get up to the study. Can't talk here with all this chatter going on."

And the juniors adjourned to Study No. 6.

CHAPTER 6.

Binks Catches It.

"HALLO! Somebody's lighted the gas!" exclaimed Blake, as the juniors entered the Fourth Form passage, and came in sight of the door of Study No. 6, which Tom Merry had left ajar.

"Yes, we did," said Tom Merry. "We went up to the study for you before we looked into the common-room. And a curious thing is—"

He paused, half doubtful whether to speak about the matter. He knew how absurd it would sound to Blake.

Jack Blake looked at him curiously.

"Well, what's a curious thing?" he asked. "There were two curious things in our study when you and Lowther went there."

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Arthur Augustus. "I wegard that as wathah funny."

"Do you?" said Lowther. "Then I can only say you're very easily pleased."

"We thought we heard somebody in your study," said Tom Merry. "We went in in the dark, you know, and heard somebody move—or thought we did—"

"Well, was there anybody there?" asked Blake.

"No, the room was empty."

"Then you must have imagined it, I suppose. Have you been reading any ghost stories lately, or borrowing Binks's thrilling American novels about Deadwood Bill and Gore-Stained Dick?"

"No, I haven't!" said Tom Merry indignantly. "And I didn't imagine it. There certainly was a sound in the study— And my hat! There it is again!"

As the juniors came up the passage, a sound was unmistakably heard in Study No. 6. As Blake, Digby, and D'Arcy were there, and Herries had gone to feed his bulldog, no one had any business in Study No. 6, and Blake looked wrathful.

"Some bounder nosing about our quarters!" he said. "Perhaps it's Skimpole up to some of his amateur detective wheezes again. I'll jolly soon see!"

And Jack Blake cut along the passage, and pushed open the door of Study No. 6, and rushed in. The others followed him quickly. There was a startled exclamation in the study.

"Binks!" exclaimed Blake.

"Binks!" repeated Tom Merry.

It was Binks, the Buttons of the School House. He stood in the full light of the gas, looking startled, his face very red. Jack Blake advanced towards him with a grim look on his face.

"Binks!" he repeated. "Now, Binks, will you kindly explain what you are doing in my study?"

"I—if you please, Master Blake—"

"I don't please!" said Blake. "I don't like a rotter nosing about my quarters. I don't suppose you'd come here to bone anything, but what do you want, anyway? I know you're a mean beast, Binks! I saw you reading a postcard the other day before you put it up in the rack. Come to think of it, I may as well give you a licking for that now!"

"Oh, Master Blake—"

"Nosing about in a fellow's study!" said Blake indignantly. "To say nothing of frightening Tom Merry and Lowther—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Digby and D'Arcy. Tom Merry and Lowther turned pink.

"Who was frightened?" demanded Lowther warmly.

"What are you gassing about?"

"Besides, it wasn't Binks," said Tom Merry. "Don't I keep telling you that we looked round the study, and there wasn't anybody in it?"

"Oh, I suppose it was Binks hiding under the table."

"We looked under the table."

"Well, behind the screen, then."

"We looked behind the screen."

"Well, you must have been jolly scared to go searching through a room like that," said Blake. "I haven't the slightest doubt that it was Binks all the time."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Why not ask him?" suggested Digby.

"No good asking him. He's such a fearful crammer," said Blake. "I've heard him roll out whoppers by the

Binks the Buttons struggled frantically, and in the struggle he shed papers on all sides, most of them with lurid, coloured pictures.



bushel to Mrs. Mimms and Taggles. Now, I'm not going to have a rotter hiding in my study and frightening Tom Merry—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wasn't frightened."

"Rats! I can't have visitors to my study frightened out of their wits—"

"Look here, Blake—"

"Don't interrupt me! Can't you let a chap talk in his own study?"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard it as wotten bad form for you to keep on intewwuptin' Blake. Tom Mewwy. You see

"Oh, ring off, Gussy!" said Blake ungratefully. "As I was saying—"

"You are intewwuptin' me now, Blake!"

"I know I am. As I was saying, I can't have visitors to my study scared almost into fits, and so I see no alternative to licking this fat little beast. What do you fellows say?"

"Yaas, wathah! I am always sowwy to see a chap thwashed, but undah the cires, I see no alternative to administewin' to Binks a weally feahful thwashin'!"

"Well, a thump or two would teach him a lesson about nosing in fellows' studies," said Tom Merry. "Not too hard, though, or you'll burst the buttons off him."

Binks was looking very much alarmed. All the time his eyes had been fixed longingly on the door, but the group of juniors blocked the way of escape.

"Perhaps an ebony ruler applied a dozen times will have the proper effect," said Blake thoughtfully. "Do you think it will have the proper effect, Binks?"

"Oh, Master Blake, I wasn't doing any 'arm!" said Binks. "I—I came in here to dust the study—"

"Where's your duster?" asked Lowther.

"I—I forgot it!"

Tom Merry's brow grew hard and stern.

"Don't tell lies, Binks!" he said directly. "You didn't come here to dust the study. If you've got a decent explanation to make, why don't you make it?"

"I—I—I wasn't doing any 'arm!"

"If there's anything I despise," said Blake, "it's a chap who noses into things that don't concern him. I suppose we'd better flog him over the table and give him a dozen with the ruler."

"Good! Hallo! Get out, Skimmey; we're busy!"

The large head, round spectacles, and knobby features of Herbert Skimpole, the brainy man of the Shell, had presented themselves at the door. Skimpole, the amateur Socialist of St. Jim's, blinked at the juniors cordially.

"Ah, I have been looking for you!" he said. "I hear that there is a project on foot to publish a double number of the 'Weekly' at Christmas—"

"Can't you see we're busy?" demanded Blake. "Get out!"

"This is a most important matter, Blake. I am doing an article—"

"Travel! We are trying a prisoner at the bar, and finding

him guilty of nosing into this study," said Blake. "We are just going to execute him."

"Har, har, har!" murmured Binks. "They little know!"

"What are you mumbling about, Binks?"

"Har, har, har!"

"Really, Blake," said Skimpole, "as a sincere Socialist, I must enter a protest! Binks has as much right in this study as you have!"

Jack Blake stared.

"Blessed if I see how you make that out!" he said. "It's my study."

"Nonsense!" said Skimpole loftily. "Everybody has an equal right to everything everywhere, and therefore—"

"Oh, ring off, Skimmy!" implored Tom Merry. "Don't start that, old chap!"

"I am compelled by a sense of duty to start it, Tom Merry. A sincere and earnest Socialist is never known to ring off. My friends, I—"

"Cheese it! Get out the ruler, Dig!"

"I protest!" said Skimpole solemnly. "Binks has as much right here as you have, and besides, on the basis of Determinism, it is easy to find a complete defence for him. Is he guilty of prying and meanness? Yes. But is he to blame for this? Certainly not. Man is what he is from the combined influence of his heredity and environment. It naturally follows that nobody is to blame for anything. There is no such thing as wrong, for every result being the effect of a cause, and every cause the producer of a result, how can you logically or reasonably lay the blame of any action upon any particular person? And therefore—"

"Will you leave off?" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Certainly not! As a sincere Socialist, I cannot leave off. Binks's rascally conduct is the result of heredity and enviro-ny—I mean, hereditament. No, I don't; I mean—"

"Get out!"

"Reared in the filthy surroundings of a slum—"

"Ere, wot's that?" said Binks.

"I say, reared in the filthy surroundings of a slum—"

Blake took Skimpole by the shoulders, and flung him through the doorway. The amateur Socialist spun round, and sat down in the passage. Jack Blake shook a warning finger at him.

"Now, you travel!" he said. "We're getting fed up with Socialism. Why can't you take up photography, or something, instead, like a sensible fellow?"

"Really, Blake," gasped Skimpole, "I am hardly likely to take up photography instead of the cause of the hungry, downtrodden millions—"

"Oh, seat! Here, hold that young rotter!"

Binks had made a sudden bolt for the door. Two or three pairs of hands grasped him, and he was bumped over on the carpet. He struggled frantically, and in the struggle a number of papers came out from under his tunic and in his pockets. He shed papers on all sides, most of them with lurid, coloured pictures. With a final effort he broke loose and bolted from the study, rushing right into Skimpole, who was slowly getting up.

The amateur Socialist went rolling over with a gasp, and Binks rolled over him. He picked himself up in a moment, and scudded along the passage and disappeared.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole, rubbing his head, which had come into rather rough contact with the floor. "Dear me! I am quite breathless. I regard this conduct of Blake's as almost rude; in fact, quite rude! Dear me!"

CHAPTER 7.

Skimpole does Not Contribute an Article.

"HE'S gone!" growled Blake. "He ought to have had a licking. What did you let him get away for, Tom Merry?"

"I was just going to ask you that question."

"I regard you as a pair of duffahs!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, fixing his eyeglass disparagingly upon the two. "You both let the young wascal get away."

"Well, you didn't stop him, ass!"

"I wufuse to be called an ass! I—"

"What's all this stuff he's left here?" exclaimed Blake, collecting up some of the books on the floor. "My hat! What a collection!"

The papers Binks had involuntarily shed over the study floor in the struggle for freedom were indeed a curious collection. Blake spread them over the table, and the juniors looked at them grinning. The pictures were mostly in colours, and the titles were enough to give any boy a dozen nightmares.

"Deadwood Bill the Broncho Buster!" grinned Blake.

"My hat! And here's 'The Dead-shot Desperado, or the Trail of Guilty Gore!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Red-handed Dick, or the Road Agents of the Rocky Mountains!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! The young ass ought to be stopped from weadin' all that wot!" said Arthur Augustus. "It must make him dream howwid dreams, I should think."

"Hallo! What's this? 'The Spotted Spectre, or the Ghastly Ghost of Golden Gulch!' Ha, ha, ha! I think this about takes the cake."

"My only hat! What are we going to do with this ghastly stuff?"

"It ought to be burned," said Tom Merry; "but you can't burn another fellow's property. Roll the rubbish up, and sling it to Binks when you see him again."

"It ought to be disinfected," said Blake, with a sniff. "There's enough blood in that heap of rubbish for any ordinary battlefield. The young duffer! This sort of stuff gets into his head, you know, and makes him a silly ass. Tie it up with string, Dig, and he can have it back. It would serve him right to burn it."

The precious parcel was tied up with string and put aside. Then the juniors came to business.

"We're thinking of a Christmas Double Number of the 'Weekly,'" said Tom Merry. "Figgins has subscribed to the idea."

"Good!" said Blake. "You ought to have asked us before you asked Figgins, of course."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But it's a good wheeze. I can turn out a double instalment of my poetic serial."

"And I will do a double fashion column, deah boy!"

"I can make up as many conundrums as you like," offered Dig.

Tom Merry grinned.

"Many thanks! Not taking any just at present. My idea is to have a double number all of Christmas stuff, leaving over the usual piffle—I mean, the usual contributions."

"Yaas, that's not a bad ideah! I wathah fancy myself as a wintah of wealdy good Chwistmas stowies, you know."

"I am going to work up the legend of St. Jim's into a ghost story," said Tom Merry. "You can leave that to me. All contributions will be carefully considered—"

"Oh, rats!"

"And if unsuitable, will be returned, provided that a stamped and addressed envelope is enclosed with the piffle."

"Cheese it! You seem to forget that you are addressing the sub-editors of the paper. I'd like to see any of my stuff returned, that's all!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course, an editor is bound to use the blue pencil sometimes. Otherwise, what's the good of being an editor?"

"Bosh! Your job is to put in our contributions, and space the thing out, and get it ready for the printer, and to cut the editorial remarks as short as possible," said Blake. "That's my idea of a chief editor."

"Then I can only say that your idea is simply rotten! I—"

"If you know more about running a paper than I do—"

"Well, I should hope so."

"Look here, you duffer—"

"Look here, you dummy—"

The door of the study reopened, interrupting an argument that was growing decidedly warm. Skimpole's big head and big spectacles came into view again.

"I say, please listen to me," he said patiently. "As a sincere Socialist, I am opposed to violence, especially when directed towards myself. As you are bringing out a special Christmas Number of the 'Weekly,' it occurred to me that you might like an article on Socialism, in order to rescue the paper from being wholly filled with bosh. I have written an article—"

"Then the next step is to burn it," said Tom Merry. "No controversial matter can be admitted to the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.'"

"But this is not controversial matter, Merry. I make the thing so clear that it is not possible for anybody to think of controverting it."

"Bai Jove!"

"It is clear even to an intellect like D'Arcy—"

"If you intended that remark to be taken in a dis-pawagin' sense, Skimpole—"

"Not at all, D'Arcy. As a Determinist I cannot disparage anything or anybody. You are a creature of hereditament and enviro-ny—I mean—"

"Nevah mind what you mean, deah boy! I expect it is only some piffle."

"Therefore I do not blame you for being a brainless ass—"

"Eh?"

"It would be wrong to blame you for being an ass."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "We've all been unjust to Gussy, then. We've always blamed him for it."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy."

"It would be as unjust to blame D'Arcy for being an ass as to blame Tom Merry for being a duffer—"

"Eh? What's that?"

"Or Blake for being a noodle—"

"What?" roared Blake.

"Or Lowther for making rotten jokes—"

"Hand me over that ruler," said Monty Lowther.

"Pray do not become violent, Lowther. Surely you prefer me to tell you the truth! You will thus be able to learn your true character, and to improve yourself as the result of self-knowledge. I have here an article made up of extracts from the two hundred and twenty-fourth chapter of my unpublished book on Socialism—"

"Then you'd better put it back where it came from," said Tom Merry, "and take yourself away at the same time. We don't want to slay you."

"But we shall be undah the painful necessity of doin' so, Skimpole, if you do not immediately buzz off," said D'Arcy.

"I nevah heard such feahful cheek in my life, you know! Fancy that object chawactewisin' me as an ass! Bai Jove!"

"The article deals with the subject of Determinism," went on Skimpole, unheeding. "I explain the position of the Determinists. By tracing everything to heredity and environment, I prove that nobody is to blame for anything. There is no wrong, and there is no right. Nothing is either wrong, or right, or both. Therefore—"

"Is that a real 'ism'?" asked Blake, with interest.

"I assure you that there are thousands of Determinists in the country, Blake, and—"

"Outside lunatic asylums, I mean?"

"Really, Blake—"

Monty Lowther took a grip on the ruler.

"Now, Skimpy, it can't be right for you to talk that piffle," he said argumentatively.

"On the contrary, it is quite right—"

"Not at all. There is no right, and no wrong. It is not right for you to jabber to us like a parrot or a gramophone, and it's not wrong for me to jab you in the ribs with the end of this ruler."

"Oh—oh! Really, Lowther— Oh!"

"You can't regard it as wrong. If anything is to blame you can shove it on to my heredity or my environment, which you like," said Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors.

"Oh—oh! Really, Lowther, you are hurting—oh—my—oh—ribs! Oh!"

"I'm afraid I shall go on hurting them until you are on the other side of that door," said Monty Lowther blandly.

"Oh—oh! Help! G-r-r-r! I'm going! Leave off, you beast!"

Skimpole fairly ran from a final lunge of the ruler, and dashed down the passage, and the editorial staff of "Tom Merry's Weekly" sent a ringing yell of laughter after the indignant Socialist.

CHAPTER 8.

The Master of the Shell is Puzzled.

CLANG! Clang!

Tom Merry yawned, and sat up in bed. The rising-bell was fingering through the misty, wintry air.

"Another beastly misty morning," remarked Tom Merry, as he got out of bed. "Wake up, Manners! Time to get up, Lowther!"

The hero of the Shell plunged his face cheerily into the icy water in his basin. It was cold, but it was refreshing. He looked round as the dormitory door opened. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, looked into the dormitory.

"Good-morning, sir," said Tom Merry, somewhat surprised by the visit.

"Good-morning, Merry," said Mr. Linton. "Are you all awake, boys? I wish to speak to all of you."

The Shell sat up in bed. The Form master's words made them wakeful enough. Mr. Linton glanced along the row of interested and surprised faces.

"Was any boy in this dormitory out of bed after lights out last night?" he asked.

There was no reply. The juniors looked at one another in surprise.

"I have a particular reason for asking," said Mr. Linton.

"Was any boy here out of bed after the light was put out in the dormitory?"

"I do not know, sir," said Tom Merry, as Mr. Linton's glance seemed to rest upon him. "I was not, for one, sir, and I don't think anybody else was."

"I think not, sir," said Lowther.

"I didn't hear anybody, sir," said Gore.

Mr. Linton glanced along the array of surprised faces with his keen eyes, and then nodded, as if satisfied.

"Very well, my boys," he said. "I have another question to ask. Can any of you tell me whether you know any person who is playing tricks in the School House—playing ghost, or anything of that sort?"

The juniors could only stare.

Tom Merry turned red. The Form master's eye was fixed upon him instantly like a gimlet.

"Merry, do you know something about this?"

"If you please, sir—"

"Come, speak out!" said Mr. Linton sternly. "I need not tell you to tell the truth, Merry. I am sure you will do that!"

"If you are referring to Taggles, sir—"

"Taggles! I don't understand!"

"Oh!"

"You had better go on, Merry. What is this about Taggles?"

"We japed him—I—I mean, we played a little joke on him in the mist last night, sir, in the quadrangle. I pretended to be the ghost of St. Jim's. He didn't see me in the mist, and I spoke in a deep voice. It was only a lark, sir."

"I cannot approve of that kind of joke, Merry, but I was not referring to that, which I had not heard of. Taggles has not complained. The incident I am speaking of has occurred in the School House, after lights-out last night."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, looking relieved. "Then I don't know anything about it, sir."

"Very good; I accept your assurance. I hope that no boy in my Form is guilty of this absurd trick."

And Mr. Linton went out and shut the door. There was a buzz of voices immediately in the Shell dormitory. The boys were amazed.

"He didn't say what had happened," Manners remarked wonderingly. "Has old Linton been seeing ghosts?"

Tom Merry started.

"By Jove, I wonder whether he has heard that tapping—the same that we heard over in Figgins's study in the New House."

"Thought you heard," corrected Manners.

"Oh, rats to you!"

"Eh? What's that about tapping?" asked Gore.

Tom Merry explained. Gore burst into a laugh, in which many of the Shell joined, as they tumbled out of bed.

"My hat!" said Gore. "Fancy Tom Merry seeing spooks in his old age! I suppose it's a case of nerves. Ha, ha!"

"This comes of fagging over editorial duties, and getting in a low state," said Macdonald. "I've been going to offer to take over the editorship of the 'Weekly' for some time, Merry—"

"You needn't trouble," said Tom Merry.

"But if you're getting into this shocking state of nerves—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

And Tom Merry dressed himself, regardless of the cackles of the Shell fellows, though there was a flush in his cheeks. Nobody believed in the mysterious tapping, and it was very hard for a healthy, clear-headed lad like Tom Merry to be accused of having "nerves." Meanwhile, Mr. Linton had gone on towards the Fourth Form dormitory, with a thoughtful frown upon his face. He opened the door of the Fourth Form room, in time to hear the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy raised in remonstrance.

"I utterly refuse to move, Blake. It is useless for you to weep that the wisin' bell has gone. It is now a question of dig with me, and I refuse. If you bring that sponge near me, I shall no longah regard you as a friend."

"Get up, ass!"

"I refuse to be called an ass. I—"

"Boys!"

"Bai Jove, is that Lathom! Yaas, sir, I'm wisin' immediately," and Arthur Augustus hopped out of bed.

"Boys," said Mr. Linton, "I wish to ask you a question. Were any of you out of the dormitory after lights out, last night?"

The Fourth-Formers stared. They were surprised enough to receive a visit from the master of the Shell, and his question surprised them still more. If any of them had been out after lights out, it was the business of Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, or of the housemaster.

"Come, answer me," said Mr. Linton testily.

"No, sir," said Jack Blake. "I wasn't, and I don't think anybody else was."

"Yaas, wathah!"

No one else spoke. Mr. Linton looked searchingly at the boys, and then nodded and left the dormitory. But he was not done his morning walk, yet. He went on to the Third Form sleeping quarters, and looked in. Some of the Third were up, and some were still in bed. Three youths—Jameson, Gibson, and D'Arcy minor—were warming themselves with a pillow-fight, and they stopped in dismay as the grim face of the Shell master looked in.

"Was any boy absent from this dormitory after lights out, last night?" asked the master of the Shell.

The Third-Formers stared at the question, with as much astonishment as the Fourth Form or the Shell had shown.

"No, sir," said Wally D'Arcy, the younger brother of the great Arthur Augustus. "No, not that I know of, sir."

"Too jolly cold now for larks outside the dormitory, sir," said Curly Gibson.

"Very good!" said Mr. Linton, and he withdrew and closed the door.

He walked thoughtfully along the passage, and met Lefevre, of the Fifth, who was just coming from his dormitory.

"Stop a minute, Lefevre," said Mr. Linton.

"Yes, sir."

"Someone was playing a foolish trick last night," said Mr. Linton—"playing ghost. Are you aware whether any boy left your dormitory after lights out?"

"I'm pretty certain not, sir," said Lefevre, turning rather red. "I don't think a Fifth Form fellow would be likely to play a kid's trick like that, sir. That's what I say. A Fifth-Former would have more sense."

"I hope so," said Mr. Linton. "I have questioned the Lower Forms, and they all disclaim any knowledge of the matter. It is very curious."

"It must have been one of the kids, sir," said Lefevre. "That's what I say. It must have been one of the kids."

Mr. Linton nodded, and walked on. He went downstairs slowly and thoughtfully. Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, was standing in the hall, polishing his glasses. Mr. Lathom was a little, short-sighted gentleman, extremely good-natured, and very much liked by his Form, though the latter were very much given to "pulling the leg" of the good-natured master. His one little weakness was a curious faith he had in spiritualism, and he was deeply read in spiritualistic lore. He nodded cheerfully to Mr. Linton as he replaced the glasses upon his nose.

"Good-morning, Mr. Linton! Very misty again."

"Yes, indeed!" said Mr. Linton. "I suppose, sir"—he hesitated a moment—"I suppose you did not hear anything curious in the night?"

Mr. Lathom looked at him through his pince-nez.

"No, Mr. Linton. I—I do not quite understand. Has anything happened?"

"I was startled at a late hour last night," said the master of the Shell slowly, "by a mysterious tapping—"

Mr. Lathom gave a start.

"Pray go on!" he said eagerly.

"It was very strange," said Mr. Linton. "The sound appeared to come from the wall of my room where the panelling is placed before solid stone, and where there is no room on the other side. I may have been mistaken, of course, and the sound may have been produced from another quarter by means of a trick. I have questioned the boys, and they all disclaim having been out of the dormitories during the night. I was sitting up late, you understand, when I heard the tapping. It was repeated several times, and seemed to die away in the distance."

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom.

Mr. Linton stared at the Fourth Form master in astonishment.

"I do not understand you, Mr. Lathom."

"I will explain," said Mr. Lathom exultantly. "This means undoubtedly that I have succeeded at last."

"You have succeeded? How—in what?"

"In establishing communication with the unseen world," said Mr. Lathom solemnly. "Last night I was holding a seance, if I can call it a seance when I was alone. No manifestation came to me, I am sorry to say, and I was once more disappointed. I am convinced that I am a medium, Mr. Linton, yet I must say that I have had to endure continual disappointments."

Mr. Linton looked slightly impatient. He remembered Mr. Lathom's spiritualistic theories, and he wondered how an otherwise sensible man could waste his time on such absurdities.

"My efforts were, however, rewarded," said Mr. Lathom. "Although I received no communication myself, it is clear that a spirit was brought into the neighbourhood of my room. Unfortunately the tapping was heard by you instead

of me. Doubtless if I had heard it, I could have interpreted the message of the unseen."

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"

"Pray tell me all, my dear sir. Was this manifestation accompanied by an icy chill in the room?"

"It was not."

"Was there a sense of the mysterious and the awesome, which pervaded the room and caused you to feel yourself in the presence of the unearthly?"

"Nothing of the sort."

Mr. Lathom looked a little disconcerted.

"Ah, you are a sceptic!" he said. "Naturally the manifestation would be less clear to you than to a believer like myself. Yet it is curious that you should be honoured by this communication from the unseen, while I remained neglected."

"I have not the slightest doubt that it was some mischievous person playing a trick."

"I cannot admit that for a moment. It was evidently a manifestation of the invisible, and I am encouraged—very much encouraged."

And Mr. Lathom rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he walked away. The master of the Shell shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER 9.

Taggles' Terrible Experience.

TOM MERRY tapped Jack Blake on the shoulder as he came downstairs.

"I suppose it was you?" he remarked.

"Eh? You suppose what was me?" asked Blake.

"Playing tricks last night," said Tom Merry severely.

"What do you mean by pulling the august leg of our respected Form master?"

Blake grinned.

"Only I didn't," he said. "Linton came along asking questions this morning, but the Fourth Form-room has a clear conscience for once. It wasn't anybody in the Fourth—in the School House part of the Fourth, anyway."

"Linton looked serious. Somebody has been up to something."

"Yes, it looks like it. But he didn't go into particulars. If he had let us know what happened, I'd have looked into the matter. It's a giddy mystery."

"Mysteries seem to be rather piling on us lately," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I fancy the practical jostler is abroad, and wants sitting on."

"Yes, if we could find out—"

"Excuse me!" said Skimpole, who was coming by, stopping and blinking at the juniors through his big spectacles. "Did I hear you refer to a mystery? Anything of that sort could be quite safely placed in my hands. I think I have given you fellows pretty clear proof of what I can do as an amateur detective."

"You have," Blake agreed cordially. "You have shown us clearly enough that—"

"That you can make a howling ass of yourself," said Tom Merry.

"In the most unequalled style," assented Blake.

"Really, Blake, I flatter myself that my methods will compare favourably with those of Sexton Blake, Sherlock Holmes, or Ferrers Locke. What is the mystery you were speaking of? I will elucidate it."

"My dear ass—"

"Give me the details," said Skimpole, pulling out a huge notebook, and wetting the end of a pencil. "The details, please. Don't leave out anything; any trifle which may appear unimportant in your eyes, may assume a very different aspect to the trained eyes of a detective."

"My only hat!"

"What is the case? Have you lost something, Blake?"

"No; I am losing something now."

"That is very curious. What are you losing?"

"Patience."

"Really, Blake, I wish you would be serious. I am ready to elucidate the mystery, without any charge or expense to yourself."

"You know as much about it as we do," said Tom Merry, laughing. "It was what Linton was saying this morning in the dorm. Somebody seems to have been playing ghost."

"Oh, I see!" said Skimpole. "It was no one in the Shell, so it was probably Blake—"

"Ass! It wasn't anybody in the Fourth, either."

"If it was no one in the Shell or the Fourth, it must have been someone else, that is, of course, assuming that the occurrence actually happened," said Skimpole, with a wise shake of the head.

Tom Merry and Blake exchanged glances of admiration.

"Isn't it wonderful how he does these things?" said Blake. "He's worked that out in his head, you know."

"Without the aid of a net, too," said Tom Merry.

"That is nothing to what I can do," said Skimpole, who was never known to see a joke. "That is merely a beginning. I think it very probable that the trick was played by a youngster in the Third Form—young D'Arcy, very probably."

"Why Wally more than anybody else?"

"Well, he is a young rascal, full of mischief. I have heard that he has alluded to me in a most disrespectful way, and so it is perfectly clear that he has no respect for anything, and would be very likely to pull the leg of a Form master."

"Then you'd better follow up that clue," said Blake gravely. "Get on Wally's track, and if you bring the crime home to him, you shall have a reward. What do you say to a particularly thick ear as a reward?"

"Or a particularly blooming black eye?" suggested Tom Merry.

"Or a bumpy nose."

"Well, he will very likely get all three if he begins tracking down young Wally," said Tom Merry, as Skimpole shut up his notebook and walked away. "Joking apart, though, it's a curious matter, and I should like to know exactly what happened last night."

The juniors went in to breakfast, and the Shell boys noticed that Mr. Linton's face was a little grimmer than usual.

All the juniors were curious to know exactly what had happened during the night. It was Mellish, of the Fourth, the Paul Pry of the School House, who first enlightened them. The Terrible Three were talking it over with Blake in the quad, just before morning chapel, when Mellish came up with a knowing expression on his face.

"I dare say you chaps would like to know what happened to Linton last night," he remarked.

"What do you know about it, Peeping Tom?" asked Blake.

Mellish sniffed.

"I know what I know. Perhaps I sha'n't tell you, after all."

"Don't, then. Cut!"

"Oh, I don't mind telling you. Linton was sitting up late in his room, and he heard a tapping on the wall."

"Phew!" said Tom Merry.

"It was a mysterious ghostly tapping. Linton doesn't believe it was a ghost, though. He thinks it was some practical joker."

"How do you know anythin' about it, deah boy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I pwesume that the respected mastah of the Shell hasn't taken you into his confidence ovah the mattah."

"I happened to hear him telling Mr. Railton."

"You happened to have your ear to a keyhole at the time, I suppose," said Tom Merry, with a contemptuous sniff.

"I didn't! It was in the hall, and they didn't happen to see me."

"Or they would have happened to cuff you, I expect," said Blake. "What do you mean by listening to a private conversation, and then coming and reporting it to us?"

"Makin' us beastly accomplices, in a way," said D'Arcy.

"Well, you rotters," said Mellish, "how did you think I found out? You let me tell you."

"Don't begin to argue about it," said Blake loftily; "you only make matters worse. The best thing you can do is to cut."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Mellish, looking far from amiable, cut. Figgins & Co. were coming over to go to morning chapel, and the great Figgins stopped to speak to Tom Merry.

"Such a lark!" he said, with a grin.

"Anything happened on your side?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather; somebody's been pulling old Ratty's leg."

This was Figgins's disrespectful way of alluding to Mr. Horace Ratcliff, his housemaster. Mr. Ratcliff was not popular in the New House—nor out of it, for that matter.

"You remember that tapping we heard in my study last night, Merry?" went on Figgins. "We couldn't make head or tail of it. Of course, it wasn't a ghost?"

"Of course it wasn't!" agreed Tom Merry. "Blessed if I know what it was, though."

"Well, Ratty has been hearing some tapping in the night."

"My Aunt Maria! Has he really?"

"Yes, rather! He's raising Cain about it in the New House. He says somebody has been playing ghost, you know, to startle him, but everybody denies having the least knowledge of it. Blessed if I know what to make of it!"

"Bai Jove! I regard this as a weally remarkable occurence."

"The same thing's happened on our side," explained

Tom Merry to Figgins. "Mr. Linton has been hearing the spirit-rapping."

Figgins whistled.

"It's curious," he said. "Looks as if there might be something in the ghost story, doesn't it? The old monk is always supposed to come tapping along at Christmas time."

"Yes; but that's all rot, you know."

"Yes, in the daylight," grinned Figgins. "It won't seem such rot to-night when we go to bed, I'm thinking."

"Mere imagination, my sons," said Jack Blake, with an air of superior knowledge. "This is what comes of reading the 'Spotted Spectre'; or, the 'Ghastly Ghost of Golden Gulch.'"

"You ass!" growled Figgins. "Do you think I would read piffle like that?"

"Or do you think I would?" demanded Tom Merry warmly.

"What have you done with all that literature belonging to Binks, then?" grinned Blake. "I gave it to you to take away yesterday evening. My idea is—"

"I'm going to give it to the young fathead as soon as I see him. I've a good mind to give him a thick ear along with it. As for that tapping, we've really heard it."

Jack Blako shook his head.

"My dear chap, it was a lively imagination, that's all."

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agwee with Blake in this mattah, deah boys. Tom Mewwy is the victim of an excited imagination, pwobably due to weadin' luwid litewature—"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tom Merry. "Hallo, herc's Taggles. Let's ask him his opinion on the subject of ghosts. I have an idea that he saw one in the mist last night."

Monty Lowther chuckled, and so did the others, who had been told the story of Taggles and the spectre of the mist.

"Hallo, Taggles! Good-morning!" said Tom Merry affably. "I hear that the ghost of St. Jim's has been walking lately. Have you seen anything of it?"

"That I ave, Master Merry," said Taggles impressively. "I see him last night."

"What was he like?"

"A 'orrid-looking figger," said the porter, with a shudder. "He suddenly come on to me out of the mist. Master Merry. Jest figger to yourself a nawful form, in flowing, black robes, with his 'and raised and pointing at a feller, Master Merry."

"Great Scott! Did you see that?"

"Which I see it with my hown heyces," said Taggles. "I tells Mr. Railton this morning, an' he says, says he, 'Pooh-pooh!' I tells Mr. Ratcliff, and he says, says he, 'Pish, pish!' But I suppose I ought to know what I see with my hown heyces."

"Certainly," said Tom Merry gravely. "A man ought to be able to trust the evidence of his hown heyces. Did the ghost speak, Taggles?"

"That it did, Master Merry. It gave a kind of blood-curdlin' shriek, and then began to speak in a 'orrid rasping voice—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"Which, if you don't believe me, Master Blake—"

"But I do," said Blake, becoming grave all of a sudden.

"I haven't the slightest doubt that the ghost spoke in a kind of voice to set your teeth on edge."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Oh, don't be funny, Blake! Go on, Taggy."

"Which it spoke in a rasping, 'orrid voice, and it says, 'Tremble,' it says. 'I'm the ghost of St. Jim's,' it says. Then it gave another 'orrid shriek, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke."

"Phew! It must have shaken you up a bit, Taggy?"

"I don't deny that I was a bit shook up," said the porter. "But I didn't run from it, Master Merry. I jest walked away quietly."

"That's because you are so brave, Taggles."

Taggles looked suspiciously at the hero of the Shell, and walked on his way. The juniors grinned gleefully as they moved on towards the chapel.

"Taggles believes all that," grinned Blake. "That shows how ghost stories get started."

"I'm afraid he had been sampling the gin in the stables," said Tom Merry, laughing. "But I like his spectre in flowing, black robes, with upraised hand. That shows that Taggles has an imagination. He might have been an epic poet, if Fate hadn't made him a school-porter."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

ANSWERS

CHAPTER 10.

The Mysterious Tapping Again.

THE morning was very misty, and the mist thickened as the day grew older. In the afternoon the gas had to be lighted in the class-rooms, while against the panes of the windows glistened the grey fog. In the Shell class-room, Tom Merry noted that Mr. Linton seemed preoccupied. The master of the Shell was perhaps still thinking of the mysterious occurrence of the night, to which he had found no clue—except the unsatisfactory one furnished by the spiritualistic Mr. Lathom.

Tom Merry, too, was thinking of the mystery which had so suddenly arisen at St. Jim's. If it was some practical joker who was tapping on the walls, it was impossible to guess how he contrived to do so—nor was it very clear why he had but just commenced his practical jokes. If the tapping was due to the ghost, of course, it was clear enough—as the monk Rufus was only supposed to appear when the snow was on the ground. Tom Merry was not much inclined to admit the ghost theory—but any other theory it seemed impossible to form. The matter remained in his mind to the exclusion of more immediate concerns, and when Mr. Lathom asked him to name one of the principal products of Cornwall, and he replied "Ghosts!" there was a general giggle in the class, and an amazed stare from Mr. Lathom.

"Merry, what did you say?"

Tom Merry turned red.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir! I meant to say——"

"I am afraid you were not attending to the lesson, Merry."

"Sorry, sir, but——"

"Well, never mind!" said Mr. Linton, unusually placable. "You may answer my question now."

And Tom Merry, who had expected fifty lines, was greatly relieved. As a matter of fact, the ghostly manifestations were in Mr. Linton's mind, too. The class had come to Roman history, which happened to be the last lesson that afternoon, and Mr. Linton was fairly embarked upon the decline of the empire of Augustus, when suddenly he stopped, and gave quite a jump.

For, in the silence of the class-room, broken only by Mr. Linton's quiet voice, a sudden sound had become audible.

Tap, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton gave a quick glance round.

"Boys! What boy was that?"

There was no reply.

"What boy was it tapped on his desk?" thundered Mr. Linton.

The Shell looked at one another in silence and dismay. No one answered the Form-master. He laid down his book, and picked up a pointer.

"Now, my boys," said Mr. Linton in a concentrated voice. "This is the second time that absurd trick has been played upon me. Some foolish boy, knowing the legend of St. Jim's, has taken it into his head to imitate the tapping of the supposed ghost of the monk Rufus. That boy I am determined to punish severely."

There was a grim silence in the class-room for some moments. It was broken by the eerie sound again, coming no one knew whence.

Tap, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton's face was almost crimson with anger.

"Who was that?" he thundered.

The boys looked at one another. Tom Merry's face was very startled. Manners was looking astounded. Up till now he had steadily ridiculed the story of the tapping his chums had heard in Figgins's study in the New House. He could hardly doubt it now.

"My hat!" murmured Manners.

"I suppose you believe it now, you sceptical ass?" muttered Lowther.

"Blessed if I know what to think!"

Tap, tap, tap!

For the third time the sound was repeated. Faint as it was, it sounded with weird distinctness through the class-room.

Mr. Linton drew a deep breath.

"Boys, I call upon you to tell me which member of this class is playing that childish trick?"

"If you please, sir," said Tom Merry, "I don't think it was anyone in the class."

Mr. Linton looked at him frowningly.

"Nonsense, Merry! Whom else could it be?"

"The sound did not seem to come from among the desks, sir."

"It might have been someone in the corridor, sir," suggested Gore.

"Look in the corridor, Gore."

Gore crossed to the door, and opened it. He looked up

and down the passage, dimly lighted by a burner some distance down.

"Is there anyone there, Gore?"

"No, sir!"

"Then it was undoubtedly someone in the class who tapped on the desk," said Mr. Linton. "I demand to know the name of the culprit."

The class were silent.

"Very well," said Mr. Linton, with a glint in his eyes; "if the foolish boy will not own up to his fault, and the others will not speak out, I shall have no alternative but to punish the whole class."

Tap, tap, tap!

As if in defiance of the Form-master's words, the sound was repeated when he had barely finished speaking.

The master of the Shell stood petrified.

If the tapping was done by a practical joker, he was a joker with an unusual amount of nerve and impudence, that was certain.

"Boys!" gasped Mr. Linton. "Boys! Really——"

"If you please, sir," said Tom Merry eagerly, "that sounded as if it came from the direction of the Fourth Form-room, sir!"

Mr. Linton knitted his brows.

"It is impossible that anyone could be tapping on the wall there, Merry. The Fourth Form are now in class there, with Mr. Lathom."

"It sounded like it, sir."

"I will go in and speak to Mr. Lathom," said the Form master, after a pause. "I leave you in charge of the class for a few moments, Merry."

"Yes, sir!"

Mr. Linton walked down the passage to the door of the next class-room, which was occupied by the Fourth. He looked in, and found the Fourth Form at their lessons, following Mr. Lathom's lead upon a thrilling excursion among deponent verbs.

Mr. Lathom looked round, and came towards the Shell master.

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Lathom——"

"Not at all," said the master of the Fourth politely.

"But—but someone has been annoying me by tapping—a curious tapping on the wall, or else on a desk," explained the Shell master. "As all my class refuse to admit having done so, it is possible that some mischievous lad in this room may have tapped on the wall without your noticing it. I thought I would inquire."

Mr. Lathom shook his head.

"It is hardly possible," he said "You see that the nearest boy to the wall on that side is quite separated from it, and I should certainly have observed any boy leave his seat. Besides, I should have heard the tapping."

"And you heard nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then I am sorry I interrupted you. I was sure that the sound did not proceed from this direction, but I thought it only just to make certain before punishing my class. As you have not heard the——"

Tap, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton broke off suddenly.

The mysterious sound was audible again, and this time it was in the Fourth Form class-room.

CHAPTER 11

Blake's Idea.

TAP, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton's face was a study. The repetition of the sound in the Fourth Form-room showed that it had not been made in the first place by anybody in the Shell.

The Fourth-Formers looked round in amazement.

Blake & Co. had been as sceptical as Manners about the manifestation in Figgins's study the previous evening. Now they heard the mysterious tapping for themselves.

Tap, tap, tap!

The sound certainly did not come from the wall separating the Fourth Form from the Shell class-room. It appeared, so far as the direction could be ascertained at all, to proceed from the wall at the end of the room; but on that side, as everyone knew, the oak panels were backed by a solid wall of stone. Yet the sound was distinct enough.

Tap, tap, tap!

The final taps were decrescendo—gradually dying away. Silence followed.

Mr. Linton looked at Mr. Lathom, and Mr. Lathom looked at Mr. Linton. The master of the Shell was amazed, but there was a very visible satisfaction dawning in Mr. Lathom's face.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Linton. "What can it be?"

"There is no further doubt," murmured Mr. Lathom.

"Eh? What did you remark, Mr. Lathom?"

"I remarked that there is no further doubt."

"I do not understand. No further doubt of what?"

"That my efforts to establish communication with the unseen world have been crowned with success at last."

Mr. Linton was very much inclined to say, "Pooh—no-sense!" but considerations of politeness restrained him.

"I am assured that the sound is due to a trick," he said.

The Fourth Form master shook his head decidedly.

"Impossible! The tapping certainly came from that wall, and that wall is of solid stone, and on the other side is the open quadrangle. A tap from the outer side would not be audible here, through a thickness of eight feet. You must remember that this was not built as a class-room, but is part of the oldest portion of St. Jim's, and the walls are of immense thickness."

"That is true, but—"

"And as the tapping came from that wall—"

"I rather thought it might have come from the ceiling," said Mr. Linton obstinately, "or perhaps from the cellars below. I certainly feel quite assured that it is due to human agency—that of some reckless, practical joker."

"I am assured not."

"I wish," said Mr. Linton, with glinting eyes—"I wish that I could find the person concerned. I would answer for it that he would play no more jokes of this kind."

"My dear sir—"

"I am certain it is a trick!"

"I am assured that it is not!"

"Really, Mr. Linton—"

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"

"I assure you—"

"Ahem! The noise seems to have ceased for good now," said the master of the Shell. "I think I must return to my class."

And Mr. Linton went back to the Shell-room, looking very puzzled and angry. The Shell, for once, had been quite quiet during the master's absence. Mr. Linton said no more about punishing the class. It was clear enough that no one in the Shell had had a hand in producing the mysterious tapping, though he was not quite so certain about the Fourth Form.

Classes were dismissed very shortly afterwards, and the boys crowded out into the corridor, discussing the strange occurrence. The Terrible Three compared notes at once with the chums of Study No. 6, and learned of what had happened in the Fourth Form-room.

"And we weally heard the tappin'!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "There was no ewwah about it, deah boys, for I weally heard it myself, you know. I have no doubt that what Tom Mewwy heard in Figgins's study was due to his imagination—"

"Ass!"

"I wufuse to be called an ass, Tom Mewwy."

"I wish you'd wufuse to be one."

"Weally, Mewwy—"

"I'm beginning to believe in the tapping now," remarked Jack Blake. "We certainly heard it in the class-room."

"That was what I was wemarkin'. I have no doubt that the tappin' in Figg's study was due to Tom Mewwy's imagination, but in this case it was weal enough. I am not likely to make an ewwah."

"Rats!" said Digby. "It was real enough in both cases. I can't make it out, but I won't swallow the ghost. That's flat."

"Ghosts are out of date," agreed Tom Merry. "Ghosts are barred—"

"Why are ghosts like football-boots?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Oh, don't, Lowther! We've had that before, under many shapes and forms," said Blake. "I don't like rotten jokes at all; but if I must have rotten jokes, I must say I like 'em new. That is a very old rotten joke!"

"Yaas; wathah! I wegard Lowthah—"

"St. Jim's ghost is barred," said Tom Merry; "but I don't see how anybody could be playing the trick. It's a giddy mystery."

Herries had been looking very thoughtful. Herries was a slow and steady fellow, and he always thought things out before he spoke, though the opinions he then delivered did not always seem to his chums worth the trouble he had taken.

"I say," said Herries, coming out of a brown study, "it would be a good idea to track down that japist—"

"Yes; if we could do it."

"I was thinking of my bulldog."

"Rats!" said Lowther. "It couldn't have been your bulldog doing that tapping—"

Herries gave the humourist of the Shell a withering glare. The juniors chuckled.

"I don't mean that, ass!" said Herries. "I mean that

my bulldog might be able to track down the japer. You know what a terror he is at tracking things down."

"Kippers, for instance!" remarked Manners.

"Oh, don't be funny, Manners! We have to stand enough of that from Lowther," said Herries crossly. "You know how my dog Towser tracked down the burglars who burgled the chapel, and I don't see why he shouldn't track down this joker."

"How are you going to get on the track?"

"That will want thinking out, of course."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It will want a lot of thinking out, in my opinion," he remarked. "By the way, I haven't returned those lurid papers to Binks yet. I ought to get it done, or he will think he has lost the Spotted Spook for ever."

And Tom Merry walked away in quest of the School House buttons. He asked after Binks at the house-dame's room, and was referred to the kitchen. He descended the kitchen stairs, and encountered the plump, good-humoured School House cook. The usually placid face of that lady became overcast as soon as Tom Merry mentioned Binks.

"Oh, don't speak to me of that dratted boy!" she said. "I don't know where he is."

"I thought he was down here, Mrs. Binns," said Tom Merry mildly. "You must excuse me for coming down and interrupting you, but I have something that belongs to him."

"Bless your bonnie face, Master Merry! I'm glad to see you here," said the cook; "but that dratted Binks is a worritin' me! He's always reading something about ghosts, or murderers, and muttering to hisself, when he ought to be cleaning the knives. When I told him the silver was waiting to be cleaned to-day, what do you think he said?"

"Can't guess," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"He said, 'Har, har, har, you little know!'" said Mrs. Binns, looking aggrieved and exasperated. "Just like they talk in a theater, you know. So I boxed his ears, and since then I ain't seen him."

"I think he's up in his room," said Mary, the housemaid.

"Thanks!" said Tom Merry. "I suppose I'd better look. I hope Binks isn't ill."

"He's been staying in his room a lot, with stories of 'eadaches," said Mrs. Binns. "I don't believe in his 'eadaches. I believe he stays up there to read about people committing murder with revolvers—I do, indeed!"

Tom Merry laughed at that description of Binks's valuable works of fiction. He left the kitchen, and ascended the stairs, and made his way to Binks's room. It was a small room in the oldest part of the building, approached by narrow stairs. Tom Merry knocked at Binks's door.

"Which I ain't ready to clean the silver, so there!" said a voice from inside. "Har, har, har! A Binks clean silver! Tip Binks a tanner! Har, har, har! They little know!"

"You ass!" called out Tom Merry through the door. "I've got something that belongs to you—the bosh you left in Study No. 6 last evening."

The door opened.

"Oh, I didn't know it was you, Master Merry!" said Binks. "Come in, Master Merry, deign to henter my 'umble 'ome."

Tom Merry entered the room. It was a small one, but very clean and tidy. The walls were panelled with oak, black with age; and the room, of course, had never been originally intended for the quarters of a humble dependent of the household. But times change; and Binks had a room which had probably been a guest-chamber in the old days of the Abbey of St. James.

"I say, Binks," said Tom Merry, kindly enough, "don't talk such howling piffle, you know! Why don't you talk sense?"

"Har, har, har! You little know!"

"Little know what?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Nothing," said Binks. "A haspiring soul may beat under a humiform. A daring heart cannot be crushed down by even the weight of the buttons of servitude. I have thought many times of sloping—"

"Of what?"

"Of sloping—bunking, you know—and becoming a pirate."

"A pirate?" yelled Tom Merry.

"Yes—or a highwayman."

"A—a—a highwayman?"

"Why not?" demanded Binks. "Daredevil Dick ran away from his employment and became a highwayman. Red-Handed Dick sloped from an office and became the terror of the Rocky Mountains."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You little know. It may happen yet," said Binks darkly.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Then, I suppose,

we should read in the daily papers accounts of the desperate deeds of Binks the Bloodthirsty, or the Terrible Trail of the Bolted Buttons?"

"You may mock," said Binks. "Har, har, har!"
"Oh, don't make that row, old chap!" said Tom Merry. "I don't see what you want to be such a howling ass for. The best thing you can do is to give up reading this piffle, and keep out of the gallery at Wayland Theatre. Here's your books; I've brought them back because they're your property, but you ought to burn them. If you want to read stories, why don't you get a book with some decent stuff in it—wholesome school stories, or something of that sort—and leave this red-handed bosh alone. You can take that as a tip."

And Tom Merry left the room. He had a very thoughtful expression as he went downstairs. He was rather concerned about Binks. Of course, the School House buttons was nothing in particular to Tom Merry; but the hero of the Shell had a kind heart, and he was good-natured to a fault. The boy was evidently in a bad way, feeding his mind on lurid nonsense till he was in danger of performing some absurdity that might get him into trouble.

"Wherefore that worried brow?" asked Jack Blake, meeting the hero of the Shell in the School House passage. "Have you found Binks?"

"Yes. The young idiot is half off his dot, I believe," said Tom Merry. "It would be a good thing to clear that rubbish out of his mind, if it could be worked."

Jack Blake grinned. "I've been thinking of a wheeze," he remarked. "It would be a service to Binks, and would give us a chance of squeezing some fun out of the matter, too."

"Go ahead!" said Tom Merry tersely.
"Why, suppose one of those giddy criminals he's always reading about was to call on him one night?" grinned Blake. "Red Handed Dick, for instance, or Captain Crack-Shot, or Black-Hearted Bill, or somebody? It would be rather a joke on Binks, and would open his eyes to what it would really be like to meet one of those gentry. And we could easily rig up the character from the costumes we've got for the private theatricals."

Tom Merry laughed. "Jolly good wheeze! It's a go!"
"Bai Jove, deah boys—"

"Hallo, Gussy! Have you found a threepenny-bit?" asked Tom Merry, as the swell of the School House came towards them beaming.

"No, Tom Mewwy, I have not found a threepenny-bit."
"Then, wherefore those beaming smiles on your aristocratic countenance?"

"Oh, pway don't wot, deah boy. I have had a lettah from my Cousin Ethel," said D'Arcy.

Tom Merry and Blake were all interest at once. They were always glad to hear from their girl chum; gladder when she came on a visit to Mrs. Holmes at St. Jim's.

"Any news?" asked Tom Merry eagerly.
"Is Cousin Ethel coming down?" demanded Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"
"Good!" said both the juniors together.
"Yaas, she's comin' down to the coll, you know," said D'Arcy, with a smile of great satisfaction. "She has written that she is goin' to stay for a few days with Mrs. Holmes, you know, and I wathah expect she will awwive this evenin'. I wegard it as wathah wippin'!"

"Ripping? My dear kid, it's stunning!"
"Yaas, pewwaps it would not be an exaggeration to describe it as stunnin'," assented Arthur Augustus. "I am wathah anxious in my mind—"

"About Cousin Ethel? Oh, that's all right! We'll look after her—"

"I should certainly wefuse to allow you to look aftah my cousin," said D'Arcy frigidly. "I was not thinkin' of that. I am quite capable of lookin' aftah my own cousin."

"That's your mistake. You see—"
"Yaas; I see a pair of feahfully cheeky boundahs," said Arthur Augustus, fixing his monocle disdainfully upon Tom Merry and Jack Blake. "What I am feelin' wowwied about is my young bwothah Wally."

"What's the matter with Wally?"
"He's such a feahfully untidy young scallywag, you know," said D'Arcy. "He nevah will keep ink off his fingahs, or have a clean collah, and his hair is always feahfully untidy, and he has pwactically no cwease in his twousahs. Then he's always covahed with gwey hairs from that howwid mongwel of a dog of his. I am weally ashamed for my Cousin Ethel to see him in such a wagged state as he is bound to be in."

"Why not give him a few tips?" asked Tom Merry gravely.
"Yaas, wathah! But he does not weceive advice vevy

wespectfully from me," said Arthur Augustus, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"But upon such an important occasion—"
"Yaas, pewwaps a few words from his eldahn bwothah might have some weight with him at this cwitical juncture," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "I think I will go along to the Third Form woom, and speak to the young wothah!"

And D'Arcy walked off. He left Tom Merry grinning at Jack Blake, and Jack Blake grinning at Tom Merry. They could both imagine what was likely to result from the visit of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to his young brother in the den of the Third Form fags.

CHAPTER 12.

Arthur Augustus Insists.

"JUMP! Why don't you jump, young D'Arcy?"
"Well, tuck in your tuppenny, Jameson."
"Oh, rats! Jump!"

Arthur Augustus looked in at the door of the Third Form room. The fags were too busy to notice him. They were playing leap-frog to enliven matters after the bore of afternoon lessons. Wally D'Arcy, of course, was the leading spirit. His elder brother gazed at him with feelings too deep for speech, as the hero of the Third took his run, and came flying over a series of bent backs towards the door.

D'Arcy minor was even untidier than usual to look at. His hair was tousled, his collar was inky, his fingers and face ditto. His necktie was flying out like a streamer, and there were two buttons off his waistcoat. The laces of one of his boots were undone, and flying loose. But for the resemblance of features, it would have seemed impossible that the "scallywag" of the Third Form at St. Jim's could be own brother to the elegant swell of the School House.

"Wally! Weally, Wally—"
But Wally did not hear or heed. He was coming on in fine style. The end boy of the row was very near to Arthur Augustus, and Wally came vaulting over his back, and alighted close to his brother, so close that he threw out his grimy hands and seized Arthur Augustus by the shoulder to steady himself.

D'Arcy shrank from the contact.
"Wally! You young wuffian!"

"Hallo, old son!" said Wally cheerily. "Glad you were there, or I might have taken a tumble. If you don't tuck in your tuppenny, young Gibbs, I'll give you a thick ear next time, so remember."

"Wally—"
"Like to have a game, Gus?"
D'Arcy simply shuddered at the idea of playing leap-frog with a crowd of inky fags.

"Weally, Wally—"
"Come on; you can have next turn, if you like," said Wally generously. "I say, Jameson, hold on! My brother wants to have a go."

"That's all very well—" began Jameson.
"Shut up, then! Come on, Gus."

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort."
"Eh? Don't you want a jump?"
"Certainly not!"

"Then, what have you poked your chivvy in here for?" said Jameson. "I protest against young D'Arcy bringing his elder brother in here. It's an old rule of this place that Fourth-Form bounders are barred."

"If you allude to me as a boundah, young Jameson—"
"I protest, too," said Curly Gibson. "Here's young D'Arcy's brother coming in and turning up his nose at us."

"Yaas, wathah!"
D'Arcy minor turned red.

"Oh, cheese it, Curly!" he exclaimed. "Gus isn't turning up his nose—"

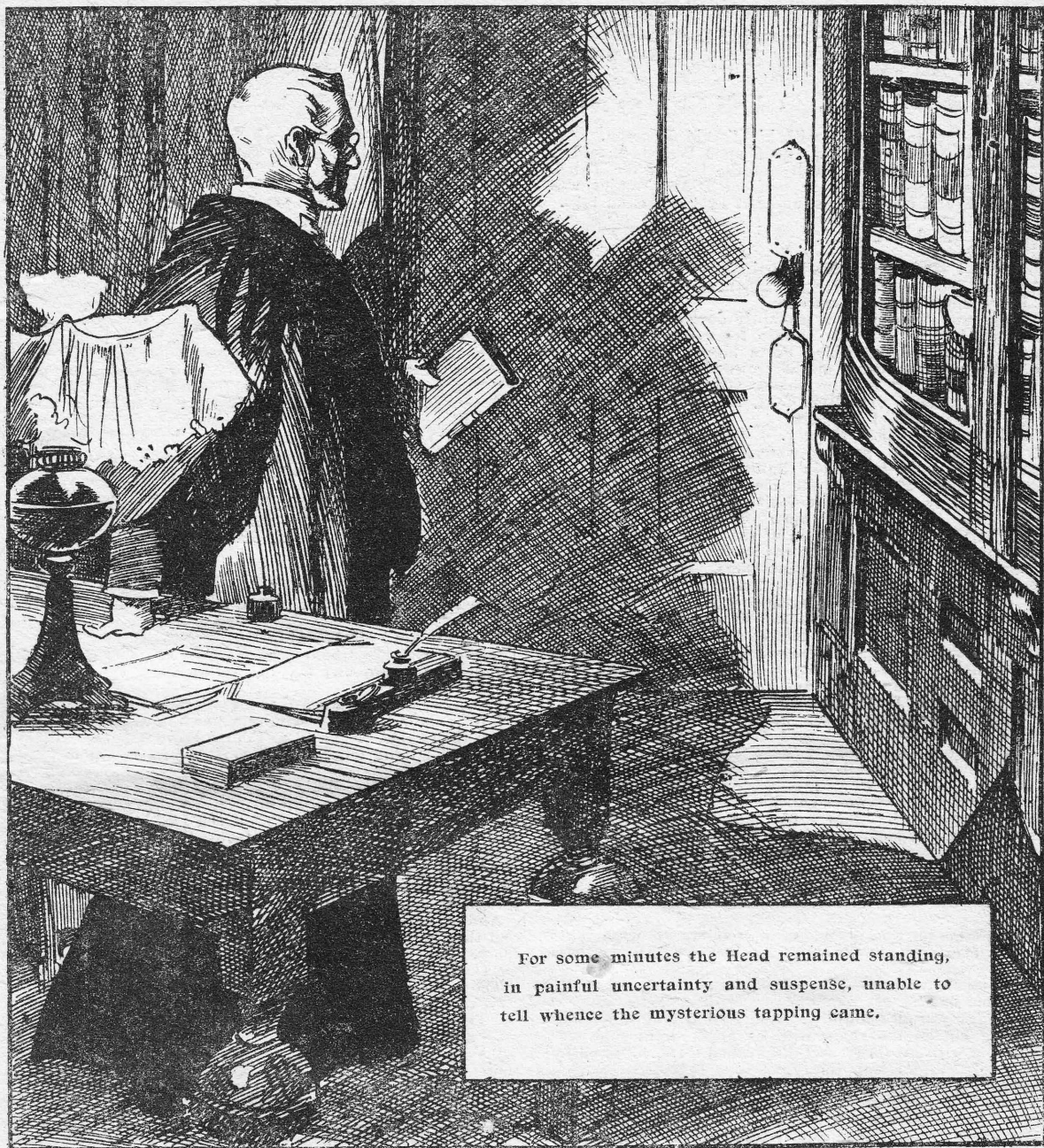
"You are mistaken, Wally. I wegard all this horse-play with uttah abhowwence," said Arthur Augustus. "I have come here to speak to you seriously—"

"Then you can cut off!" said Wally.
"I wefuse to cut off till I have spoken to you seriously. Cousin Ethel is coming down to the school—pewwaps she will awwive to-night—"

"You want me to go and meet her at the station?"
"Certainly not! She will come in the Head's twap. I want you to put on a clean collah, and wash the ink off your face, and in ewery way assume a more wespectable appearance."

"Rats!"
"Weally, Wally—"

"You're interrupting the circus. Clear, old chap!"
"I wefuse to clear until I have impwessed upon you the absolute necessity of assumin' a more wespectable appearance," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I weally considah



For some minutes the Head remained standing, in painful uncertainty and suspense, unable to tell whence the mysterious tapping came.

that wegard for me might lead you to be a little more respectable, Wally. I should be glad to give you any bwothahly advice upon the subject of dwessin'—"

"Oh, sheer off!" exclaimed Jameson

"I wefuse to sheer off, young Jameson. I am here frowm a sense of duty. Wally, I should be glad if you would come to my study, and I will do the best I can to make you a little more respectable."

"Rats! I won't come!"

"As your eldah bwothah—"

"Are you going to clear?" demanded Curly Gibson.

"If you address me in that wude mannah, Gibson, I shall have no alternative but to administah a feahful thwashin' to you."

"Oh, go and eat coke!"

"Wally, will you have the extweme kindness to come with me?" said Arthur Augustus, with elaborate politeness.

"Not much!"

"That is a vewy vulgah mode of speech, Wally. I will twy to cure you of usin' vulgah expressions as much as poss., too. I weally—"

"Gus, old man, do get off! Can't you see we're busy?"

"I wefuse to wegard leap-frog as a mattah of any con-
sequence. As for these gwimy little wuffians—"

"What's that?" roared Jameson & Co.

"Gwimy little wuffians," said D'Arcy. "I wegard you as a set of extwemely gwimy little wuffians. Wally, as your eldah bwothah—"

"Oh, do ring off, Gus!"

"It is my duty to see you lookin' a little more clean and respectable when Cousin Ethel awwives. I insist upon your comin' with me immediately."

"He's like a giddy gramophone, isn't he?" said Wally admiringly. "He can run on like this for hours. I wish he'd change the record, though."

"Wally, as the eldah of the two, I insist—"

"Gussy, as the more sensible of the two, I refuse."

"Weally, Wally—"

"Oh, come and play!" exclaimed Jameson. "There's no particular reason why D'Arcy's brother shouldn't talk if he wants to, but I think young D'Arcy might keep his talkative brothers out in the passage."

"Will you pwoceed to my study with me, Wally?"

"Rats! No!"

"Then I shall have no wescource but to wemove you by force!" said D'Arcy majestically. "I twust you will not dwive me to that wescource, Wally."

Wally grinned.

"Oh, go ahead!" he said. "I should like to see you do it."

"We'll wipe ap the floor with him," said Jameson.

Arthur Augustus laid a firm hand upon Wally's shoulder. That was enough—or too much—for the fags of the Third. They made a rush, and in a moment D'Arcy major was surrounded, and clawed right and left by the excited fags.

"Down him!"

"Snatch him bald-headed!"

"Serag him!"

"Hurrah! Down with the Fourth!"

"Weally, you wascally young wuffians——"

"Down him!" roared Jameson.

And Arthur Augustus was promptly downed. He hit out right and left to save his clothes from contact with the inky fags, and several Third Form heroes rolled over on the floor, but they came on in crowds. Their name was legion, and D'Arcy had no chance. He sprawled on the floor under a heap of yelling fags, and was pinned down by the sheer weight of numbers.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "You young wuffians! You howwid little gwimy wascals! Welease me immediately! I insist upon bein' immediately weleased!"

But the Third Form did not release him. They bumped him on the floor. They tore out his collar, and dragged out his necktie. They ripped open his beautiful waistcoat, resplendent with all the colours of the rainbow—and a few more. They split his jacket up the back. They rumpled his trousers, and trod on his elegant boots. It was a famous rag. Never in the history of the Third Form at St. Jim's had it enjoyed itself so thoroughly.

And Wally stood by, with his hands in his pockets, laughing. His allies fully avenged him.

Arthur Augustus didn't know whether he was on his head or his heels when the victorious fags had finished with him.

He sat up, looked tattered and dusty and bewildered, and a roar of laughter from the Third Form greeted him.

"There's a picture for you!" gasped Jameson.

"My only Aunt Jane!" said Wally. "Cousin Ethel wouldn't own you now, Gus."

"You young wascals——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet. He made a rush at his tormentors, but they broke and dodged before him, and he might as well have tried to catch flies.

"You young wascals! I will give you all a feahful thwashin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As for you, young Wally, I no longah wegard you as a bwotah."

"Rough on me," said Wally, pretending to wipe tears from his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket. "Hence these tears."

"You young wottah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I despise you all feahfully!" said Arthur Augustus; and he swung out of the room with as much dignity as was compatible with his dusty and dishevelled state, followed by a shriek of laughter from the fags.

Arthur Augustus hurried away, dusty and untidy, collar and necktie hanging loose, his trousers shapeless, his jacket hanging in two pieces from the neck. Never had the swell of the School House felt so utterly used-up and disreputable. His only idea was to get upstairs, and wash and change his clothes as quickly as possible. He came into the hall to hurry towards the staircase, and stopped in dismay.

The door was open, and a graceful, girlish figure had just entered.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

And Cousin Ethel gazed in amazement at the swell of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 13.

The Reckoning.

"ARTHUR!"

Cousin Ethel uttered the name in tones of astonishment. Arthur Augustus turned crimson under the coating of dust upon his features.

"Ethel!"

"Have you had an accident, Arthur?"

"N-n-n-no; not exactly, Ethel."

"Ah! I suppose this is one of your amusements?" said Ethel, with a bright smile. "You have been playing a rough game."

"Weally, Ethel——"

"You look quite dusty."

"I feel exhausted, and very dirty and wotten," said D'Arcy. "As a matter of fact, Ethel, it was a wag."

"A what?"

"A wag."

"Oh, I see! Some wag has treated you like this, out of—of waggishness."

"No, deah boy—I mean, deah girl. You don't quite compwehend. I mean that it was a wag—a Form wag, you know."

"Oh, a rag! I understand."

"If you will excuse me, Ethel, I will go and make myself a little more pwesentable," said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Certainly, Arthur. You really need it."

"Yaas; wathah!"

And D'Arcy hurried away. Cousin Ethel was smiling as she went in. Arthur Augustus bolted upstairs to a bath-room, and nearly ran into Blake. Jack stopped him by catching at his shoulder, and stared at him blankly.

"What on earth have you been doing, Gussy?"

"Nothin', deah boy! Pway welease me! I feel vewy dirty, and I want to get to a bath-woom as quickly as poss."

"You feel like you look, then," said Blake. "But how did you get into this state? My hat! Was it the Third Form?"

"Yaas; wathah! I was ovaheome by gweat numbahs, and weally tweated with gwoss diswespect. They actually had the feahful cheek to wag me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughin' mattah, Blake. I shall make it a point to give them all a feahful thwashin', of course. I have nevah been tweated with such diswespect in all the course of my career at St. Jim's."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake, it is wathah unfeelin' of you to laugh, especially as I have just met Cousin Ethel in this awful state——"

"Oh, my hat! Ha, ha, ha!"

"And she thinks I have been playin' some wuff game, and got like this of my own accord, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake, I wegard you as an unfeelin' wottah!"

"Never mind, Gussy. You're a howling ass, but we can't have the Third ragging a Fourth-Former," said Blake. "I'll call up the fellows, and we'll go and see them about it."

"Upon wefection, Blake, I dare say they were pwovoked, and I would wathah you did not wag them in weurn."

"But it isn't a question of what you'd rather, Gus. We've got to keep up the dignity of the Fourth Form in this school."

"Oh, of course, if it is a question of dig. I should be the last fellow in the world to interfere!" said D'Arcy. "But pway excuse me. I weally must go and get a wash."

And he hurried off. Blake laughed till the corridor rang, and then hastened to Study No. 6. Herries and Digby were there.

"Come on, kids!" said Blake.

They stared at him.

"Come on where?"

"The Third have been ragging Gussy."

"I dare say he deserved it."

"Very likely; but we can't have the Third Form getting their ears up in this school. Come on, and call up the fellows!"

"Oh, right you are!"

The chums of Study No. 6 were not long in calling up the forces of the Fourth. New House and School House united cordially to rag another Form. A crowd of the Fourth proceeded to the Third Form-room, and Jack Blake kicked open the door. The fags were still exulting over their victory.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Wally. "What do you rotters want?"

"Please, we've come to snatch you bald-headed!" said Blake blandly.

"Look here, get out of our quarters!"

"Certainly—when we've finished."

"That's it," said Figgins. "You see, you youngsters have got to learn that the Fourth is a senior Form, and has got to be treated with humble reverence."

"Rats!" said Wally.

"Oh, give 'em socks!" said Herries.

"Line up!" yelled Wally.

The Third Form lined up, but it was not of much use against the attack of the Fourth. They were hurled right and left by the Fourth Form rush, bumped over, sent sprawling, rolled under the desks, and piled in heaps on the floor. Then the avengers were not finished.

They turned out the desks and lockers, and scattered the

contents pell-mell among the shrieking fags. A few of the fags fought gamely to defend their property, but most of them were yelling for quarter.

Wally was the gamest, and he had to be secured by being laid flat on the floor, with Fatty Wynn sitting on him. There was no chance of his getting away from under a weight like that. Wally gasped, and gave in, and the rag proceeded. It was a record rag, and one the Third Form at St. Jim's long remembered.

"There, I think that will about do!" gasped Blake at last. "I think that will teach these young monkeys not to lay sacrilegious hands upon the noble persons of their elders."

"Yes; rather!" said Figgins. "And if they want another lesson, we'll drop in again another evening."

"We'll be ready for you next time," panted Wally.

"Ha, ha, ha! The place looks rather wrecked, doesn't it?"

"It does—it do!"

"I think it will do," said Blake. "Come on, chaps! You fags, mind your p's and q's in the future. We have to be severe sometimes."

And the Fourth Form, laughing loudly, crowded out of the room. They left the fags almost squirming with impotent rage.

"My hat!" said Wally, sitting up, breathless. "I'm glad to get that porpoise off my chest! It looks like a rag, doesn't it?"

"All your fault!" said a snappish voice.

"Eh? Anybody who's got any fault to find with me, has only to get up on his hind legs and say so," said Wally. "Come on, there!"

But the speaker did not come on.

"We've been done in," said Wally. "We might have expected it. But we'll be ready next time, and the Fourth haven't finished with us yet. And now, for goodness' sake, let's get some of these things in order!"

CHAPTER 14.

Skimpole Makes a Discovery.

"GOT the mask?"

"Yes."

"And the whiskers?"

"Yes."

"And the pistol?"

"Here they are."

Jack Blake chuckled. The "properties," used by the amateur theatrical club among the School House juniors, were all ready. The Terrible Three had brought them into Study No. 6, and Blake and his chums looked over them with great satisfaction.

"Ripping!" said Blake, picking up the huge, old-fashioned horse-pistol. "This looks business-like. Let's try on the things."

All the juniors lent a hand, and Jack was soon arrayed in the garb of Daredevil Dick the Highwayman. He wore a three-cornered hat, a black cloak, a mask, and a belt under the cloak, with the huge butt of the pistol sticking out of it. In the study, the get-up was not, perhaps, convincing, but in a dusky light there was no doubt that he would pass for a very good representation of the highwayman who was Binks's favourite hero.

Tom Merry chuckled gleefully.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Put the whiskers a little straighter. That's right. Between the mask and the whiskers there isn't much of your chivvy to be seen. I fancy Binks will think he's got the real Daredevil Bill—"

"Daredevil Dick!"

"Oh, Daredevil Dick, then! It's all one. I— Hallo! Who's that?"

There was a tap at the study door. Blake looked cross. He did not want anybody to see him in that curious get-up. The whole plot would be spoiled if Binks should get wind of it. The junior darted behind the screen that stood in one corner of the study, and the next second the door opened.

A pair of glimmering spectacles came into view, with the bumpy forehead and large head of Herbert Skimpole behind them.

"Ah, I thought I should find you here!" he remarked. "I am glad to be able to tell you, Merry, that I have worked up this case to a satisfactory conclusion."

"What case?" asked Tom Merry.

"The case of the mysterious tapping. Surely you have not forgotten that I took up the case with the intention of elucidating the mystery?"

"Did you? And you have finished it?"

"Yes, the case is now complete."

"Then buzz off, old chap."

"But surely you wish to know the conclusions I have come to, Merry? I have proved that young Wally D'Arcy is the guilty party."

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, it is undoubtedly the fact."

"You uttah ass!"

"I am sorry to have to condemn your younger brother, D'Arcy, but the evidence is overwhelming. I have examined the Fourth and the Shell with great keenness, and am certain that the guilty party is in neither Form. This ghost-tapping is just one of the tricks a junior in the Third Form would play. I proceeded to the Third Form-room in pursuit of my investigations, and was hurled out by the fags with what I can only characterise as brutal violence."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You ass!" said Digby. "We've just ragged them bald-headed, and they would be bound to go for any Upper Form fellow now."

Skimpole shook his head.

"Nonsense, Digby. Young Wally was evidently actuated by a guilty conscience, knowing that I was on the track. He was the leader in the attack, and, as a matter of fact, directly I looked into the Third Form-room, he uttered the words: 'Look there! Did you ever see anything like that?'"

"Bai Jove, that was a natuwal question, deah boy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The remark was a proof of guilt."

"Blessed if I see how you make that out," said Tom Merry.

Skimpole smiled the smile of superior knowledge.

"You have not studied detective work upon the methods of Sherlock Holmes and Sexton Blake," he replied. "To the trained mind of a detective, D'Arcy minor's words contained an involuntary confession of guilt. 'Look there!' That was the startled exclamation of one conscious of guilt, on finding the shadow on his track. 'Did you ever see anything like that?' That remark, of course, referred to the wonderful way in which I had tracked him down, apparently without the aid of clues."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I cannot allow your ribald laughter to influence me against the weight of solid evidence. Young Wally is evidently the person who has been playing ghost. Having established his guilt—"

"Skimmy, old man, you're too funny to live! Somebody lend me a chopper."

"Really, Lowther!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Manners suddenly.

Tap, tap, tap!

The sound came eerily through the study.

"My—my hat!" muttered Tom Merry. "There it is again!"

Skimpole gave a jump.

"Dear me! There—there must be something wrong with my theory after all. I have just left young Wally downstairs in the Third Form-room, and here is the tapping again."

But the juniors did not laugh.

The mysterious sound made them serious enough. They looked at one another in deep and breathless silence, with a strangely-weird feeling creeping over them. Whence came that mysterious tapping?

"It can't be the g-g-ghost!" muttered Herries.

"It's doocid mystewious," muttered D'Arcy. "I weally considah—"

"Really," said Skimpole, "I am surprised to see you all so impressed by this evident trick. There is someone concealed in the study."

Tom Merry could not help grinning.

There certainly was someone concealed in the study—Jack Blake, in the guise of Daredevil Dick, the Highwayman. But it was not Blake who had tapped.

"Oh, cheese it, Skimmy, and get out!"

"There is someone concealed in the study," said Skimpole firmly. "I appear to have been misled in the case of young Wally by an imperfect clue; but now there is an opportunity of discovering the real culprit."

"I tell you—"

"It would be advisable to search the study—"

"Travel, old chap!"

"Perhaps behind that screen in the corner—"

"Get along!"

"I think it is my duty to clear this matter up," said Skimpole, and he made a sudden rush at the screen. "Here—great Scott!"

He dragged the screen aside, and Daredevil Dick, the Highwayman, was revealed.

Blake, though surprised, was equal to the occasion.

He raised his huge horse-pistol to a level, and his eyes glared through the holes in the mask at the astounded Socialist.

"Die!" he roared.

"Dear me! Ow! Mercy! Help!"

"Die the death of a dog!"

"Ow! Hellup!"

Tom Merry turned down the gas. Skimpole evidently took Daredevil Dick for the genuine article, and Tom Merry wanted to keep it up. The highwayman came forward, flourishing his pistol.

"Silence!" he said, in a deep, bass voice. "Silence! Close that door!"

Tom Merry trembling in every limb, closed the door. The juniors were all trembling, but in the dim light Skimpole could not see that they were shaking with suppressed laughter. Daredevil Dick glared round ferociously.

"Swear," he exclaimed impressively—"swear to keep this secret, or this study shall be drenched in gore!"

"I—I can't swear," murmured Lowther. "I promised my Aunt Sempronia never, never to say a naughty word."

There was a suppressed chuckle in the study. But Skimpole was too terrified to notice it—or to notice anything but the black mask and the huge pistol.

"Swear," repeated the highwayman sternly. "Down on your knees!"

The juniors dropped on their knees. Skimpole's knees were knocking together with fright, and he was glad to kneel down. He fixed his spectacles upon the masked man, as if fascinated by the dreadful sight.

"Now," said the deep bass voice, "swear never to reveal the dread secret of my presence in this place! Swear!"

"I—I swear!" murmured Tom Merry.

"I swear!" gasped Skimpole. "I shall certainly have great pleasure in keeping the secret, my dear sir. I—"

"Silence!"

"Ye-es, certainly!"

"Remain as you are," said the highwayman sternly. "I am going. A few minutes, and this ancient hall will know Daredevil Dick, the Highwayman, no more. But keep the secret, or I'll give you a licking—I mean, these floors shall run red with crimson gore!"

"I—I—I—"

"Silence!"

The highwayman flourished his pistol again, so close to Skimpole that the amateur detective jumped, and then reached up and turned out the gas. The juniors did not move. There were vague sounds in the darkness, which Tom Merry knew to be made by Jack Blake, stripping off his disguise. But Skimpole was far from suspecting anything of the sort. Then there was the sound of a door opening and closing, and receding footsteps in the passage.

"He is gone!" said Tom Merry, in a low voice.

The juniors rose to their feet. Lowther lighted the gas. Skimpole was trembling in every limb.

"Is he—er—really gone?" he gasped.

"Yaas, wathah! What an extremely fewocious-lookin' wascal he was!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am not surprised that you were in a blue funk, Skimmy."

"You—you are mistaken, D'Arcy. I was not in a blue funk. I—I was assuming this aspect of terror for the purpose of—of—of—"

"Then you assumed it jolly well," said Tom Merry.

The door opened, and Jack Blake came into the study. He looked round at the juniors with an expression of surprise.

"Hallo, anything the matter?" he asked.

"It's a dread secret," said Monty Lowther. "Something has happened, but we have sworn to keep it dark."

"Oh, rats!"

"I assure you that it is the case, Blake," stammered Skimpole. "We have now discovered the dreadful author of the mysterious tapping, but we have sworn to keep the secret."

"You have sworn?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Then you can jolly well get out of my study. I'm not going to have a fellow who swears, in here," said Blake severely. "I'm surprised and shocked at you, Skimpole, setting such a bad example to these tender youths."

"Really, Blake—"

"Oh, travel along, before I kick you!"

"You don't understand?"

"I don't want to understand. Get out!"

"When I say I swore, I don't mean to say that I swore."

I mean to say that I swore—"

"Yes, that's quite lucid," assented Blake. "Get out—"

"But really—"

Blake picked up the inkpot.

"I give you one second, Skimmy."

The second was enough for Herbert Skimpole. He skipped out of the study, and slammed the door. As he went down the passage he heard a wild yell of laughter from the study, and he wondered what Tom Merry & Co. were laughing at.

CHAPTER 15.

A Rush for the Door.

FATTY WYNN came up the steps of the School House in the dusk of the evening and looked in. There was a serious expression upon Wynn's plump face, as if he were revolving matters of great weight in his mind. He gave a grin of pleasure as he caught sight of Cousin Ethel standing in the hall talking to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

D'Arcy's present attire more than compensated for the shocking state Miss Cleveland had first seen him in. The swell of the School House looked very elegant. His collar was whiter, his waistcoat more startling, than ever, and his tie was tied as well as the ties of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could be tied. Elegant as he always was, the swell of St. Jim's had assumed a little extra elegance in honour of the visit of Cousin Ethel to the old school.

"I think it is weally wippin' of you to come, Ethel," he was remarking. "All the fellows are awfully glad to see you, you know. I was thinkin' that we ought to get up some little celebration—"

"That is very thoughtful of you, Arthur," said Ethel, with a bright smile.

"Yaas, wathah! I am wathah a thoughtful chap, you know. Hullo, Wynn! If you have come to see Blake, he's up in the study."

Fatty Wynn pulled off his cap to Miss Cleveland.

"So glad to see you, Miss Cleveland," he said. "It couldn't have happened more fortunately."

"I weally fail to see what you are dwivin' at, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus.

"You see," went on Wynn, still addressing his remarks to Cousin Ethel, "we have been thinking of a celebration on account of Christmas, you know."

"Bai Jove, I was just thinkin' of that myself!"

"Have you really?" said Cousin Ethel.

"Yes—a celebration to take the form of a specially ripping feed," explained Fatty Wynn. "I've talked it over with Figgins and Kerr, and I've come over to see Blake and Tom Merry about it. We've had a letter from Marmaduke. You remember Marmaduke—"

"Oh, yes, certainly!"

"Marmy's coming down for a day or two, before going abroad again," said Fatty Wynn. "He will be in time for the Christmas celebration. If you would come to the feed—I mean the feast—Miss Cleveland, everything in the garden would be lovely! We only want a lady present to make it an absolute success!"

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"I should like to be present, Wynn."

"Good! Can I tell Figgins?"

"Certainly; and thank you very much!"

Fatty Wynn smiled a beaming smile.

"That's ripping, and it's awfully good of you, Cousin Ethel! I'll run up and speak to Blake and Merry about it now!"

And Fatty Wynn ascended the stairs. He went to Study No. 6 first, and found Tom Merry & Co. still there. The juniors were still chuckling over the adventure of Herbert Skimpole with the highwayman.

"Hallo; I see the whole family's at home!" said Fatty Wynn.

"No New House rotters admitted!" said Blake. "Take your face away!"

"Go and boil yourself down into blubber!" said Manners.

Fatty Wynn grinned genially. When he was on the scent of a feed, nothing could shake his good-humour.

"It's pax," he said. "I suppose you fellows don't want to row at this time of the year? 'Peace on earth, goodwill—'"

"Oh, right you are!" said Blake. "Anything for a quiet life! What do you want? Is Figgins standing a feed, and do you want us to come?"

"Not exactly," said Fatty Wynn; "it's a more important matter than that! We're thinking of celebrating Christmas by standing a really stunning feed!"

"Good wheeze!"

"And we want you fellows to join in the idea. Marmaduke is coming down for the occasion, and Cousin Ethel has promised to come—"

"Good! We'll come!"

"Then it's a question of subscriptions," said Fatty Wynn, taking out a little notebook. "I'm ready to collect 'em. A pound each would make a ripping feed!"

"Why don't you say a fiver each?" said Blake sarcastically. "It would be just as easy for you to rope it in, you know!"

"I don't think a fellow ought to be mean on an occasion like this! I've saved up a pound myself—"

"Make it ten bob a head, and we'll all get tips for the

special purpose from our people," suggested Tom Merry. "A pound is rather steep. Of course, as originator of the idea, Fatty Wynn is entitled to make a double contribution."

"Oh, of course, there's no objection to that!"

"Quite right!"

"Passed!"

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty Wynn. "I suppose ten bob a head will make a decent sort of feed, but it's no good forgetting that we have a guest coming—Marmaduke—and Marmy is rather particular what he eats. Then there's Cousin Ethel—"

"Weally, Wynn," said a voice at the door, as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came in; "weally, you have not placed the guests in their pwopah ordah!"

"What are you wandering about, D'Arcy?"

"I am not wandewin'. I wepeat that you have not placed the guests in their pwopah ordah! You should say Cousin Ethel and Marmaduke, not Marmaduke and Cousin Ethel."

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry. "Ladies first!"

"Place aux dames," assented Lowther.

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty Wynn.

"I weally considah that Wynn ought to apologise!"

"Oh, I stand corrected!" said the New House junior.

"Now, about the feed?"

"Vewy well, I am satisfied if the other gentlemen pwesent are satisfied."

The other gentlemen present being satisfied, Fatty Wynn was allowed to proceed. He wetted the end of his pencil.

"I'm going to do the shopping," he remarked. "I'll take the cash now, as much as you've got, and the rest can come in later. Ten bob a head. Hand over, and put your names down here."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy laid a sovereign on the table.

"That is my contwibution, and an extwa one for my cousin," he remarked. There was a howl of protest at once.

"Nothing of the sort!"

"Take it back!"

"Get out!"

"Weally, deah boys—"

"We're all standing the feed to Cousin Ethel," said Tom Merry, glowering at the swell of the School House. "You're not allowed to make a special contribution."

"Oh, wats! Ethel is my cousin—"

"D'Arcy's contribution is accepted," said Fatty Wynn, slipping the sovereign into his waistcoat-pocket; "but not for Cousin Ethel, who is the guest of the whole party—it is accepted on general grounds."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Wynn, I wefuse to have my contwibution accepted on general gwounds. I insist—"

"The matter is now closed."

"But I weally considah—"

"It is impossible to revive a matter now closed and done with. I am waiting for your contributions, dear boys," said Fatty Wynn.

"I wegard that as wathah wotten!"

"You are at liberty to regard it how you like. Cash up, you fellows!"

Some of the fellows cashed up, others put it off till they should receive their remittances from home. Fatty Wynn jingled a considerable sum in silver in his pocket, and smiled a satisfied smile.

"I'd better be off," he remarked. "It's late, and the House will be closed up soon. Oh, there was a message from Figgy about the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.' He's doing a Christmas instalment of the 'Black Chief.' By the way, Merry, if you'd rather leave 'The Ghost of St. Jim's' to me—"

"I wouldn't," said Tom Merry.

"I think I could handle the subject perhaps a little better than you could. Of course, I don't want to take it out of your hands if you'd rather not. What I was thinking is, that the subject is a specially good one for the Christmas Number of 'The Weekly,' and ought to have justice done to it."

"Bai Jove! What I like about Fatty Wynn is his modesty, deah boys! Now, if he had suggested that I should take the subject—"

"Of course, that would be mere rot, D'Arcy!"

"I wefuse to wegard it as wot! I considah—"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry. "I'm sticking to 'The Ghost of St. Jim's.' You can put in a thrilling description of the great Christmas feed, Fatty!"

"Good; I hadn't thought of that!" agreed Wynn. "That's a subject I can do justice to!"

"Yaas, wathah! But about that ghost—"

"The ghost belongs to me," said Tom Merry, shaking his head. "The story will come very opportunely just now, considering that the ghost is actually walking at the time."

"Oh, wats; it is a twick!"

"Well, I don't see how you are to account for the mysterious tapping," said Tom Merry. "I shall work that into the story, and make it awfully creepy!"

"Br-r-r!" said Blake. "You'll give us the creeps now, if you talk about it! Ghost stories are silly enough in the daytime, but lots of fellows believe in ghosts after dark!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I've got the first chapter sketched out," said the editor of "Tom Merry's Weekly." "It begins like this: 'Tap, tap, tap! The mysterious, awesome sound echoed through the gloomy vaults—'"

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"Through the gloomy vaults, and a spectral figure loomed up—"

"Gr-r-r-r!"

"Loomed up, and—"

"Tap, tap, tap!"

The sound rang suddenly through the study, interrupting Tom Merry. The juniors sprang to their feet in alarm. In the silence of the night the sound was inexpressibly weird.

"Tap, tap, tap!"

The boys looked at one another with suddenly pale faces. Then, proceeding they could not imagine whence, came the sound of a deep groan.

It was too much for the nerves of the juniors. With one accord the terrified youngsters dashed for the door, and poured pell-mell out of the study.

CHAPTER 16 Daredevil Dick.

"WHEW!"

The juniors halted some distance down the passage, and looked at one another sheepishly.

"Bai Jove, you oughtn't to have bolted like that, Blake!"

"Why, you bolted too!"

"I was cawwed away in the wush!"

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me—"

"Well, I do, and many of 'em!"

Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"The fact is we were all scared!" he said. "And it's not to be wondered at, either! I'm blessed if I know what to make of it, for one!"

"My word," said Digby; "I'm beginning to think that it's a real ghost!"

"Well, it does look like it!"

"It's horrid!" said Fatty Wynn, with a shudder. "If this thing doesn't stop, it will take my appetite away! I think I'll cut!"

And the New House Falstaff departed. It was close upon bedtime for the Fourth Form and the Shell, and no one showed any desire to return to Study No. 6. The mysterious tapping was weighing upon their minds.

When the Fourth Form went up to the dormitory, however, Blake cut into the study to get the parcel containing the disguise of Daredevil Dick the Highwayman. The scare had not made an alteration in his plans. The lesson to Binks was still to be given. He had arranged to meet Tom Merry and his chums in the corridor at half-past ten. The Fourth Form went to bed, but Blake did not go to sleep.

When half-past ten chimed out from the clock-tower, Blake slipped out of bed. He shivered; the night was cold. The mist had cleared off, and the moon was glimmering upon the white carpet of snow in the quadrangle, and on the strange figures of the frost on the dormitory windows. Blake hurriedly dressed himself.

"Are you coming, Herries?" he asked, shaking his chum. Herries started out of a dream.

"Eh—what—'tain't rising-bell!"

"Are you coming for that jape on Binks?"

"If you don't mind, Blake, I'd rather you told me about it in the morning."

Blake grunted.

"Are you coming, Dig?"

"Eh, what? Well, if you'll excuse me, old chap, I'd rather hear about it in the morning!" said Digby, sleepily.

"You coming, Gus?"

"Bai Jove, is that someone shakin' me? I wefuse to be shaken wuffly! I wish you to undahstand that it is a question of dig, with me, and I wefuse—"

"Oh, wake up! Are you coming with me to jape Buttons?"

"Upon the whole, Blake, I think I had bettah not come, unless you wish me to play the pwincipal part in the pwogramme. I will come and assume the disguise of Daredevil Dick, if you like, as I could pwobably do it much bettah."

"Rats!"

"Othahwise, I think my pwesence will pwobably be super-fluous."

"You're quite right there, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Lazy rotters," said Blake. "Stop in bed, then!"

"If you wish me to come, deah boy—"

"I don't."

"Then, if you are not watty about it, I will go to sleep again."

"Go to sleep, Gussy. You're nicest when you're asleep. You don't talk then."

But D'Arcy was already dozing off again. Jack Blake donned the startling garb of Daredevil Dick, the Highwayman, and quietly left the dormitory. Outside the door of the Shell dormitory Tom Merry was waiting for him. There was a glimmer of moonlight in the passage from the high window at the end, and Tom Merry gave quite a start as the curious figure of the highwayman came along.

"That you, Blake?" he whispered.

"Yes. Where are the others?"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Manners and Lowther think they'd rather hear about it in the morning. Where are your lot?"

"Same with them," grinned Blake. "Come on!"

"I say, you'd give anybody a start who saw you like that."

"Very likely. We shall have to take jolly good care not to be seen by anybody but Binks. Let's get along! Hallo, what's that?"

There was the sound of a cautious footstep behind Blake in the half-lit, shadowy corridor. The juniors started and stared in the direction of the sound.

"It—it's somebody coming!"

"Confound him!"

"It's— My hat, it's Gussy!"

The juniors breathed more freely. The figure of the swell of St. Jim's came into view in the glimmering moonlight. He had his trousers and slippers and a coat on, and a scarf round his neck. The corridor was very cold that winter night. An eyeglass glimmered in the moonlight.

"Bai Jove, are you there, deah boys?"

"Yes, ass," growled Blake. "You startled us."

"I wufese to be called 'an ass.'"

"What have you come along for, after all?"

"I thought you would vewy pwobably get into some mischief if I wasn't with you," explained D'Arcy. "Upon the whole, I considahed it bettah to come."

"Well, now you've come, don't make a row!"

"I am not makin' a row."

"Shut up, then! Come on!"

Blake led the way, and the other two followed in silence. Outside the door of the room occupied by Binks, Blake halted. There was a light glimmering under the door.

"The young ass hasn't gone to bed, yet," muttered Blake. "Staying up to read some of those lurid shockers, I suppose. We shall catch him in the act."

"I say, upon the whole, don't you think it rather rough on him?" murmured Tom Merry.

Blake snorted.

"Well, this is a nice time of day to start thinking that," he said. "Hallo! Listen!"

The sound of Binks's voice was audible from the room.

"Har, har, har! They little know!"

"Silly young ass, talking to himself," muttered Blake. "I think he wants curing, if ever any howling idiot did."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You two chaps stop here while I go in!"

"Good."

Blake turned the handle of the door, and strode into the room. As he came into the flickering light of Binks's candle, he certainly looked an awesome figure in a cloak and mask, whiskers, and pistol. The School House page was fully dressed, but he did not seem to have been reading. He had his hand on a panel in the wall of the room, and he turned round instantly as Blake came in. His gaze fell upon the terrible figure of Daredevil Dick, and he stood petrified.

CHAPTER 17.

Binks the Terrible.

BINKS gazed at the awesome visitor, his jaw dropping, his glance fixed, his eyes almost starting from his head. The masked highwayman returned his gaze grimly.

"Aha!" said Blake, in a deep bass voice. "Aha! Are you ready?"

"I—I—I— Who— How— Oh!"

"Har, har!" said Blake. "You are scared. You are frightened. Is this the spirit of a follower of Red-handed Bill?"

"Red-handed Dick, you ass!" came a whisper from outside.

"Of Red-handed Bill?" repeated Blake obstinately. "Is this the pluck of a disciple of Black-hearted Dick? Minion, tremble!"

The order was unnecessary. Binks was trembling in every limb, and his face was as white as chalk.

Blake stretched out his hand, and knocked the candle over. He did not want Binks to get a closer view. The moonlight glimmered in at the frosty window, and in the eerie dimness the figure of Daredevil Dick looked more terrible than ever.

"Mercy!" gasped Binks. "Oh, mercy!"

"Daredevil Dick never shows mercy," said the highwayman scornfully. "His path is marked in gore. His footsteps are deep in crimson stains, just as if he had dipped his boots in red ink."

There was a faint chuckle from without.

"I have come for you, Binks."

"Oh, lor, mercy!"

"Tremble not! I shall not hurt you. Have you not been prepared for this visit?"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Have you not often dreamed of becoming a highwayman, and stealing things for a living? Have you not visioned a wild career on the boundless main, and longed for the time when you could hoist the Jolly Roger, and sail the Spanish Main, and imbrue your hands in gore?"

"Oh, dear, I—I—"

"Will you join my band?" hissed Blake.

"I—I— Oh!"

"Will you join the choice selection of daring spirits that scoff at law, and fill their pockets with booty? Will you become a highwayman, and sail the Spanish Main with my gallant band?" demanded Blake, getting a little mixed.

"Oh, dear!"

"I have come to help you realise your dreams of a life of adventure. You shall join my band. I have long been in search of such daring spirits. You shall become known as Binks the Terrible."

There was a curious sound from the passage. It seemed as if somebody were choking there. But the terrified Binks did not notice it.

"Come!" said the highwayman sternly. "Will you join my gallant band?"

"I—I'd rather not, if you don't mind. I—"

"Is not this the opportunity you have been longing for?"

"Ye-e-es; but—but—"

"Ah, you are a craven! You shrink from the thought of imbruing your hands in gore! Har, base minion!" Blake plucked the old horse-pistol from under his cloak. "You must join my band or die!"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

"My men are waiting in the passage. Will you join my band?"

"I—I—I will if you wish, please."

"Then come! Have you a dagger?"

"N-n-n-no."

"Or a trusty sword?"

"N-n-n-no."

"Very well, I will lend you a pocket-knife to kill the doctor."

"To—to—to wh-wh-what?" gasped Binks.

"To kill the doctor. No member is allowed in my gallant band who has not paid his footing by committing, at least, one murder."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

"Besides, the gold in my cave in Epping Forest runs short. I must have more gold, and we can rob the school ere we mount our coalblack steeds and fly."

"I—I—I can't ride."

"Base minion! You aspire to be a highwayman, and you cannot ride, you have no dagger, not even a trusty sword. Bah! You shall learn to ride. You shall learn to watch the red gore flow and say 'Har, har!'"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

"Are you ready?"

"N-n-no—ye-e-es."

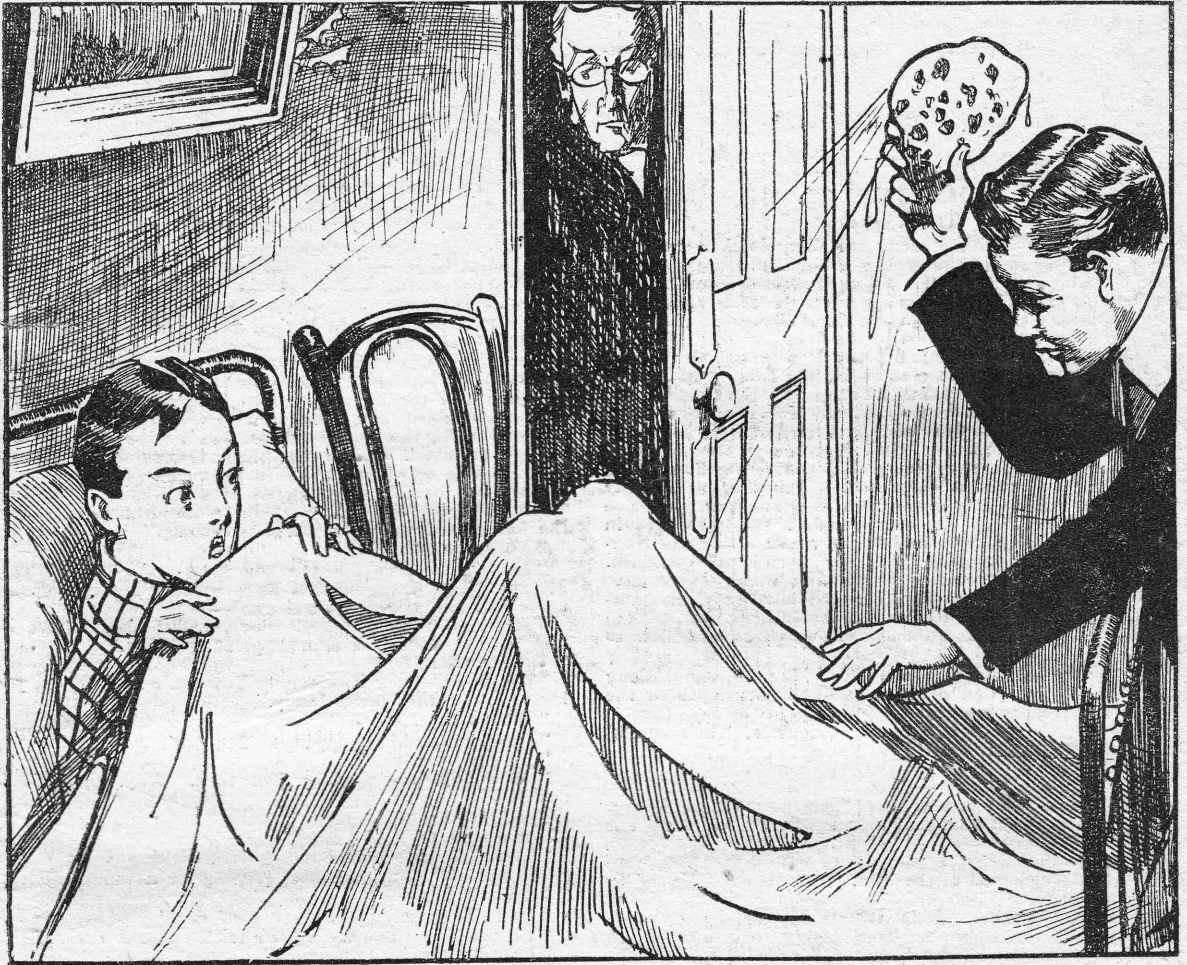
"Then come! Have you ever killed anyone, yet?"

There was an irrepressible chuckle from the passage. This time Binks heard it, but he set it down to the highwaymen chuckling in horrid glee at the thought of a murder.

"N-n-never," gasped Binks. "I—I would rather not kill anyone."

"Rats! I mean har, har!" said Blake hastily. "You must learn to wield a rusty sword—I mean a trusty sword. Come! I will lend you my poniard, and you shall drive it to the heart of the old man as he lies snoozing. Is there anybody else you would like to murder before you leave this place for ever?"

"I—I don't think so, please."



Mr. Linton opened the door of the Fourth Form Dormitory in time to hear the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy raised in remonstrance. "I utthly wefuse to move, Blake! If you bwing that sponge near me, I shall no longah wegard you as a fwient!"

"What about Mrs. Binns, the cook? Has she not boxed your ears?"

"Ye-e-es; but—"

"Boxed the ears of Binks the Terrible? Think! Had you had not better drive a rusty—trusty—dagger to her heart?"

"I— If you please, I—I'd rather not."

"And Mary the housemaid. Shall she not die?"

"No-n-no, please!"

"Perhaps you would rather carry her off to be the brigand's bride? Shall I call in my band to carry her off to be the brigand's bride?"

"Oh, dear! Please—please don't!"

"Then come! Let me see you slay the doctor, and I shall be convinced that you are worthy to be a member of my gallant band."

"Oh, please—please—"

"Come!" thundered Daredevil Dick.

Binks came. He was so paralysed with terror that he could hardly move, but he dared not disobey. Daredevil Dick grasped him by the shoulder, and led him from the room. He paused in the passage to speak to his trusty band.

"Har, har, my faithful blades! Spread through the house, and seize the gold, and shed as much blood as possible!"

"Yaas, wathah."

Tom Merry pinched the swell of St. Jim's too late. The cat was out of the bag, now. Binks gave a jump as he recognised the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He was not a particularly bright youth, but even his denseness had its limits. He understood that he was the victim of a "jape" at once.

"You utter ass!" muttered Tom Merry wrathfully, as

Binks uttered a gasping exclamation of relief. "You've given the show away."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"You shrieking idiot!"

"I wefuse to be called a shwieking idiot. I wegard you as havin' given the show away in the most widiculous manner. If you had not spoken—"

"You—you beasts!" muttered Binks. "Is this a little game?"

"Ha, ha!" yelled Blake, unable to restrain his merriment any longer. "Ha, ha! What do you think of Daredevil Dick, now, you young ass?"

"Master Blake!"

"Are you unwilling to join my band, and kill a few people to pay your footing?"

"You—you—"

"The game's up, now," said Blake regretfully. "I was thinking of taking the young idiot down and ducking him under a bath-room tap. Binks, you can go to bed."

"You—you—"

"Get to bed, and remember we've done this for your own good, and I hope the lesson will not be lost on you," said Blake, with a paternal air. "If Gussy hadn't been such an ass—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"You—you didn't frighten me," said Binks surlily. "I knew it was you all along. But I could jolly well frighten you if I liked."

"Rats! Get to bed, my son, and give Daredevil Dick and Red-handed Bill a wide berth. Bring that dummy along, Tom Merry!"

"I wefuse to be addressed as a dummy!"

Binks went into his room, and shut the door hard. The juniors descended the stairs chuckling. As they came into

the dormitory passage there was the sound of a door opening.

"Hold on!" muttered Tom Merry. "Listen!"
"It's somebody coming out of the Shell dormitory," muttered Blake.

"Yaas, wathah! And——"
"Shut up!"

"I wefuse to shut up! It's Skimpole!"

CHAPTER 18.

The Tappers.

SKIMPOLE blinked along the dim, desolate corridor. The three juniors crouched back into the shadows, and watched him curiously. It was evident that the amateur detective of St. Jim's was on the trail again. He was muttering aloud, and in the dead silence of the night his words were quite audible to the trio.

"Dear me! I am certain I heard a noise! It is very cold, but under the circumstances I think I ought to investigate the matter. I was taken by surprise when that terrible robber appeared in Blake's study, but if it happened again I should know how to deal with him. I should fix him with my eye, spring upon him, and deal him a terrific blow. Then I should take away his pistol, and secure him."

The hidden juniors chuckled. Skimpole's soliloquy seemed to them very funny, as the amateur detective blinked up and down the dim corridor. Skimpole was in his pyjamas and a coat, and there was a determined expression upon his knobby face. He was on the war-path. But for the present he seemed undecided which way to go.

"Dear me! I am certain I heard a noise!" he muttered again. "I should like very much to meet that masked scoundrel again, but I am uncertain in which direction to proceed."

Apparently he made up his mind, for he came along slowly in the direction of the shadowed corner where the three juniors were crouching.

"Bai Jove," murmured Arthur Augustus, "he's comin' this way, deah boys!"

"Quiet!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"He'll be on to us in a minute!" murmured Tom Merry. "He wants to see the masked man again, Blake. Why not give him a chance?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Jack Blake chuckled at the idea.

"Good wheeze!"

Skimpole seemed to hear something, for he stopped, blinking into the dimness. Tom Merry took a penknife from his pocket, and tapped on the floor with the handle. The sound echoed eerily along the corridor.

Tap, tap, tap! Skimpole started as he heard it. The courage of the amateur detective oozed out at his fingertips. His face went pale, and he hardly breathed, as he listened with painful intensity.

Tap, tap, tap!

"Dear me! I—— Oh dear!"

Skimpole was paralysed with terror. He stood quite still. He dared not advance, and he dared not go back.

Tap, tap, tap!

The amateur detective did not move. His eyes were starting from his head behind his glasses, and his breath came in thick, short gasps.

"Go ahead, Blake!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Right-ho!"

Jack Blake stepped quietly forward, and came out into the dim moonlight. Skimpole's eyes fell upon the fearsome form, and he jumped.

"Stand and deliver!" said Blake, in the deep bass voice of Daredevil Dick.

"Bless me! I—I——"

"Tremble, fathead—I mean, tremble, minion!"

Skimpole was trembling enough. He blinked in utter horror at the terrible form advancing upon him, and then all of a sudden he turned and bolted. He dashed into the Shell dormitory, and slammed the door with a slam that awoke half the Form, and buried himself with a plunge in his bedclothes.

"My only hat!" cried Monty Lowther, starting out of a doze. "What's that row? What's the matter? Burglars?"

"Yes!" gasped Skimpole. "There is a fearful ruffian in the passage—the same we saw in Blake's study——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughing matter, Lowther. There may be murder done!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lowther, I call upon you—all of you—to rise and alarm the house! I will shriek for help! I will——"

"Hold on, you ass! The highwayman is Blake!"

"What?"

"It's only Jack Blake, you ass!"

"Do you mean to say that this is a jape, Lowther?"

"Yes, dummy!"

"Oh, go to sleep!" said Manners. "Fancy waking us all up because you've met Blake in a mask and a horse-pistol! Really, Skimpole, you're getting mighty near the limit. You will find yourself scragged one of these days."

"Really, Manners——"

"Go to sleep!"

"But I am not yet assured——"

"I'll come and assure you with a jug of cold water if you don't shut up!" growled Gore. "Go to sleep, you fat-head!"

"Really, Gore——"

"Another word, and I'll brain you with a soap-dish!" howled Lowther.

And Skimpole thought he had better not utter the other word. Upon reflection, it did seem improbable that a gentleman in the garb of Dick Turpin would be roaming about St. Jim's, and he had to admit that it was no doubt a jape. In a state of considerable indignation, Skimpole drew the bedclothes about him, and made up his mind from that moment to let the mystery of St. Jim's solve itself, or else remain unsolved. Meanwhile, three juniors in the passage were kicking up their heels in a paroxysm of mirth.

"My only hat!" gasped Blake, almost sobbing. "I never knew Skimpole was such a sprinter. A dash like that on the footer field would be worth something."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He didn't carry out the programme!" chuckled Tom Merry. "He was going to fix you with his eye, spring upon you, and take the pistol away——"

"Ha, ha! I had my left ready, and I should have let him have it under the chin!" grinned Blake.

Tap, tap, tap!

"Oh, I say, chuck it, Merry! You can't frighten us, you know. Keep that for Skimmy."

"What's that, Blake?"

"I say, chuck that tapping! You can't scare us."

"I wasn't tapping."

"Somebody was tapping just then. Why, there it is again!"

Tap, tap, tap!

"It wasn't I," said Tom Merry.

"Then it's that young duffer Gus playing a little joke on his uncle!" growled Blake, groping for Arthur Augustus.

"I'll teach him——"

"Ow! Leggo my collah, you wuff ass!"

"I'll teach you to play a little trick on your uncle!"

"I wasn't playin' any twick."

"Wasn't that you tapping?"

"Certainly not!"

"By Jove, then it's——"

Blake broke off. The mysterious tapping had recommenced.

Tap, tap, tap!

The juniors were silent, hardly breathing. The mysterious sound came apparently from further up the corridor.

Tap, tap, tap!

"Look here, I'm going to see what it is!" muttered Tom Merry resolutely. "Come on!"

Blake and D'Arcy hesitated for a moment. But they had plenty of pluck. They followed Tom Merry's lead, and passed quickly up the corridor, past the door of the Third Form dormitory, and to the end. The passage was empty!

Tap, tap, tap!

The sound was behind them now. The juniors shivered. They had to pass the mysterious tapping now to get back to their sleeping-quarters.

"Come on!" muttered Tom Merry.

They hurried along the passage with beating hearts. It was empty!

"My hat!" muttered Blake. "This is getting too thick!"

"It was a different kind of tapping from that we heard before," said Tom Merry, in a low voice. "This sounded like tapping on the floor."

"Yaas, I thought so, too."

"Better get back to bed," muttered Blake. "Whatever it is, we can't get on to it."

"Yaas, wathah!"

There was evidently nothing better to be done. The juniors were growing a little scared, which was not to be wondered at.

"Right you are!" muttered Tom Merry. "Good-night!"

"Good-night, kid!"

"BRITAIN INVADED!" ANOTHER SPLENDID LONG INSTALMENT NEXT THURSDAY.

Blake and D'Arcy went into the Fourth Form dormitory, and Tom Merry further on into the Shell room. Their doors closed.

Then the door of the Third Form room cautiously opened, and three grinning faces peered out into the moonlit corridor.

CHAPTER 19.

Wally is Convinced.

WALLY peered up and down the corridor, and then grinned gleefully at his two companions, Jameson and Curly Gibson.

"They're gone!" he muttered.

Jameson and Gibson chuckled.

"Scared!" muttered Jameson.

"In a blue funk!" grinned Gibson.

"My only Aunt Jane!" went on Wally. "Fancy Tom Merry and Blake turning tail like that! I suppose this thing is getting on their nerves. They imagined before that they had heard it, you know, and that's what put the idea into my head."

"By George, we'll remind them of this to-morrow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say," murmured Curly, "we were going to tap on the doors of the Fourth and the Shell, when you spotted them in the passage. May as well carry out the programme."

"Yes, rather!"

And the three fags crept out into the corridor. Wally was a hard-headed youngster, and he did not believe in ghosts. The ghost story now going the rounds of St. Jim's only appeared to him as a good ground for "japes" on the fellows who thought they had heard the mysterious tapping. The three young rascals crept down the passage, and Wally tapped gently on the floor outside the Shell dormitory with the handle of his pocket-pencil.

Then he passed on to the Fourth Form-room, and repeated the tapping. The trio chuckled joyously as they heard a startled exclamation within.

"Bai Jove, Blake, there's that tappin' again!"

"Oh, go to sleep, Gussy!"

"But weally, Blake, I tell you I distinctly heard that mysterious tappin'!"

"Well, go out and see what it is."

"Weally, I think I will stay in bed."

Wally chuckled.

"That's my brother Gus," he murmured.

"Yes, rather! I'm not surprised at that ass being scared out of his wits—Hallo, what are you grabbing my hair for, D'Arcy minor?"

"I'm going to knock your head against the wall, Jim."

"Wh-wh-what?"

"I'm going to teach you chaps not to slang my brother Gus."

"Why, hang it," growled Jameson, "you slang him yourself!"

"That's different! He's my brother. He ain't your brother, is he, fathead?"

And Jameson's head biffed against the wall with a sounding tap. The next moment Jameson was hitting out, and Wally was hitting out, too; and then, clutching one another, they rolled over in the passage.

"Quiet!" whispered Curly Gibson. "You duffers, you'll have the Fourth out in a tick!"

But neither combatant heeded the warning.

"Lemme get at you—"

"I'll give you a jolly good licking—"

"You silly ass—"

"You howling duffer—"

"Chuck it, you fools! I can hear somebody coming!" cried Curly, in a shrill whisper.

And, as his warning was not heeded, he bolted, leaving the two excited combatants to face whoever was coming by themselves.

The Fourth Form door opened, and Jack Blake looked out. The sound of the bumping in the passage and the gasping of the combatants had reached his ears.

"My hat! Is that you, young Wally?"

"Yes!" gasped Wally.

"And what are you doing?"

"I'm licking Jameson!"

"Rot!" panted Jameson. "Rot! I'm licking D'Arcy minor!"

"And I dare say," said Blake, with a glimmering of the truth dawning upon his mind, "that it was you doing that tapping just now."

The Third Form fags were too busy to reply.

"Herries! Dig! Come here! Collar those young rotters!"

Wally and Jameson were promptly collared, and dragged into the Fourth Form dormitory. Wally resisted, but he hadn't much chance.

"Now then, you young scallywags," said Jack Blake severely, "was it you doing that tapping in the passage?"

"Find out!" gasped Wally.

"Weally, Wally, I think you should answer a question addressed to you in a polite and civil way," said Arthur Augustus, from his bed.

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus!"

"Weally, Wally—"

"I'm going to find out!" said Blake. "Reilly, old man, give me your sponge, will you? Fill it as full of water as it will hold."

"Faith, and I will!" said Reilly.

"Now then, you young rotters! Was it you tapping in the passage?"

Wally eyed the dripping sponge warily.

"Yes, it was!" Jameson gasped out quickly enough.

"We scared you, too. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Wally chuckled.

"And was it you tapping on previous occasions?" demanded Digby.

"Oh, no! That was your giddy imagination!"

"Is that honest Injun?" demanded Blake suspiciously. "It wasn't you when we heard the tapping before?"

"No, it wasn't! I don't believe you heard any tapping. It was only you were in a funk, you know," said Wally cheerfully.

"Weally, Wally, I must wequest you to—"

"Now, don't you begin, Gus."

"I suppose we ought to lick them," said Blake. "But as they've confessed, we'll only kick them out. Here goes!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tap, tap, tap!

Wally gave a jump. The sound came from across the dormitory—apparently from the solid wall against which the row of bed-heads were placed.

"Bai Jove, there it is again!"

"My hat!"

"You hear that, young D'Arcy?" grunted Blake. "What do you make of it?"

"Blessed if I know what to make of it!" said Wally. "It's some fellow playing a trick, of course!"

The juniors listened tensely for a repetition of the sound. But dead silence followed it. Blake broke the silence.

"Get out, you kids," he said, "and no more tricks, or you will get warmed! This is a serious matter!"

The Third Form fags quietly left the dormitory. Even Wally's volatile spirits were somewhat depressed by the curious, ghostly sound. Jameson was frightened, and did not conceal it. He looked about him nervously as he accompanied Wally down the passage. They entered the Third Form dormitory and found Curly Gibson sitting up in bed, his face glimmering white in the dimness.

"Is that you, young D'Arcy? I say, listen!"

"What is it?"

"Listen!"

Tap, tap, tap!

Wally started. It was the same sound that he had heard in the Fourth Form dormitory—faint, ghostly, mysterious; echoing eerily through the dim night!

"My only Aunt Jane!"

"Wh-wh-what do you make of it?" stammered Curly.

"Is it the g-g-ghost?"

"Stuff!" said D'Arcy minor resolutely. "It isn't a ghost, anyway!"

"Then what is it?"

"Blessed if I know! These fellows were telling the truth, then, about that mysterious tapping," said Wally thoughtfully. "They did hear it, and it wasn't all funk. I say, you chaps, we ought to look into this!"

Jameson rolled himself up in his bedclothes.

"You can look into it if you like!" he grunted.

"Oh, I don't mean to-night," said Wally, getting into bed; "it's too jolly cold!"

"I—I believe it's a gh-gh-ghost," murmured Curly Gibson. "I—I think we ought to go and call Mr. Selby or Mr. Railton."

"Rats!"

"I'm f-f-frightened!"

"Oh, don't be an ass, young Curly! If it's a ghost, Selby or Railton can't do any good," said Wally. "Better go to sleep."

And, as the mysterious sound was heard no more in the Third Form dormitory, Curly at last composed himself to sleep.

CHAPTER 20.

The Snow Fight!

"**J**OVE! Look at the snow!" Tom Merry uttered the exclamation as he jumped out of bed the following morning.

The snow was coming down in a dazzling sheet, and drifting before the wind against the panes of the Shell dormitory.

"Cold, isn't it?" shivered Manners. "But I'm glad to see the snow so thick. What price snowballs in the quad?"

"What ho!"

"Rats!" grunted Gore. "Too jolly cold! I'm going to look for a fire somewhere!"

"Slacker!"

"Oh, rats!"

There were very few of Gore's mind, however. Nearly all the Shell dressed themselves hurriedly, and followed the Terrible Three downstairs for a run in the snowy quad before breakfast. Snow had fallen before, but it was coming down thickly at last, and the juniors were delighted to see it.

"Coming out, Skimmy?" demanded Lowther, giving the amateur Socialist a slap on the back as they went downstairs that nearly sent him headlong to the bottom.

Skimpole clutched at the banisters and blinked at Lowther.

"N-no, I think not, Lowther!" he gasped. "I have to put the finishing touches to the four hundred and forty-fourth chapter of my great book on Socialism, as well as to prepare my article on Determinism for the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.' If you fellows like to stay in till breakfast, I'll read you out my notes for that article—"

"Thank you," said Lowther; "I'd rather be buried alive in the snow."

"Really, Lowther— Perhaps you would care to hear the latest views on the subject of Determinism, Manners?"

"Yes, perhaps," said Manners—"a jolly big perhaps!"

"Or you, Merry—"

"The very latest views, rather!" assented Tom Merry; "the latest possible—say very late to-night, when I'm asleep. You can read 'em out then."

"Really, Merry—"

"Come on, you chaps! I expect we shall find Figgins & Co. in the quad."

And the Shell, in coats and scarves and thick boots, rushed out into the quad. The wintry sun was glimmering through the falling snow. The quadrangle was a sheet of white. Walls and roofs and fences gleamed with a coating of snow.

"Hallo, here's those Shell-fish!" exclaimed the voice of Jack Blake. The Fourth Form were already out. "Give 'em socks!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Buck up, Shell!" shouted Tom Merry.

And in a moment the snowballs were flying.

There was plenty of material for manufacturing missiles, and the juniors were adepts at the work. A terrific battle was soon raging amid the falling flakes.

The Fourth were superior in point of number, and they were soon driving the Shell back towards the house under a shower of missiles. But the Terrible Three were a host in themselves. They rallied the Shell, and a hot scrimmage ensued at close quarters.

The combat was at its height when a crowd of scarfed juniors loomed up through the falling flakes from the direction of the New House.

"Go for 'em!" rang out the voice of Figgins.

And the New House juniors rushed to the attack.

Figgins led off with a huge snowball that caught D'Arcy behind the ear and broke over his cheek and neck. Arthur Augustus sat down suddenly in the snow with a gasp.

"Bai Jove!"

The next moment he had disappeared among the legs of the New House juniors as they rushed forward.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "Pwaw don't twead on me, deah boys! Weally, I wegard this as wathah wuff! If you twead on my twousahs I shall wefuse to play with such a set of wuff wottahs!"

But no one heeded D'Arcy.

Figgins & Co., backed up by a crowd of New House fellows, quite gained the upper hand by their sudden attack. But the two parties of School House fellows at once united against the common foe, and then Figgins & Co. began to get the worst of it.

"Down with the New House!" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" gasped D'Arcy, scrambling to his feet.

"Down with the beastly New House, deah boys!"

There was a wild and whirling conflict amid the wind-driven flakes.

In the height of it, a tall, lean form came crossing from

the New House to the School House; but the juniors were much too busily occupied to notice Mr. Ratcliff.

The New House master looked at the scene of excitement with a sour expression, and walked on; and then gave a sudden jump as a snowball caught him behind the ear.

The snowballs were flying in all directions, and it was dangerous to get near the combat. Mr. Ratcliff turned round with a glint in his eyes.

"Who threw that?" he shouted.

There was no reply. The juniors did not even hear him. But snowballs were flying fast, and a couple more squelched on Mr. Ratcliff's features as he glared.

"Boys! Desist at once!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the New House!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Buck up, there!"

"Hurrah!"

Faster and thicker flew the missiles. Mr. Ratcliff was in the line of fire, and the snowballs plumped on him from all sides. His face was pale with anger, but it was evidently useless to shout at the excited juniors. The housemaster fairly took to his heels and ran, and the snowballs—whether by accident or design—followed him fast, till he bolted into the doorway of the School House.

The conflict continued unabated. From the gate of the Head's garden a charming face looked into the quad, and two bright eyes watched the eddying conflict. The New House fellows, driven by superior numbers, were retreating, and their retreat happened to be in this direction. A large number of them were scattered, but a thick knot held fast round Figgins & Co., and showed a brave front to the enemy. Figgins caught sight of the pretty face over the gate, and in a moment the heap of ready snowballs dropped from under his arm, and he ran to the gate, dragging off his snow-covered cap.

"Good-morning, Cousin Ethel!"

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"Good-morning, Figgins! I see you are busy."

Figgins grinned.

"Only a little fun," he explained. "Hallo, those duffers can't see you! Hold on, there, pax!"

The School House fellows were rushing on, sending a storm of snowballs before them. Many of the missiles flew right at the gate, and Figgins immediately planted his lengthy form in front of Cousin Ethel to shield her. Snowball after snowball biffed upon him, but Figgins did not mind.

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"That is very kind of you, Figgins."

"I shouldn't like you to get biffed—I mean hit by a snowball," said Figgins anxiously, apparently under the impression that Cousin Ethel might break if touched too roughly. "Hold on, you duffers! Pax!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake. "You own up you're licked, Figgy?"

"No, I don't!"

"Then—"

"Hold on! Can't you see Cousin Ethel?"

"How do you expect me to see through a great chump like you?" demanded Blake, pulling off his cap as he caught sight of Ethel. "Beautiful morning, Miss Cleveland!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

"Nice and snowy. You don't often get a morning like this before Christmas, and we were making the most of it, giving these New House kids a licking."

"Rats!" said Kerr.

The snow-fight was mostly over now. Here and there it continued, but near the gate all was peace and polite grins.

"Bai Jove, I am not sowwy it is ovah, as a mattah of fact, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I find this wuff play vewy exhaustin'."

"Go and sit down, then," said Figgins kindly.

"I wefuse to go and sit down, Figgins," said D'Arcy, groping for his eyeglass, and then jamming it into his eye and regarding the New House junior with great disdain. "I cannot help suspectin' that you have utewiah motives in suggestin' that I should go and sit down."

Figgins turned pink. A bell rang through the falling snow.

"Bai Jove, that's bwakfast!"

The juniors began to go to their houses. Figgins remained at the gate. He was evidently determined to speak to Cousin Ethel, and the others raised their caps and turned away, to give old Figgy a chance, as they expressed it. All, except Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"You will be late for bwakfast in the New House, Figgins," he remarked.

"Really," said Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Gussy! Come on, Gussy!" called out Blake.

"I will follow you, deah boys."
 "No, you won't," said Blake, coming back and passing his arm through D'Arcy's; "you'll come now. Trot!"
 "I uttahly wefuse to twot—"
 "Now, Gussy, old man; we can't possibly begin breakfast without you," said Jack; "it wouldn't seem like breakfast without your chivvy at the table."
 "Oh, if you put it like that, Blake—"
 "Well, I do put it like that," said Blake solemnly.
 "Then I shall be vewy pleased to come. Au wevoir, Ethel!"

"Au revoir, Arthur!"
 And the swell of the School House walked off with Blake. Cousin Ethel made a movement to leave the gate.

"Just a minute," said Figgins.
 "You will be late for breakfast, Figgins."
 "Yes, I shouldn't wonder," said Figgins absently. "I—I say, Fatty—Wynn, I mean—spoke to you last night about coming to the feed—I mean the Christmas celebration. He says you're coming."

"I should like to come."
 "I say, that's—that's ripping!" said Figgins. "That's all we want, you know, to make it absolutely ripping."
 "Then it will be absolutely—er—ripping," said Cousin Ethel gravely.

Figgins blushed.
 "We are going to make it as decent an affair as we can," he remarked. "There will be holly and Christmas chains up, and so on. I—I wonder if you would help to decorate the room."

"Yes, certainly, Figgins! What room is it?"
 "Well—we haven't settled that yet, but when it's settled—"

"I shall be glad to do anything I can," said Cousin Ethel.

And, with a bright smile and a nod, she disappeared among the snowy trees. Figgins walked back to the New House with a smile of great satisfaction upon his rugged face.

CHAPTER 21.

Great Preparations.

MR. RAILTON, housemaster of the School House, entered the Head's study with a serious expression upon his face. Dr. Holmes was also looking very grave.

"You sent for me, sir?"
 "I wish to speak to you about a most curious occurrence," said the Head, as Mr. Railton sat down. "Mr. Ratcliff came over here before breakfast, to complain of a sound that disturbed him last night—a curious tapping, like that supposed to be made by the ghost of the monk Rufus."

"Ah, Mr. Ratcliff has heard it, too, then!"
 "Yes, at a late hour last night. It startled him very much, but he is convinced that it is due to some trick, which he attributes to a School House boy."

Mr. Railton smiled slightly. The housemaster of the New House never failed to find as many faults as possible with School House boys.

"And his reason?" asked Mr. Railton.
 "The tapping in the New House has only been audible upon one side—the wall where the New House joins buildings connected with the School House."

"I see."
 "It is a very strange affair, Mr. Railton," said the Head, looking troubled. "Last night, as I was sitting up late, I heard a curious sound of tapping, and could not ascertain whence it proceeded. As it was only audible once, I attributed it to the imagination. I thought also that it was, perhaps, due to some animal—a rat behind the wainscot, or something of that sort. But now I find that the sound has been audible to others, on more than one occasion."

Mr. Railton nodded.
 "I am aware of that, sir. I have been going to speak to you about it."

"Mr. Ratcliff says he has questioned the boys of his House, and several of them have heard the tapping. Figgins of the Fourth, and French of the Shell, have heard it, and also Monteith, his head prefect. To all of them it seemed as if the sound came from the wall adjoining the old refectory."

"But that wall is of immense thickness," said Mr. Railton. "A School House boy could certainly get there easily enough, but would a tap be audible through something like eight feet of solid stone?"

"It is very curious. I take it that you have heard this curious sound, too, Mr. Railton?"

"Yes, several times; and I do not know what to make of

it. Kildare and Darrel have both spoken to me about it, also Lefevre of the Fifth; and I find that it is a topic of discussion among the juniors, a large number of whom have heard it."

"And are you aware what views are held regarding it?"
 "Some of the younger boys attribute it to the ghost of St. Jim's—especially after dark," said Mr. Railton, with a smile. "Most of them, however, believe that it is the work of some practical joker."

"That is the only possible conclusion, I suppose?"
 "I think so, sir."

The Head looked very troubled.
 "The matter must be looked into," he said. "We shall have the smaller boys allowing all sorts of fancies to frighten them, if it is not stopped."

"That is true."
 "But how is it possible for the joker, whoever he may be, to obtain access to the places where the tapping is heard?"

Mr. Railton knitted his brows in a puzzled way.
 "That is a mystery at present, sir. But I have no doubt we shall discover the culprit, if we take the matter in hand seriously."

"Then, that is all we can do," said the Head. "I am really very much puzzled and annoyed."
 Mr. Railton quitted the Head's study. He met the master of the Fourth in the passage, and Mr. Lathom stopped and peered at him through his glasses.

"I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Railton—"
 "Certainly," said the housemaster, stopping.

"Have you heard a mysterious sound—a curious rapping in the dead of night?" asked the little Form-master impressively.

"Yes. Then you have heard it, too?"
 "Unfortunately, I have heard it only once, and that was in the class-room during afternoon lessons yesterday," said the Fourth-Form master regretfully; "and it was so brief that I was unable to deduce anything from it."

"I—I don't quite follow."
 "Of course, the cause of it is pretty evident, Mr. Railton."

"So I believe."
 "It is clearly the effort of a disembodied spirit to establish communication with beings of the earth."

Mr. Railton started.
 "It is—is what?"

"Perhaps you are a sceptic, like Mr. Linton," said the Fourth Form master; "but to my mind it is undoubted that this is the effort of a disembodied spirit to establish communication with the earth."

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"
 "Did you hear the rapping last night?"

"I certainly heard the tapping last night, in my study."
 "Was it accompanied by an icy chill in the room—"
 "No!"

"A curious, creepy feeling in the bones—"
 "Not at all!"

"Dear me! I suppose you are not a medium," murmured Mr. Lathom. "Now, I am convinced that I am a medium, Mr. Railton."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Railton drily.
 "Yes; although the manifestations I have received from the unseen world have hitherto been very meagre—very meagre indeed," said Mr. Lathom. "I am going to fully investigate this matter, and obtain as much data as possible to lay before the Disembodied-Spirit-Communication Society at the next meeting. I was thinking of holding a seance in my study to-night—"

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"
 "And I should be very pleased if you would come—"

"I fear I shall be busy elsewhere," said Mr. Railton, and he passed on, leaving the master of the Fourth shaking his head.

Mr. Lathom was fully convinced that his spiritualistic efforts were being crowned with success at last. The other masters were equally convinced that the mysterious tapping was the work of a practical joker. The latter opinion was that of the boys—during the daytime, at least.

The Upper Form fellows, many of whom had heard the spirit-rapping, attributed it to some mischievous fag, but how he contrived it they had to confess themselves unable to guess. As for the juniors, they regarded it as a "jape," though, when night drew on, their disbelief in ghosts grew proportionately weaker. Some of them, however, had other things than ghosts to think about now. The preparations for the Christmas celebration were going forward at a good rate.

Most of the funds were in, and the money was placed in the hands of Fatty Wynn. The fat Fourth-Former was planning a feed which he described as simply stunning. There was, of course, an argument as to whether the feed



At the sound of the ghostly voice, Taggles, the porter, dropped the lantern with a crash, and bolted.

should be held in the School House or the New House. The argument was settled by Tom Merry getting permission from Mr. Railton to use a room in the School House, which was larger than any Figgins could have secured on the other side. Size was, of course, an object as the party was a large one.

After morning school—the room having been agreed upon—the juniors were busy with the decorations. Here, of

course, Cousin Ethel was of assistance—more assistance than a dozen boys would have been.

A large supply of coloured paper having been laid in, the juniors were busy, under Miss Cleveland's directions, in making Christmas-chains, for the decorations of the somewhat bare walls. Others were set to work upon the holly decorations, and the room soon began to assume a very Christmassy aspect.

Afternoon school interrupted the work, but it was pretty well advanced. There was one junior who had not taken a hand in the decorations. It was Fatty Wynn. The mind of Fatty Wynn was fully occupied with the feed. All that day Fatty was going about with seraphic smiles upon his plump face.

"It will be ripping," he confided to Arthur Augustus, as the Fourth Form went in to afternoon lessons.

"Yaas, wathah!" assented D'Arcy. "Cousin Ethel is a gweat hand at decowatin' a place."

"Oh, I meant the feed!"

"Yaas, I might have guessed you meant the feed, you feahful young porpoise," assented the swell of the School House. "I weally do not think I evah saw you at any time when you were not thinkin' about a wotten feed."

"It won't be a rotten feed!" said Wynn warmly. "It will be ripping—simply stunning! I've laid out the money carefully, and there was a good sum. I'll bet you Marmaduke will be surprised when he comes."

"Yaas, you had better awwange with Figgy and Kerr and Marmy to cawwy you back to the New House when you've finished. Or, bettah still, to woll you back like a bawwel."

"If it wasn't Christmas time, I'd punch your nose!" said Fatty Wynn, and as they entered the class-room at that moment, the discussion ceased.

The juniors were rather curious as to whether there would be any tapping during the lesson. But there was none.

Afternoon lessons passed off uneventfully, only Fatty Wynn receiving fifty lines for inattention in class. Fatty Wynn was thinking of the glorious Christmas spread coming off that evening, and he could not be expected to bring his mind down from such a subject to mere decimal-fractions.

Mr. Lathom thought differently, hence the lines. But as the master of the Fourth seldom remembered to ask for the impositions he gave out, no harm was done.

Mr. Lathom himself was a little absent-minded that afternoon, as a matter of fact. He was thinking about the seance he intended to give in his study. In spite of the thrilling interest of a spiritualistic seance, Mr. Lathom did not find his colleagues of the School House eager to join him in establishing communication with the unseen world. In fact, they hardly concealed their opinion that it was nonsense. Mr. Lathom, of course, knew better. He knew that he was a medium, and that it was his own efforts that had been rewarded by the tapping in the School House. His heart beat at the thought of persuading the spirit to materialise and show himself in bodily form to the unbelievers.

Both master and class were glad enough of the hour of dismissal. Mr. Lathom went to his study to make his preparations, and Figgins & Co. went down to the gates to wait for Marmaduke. Tom Merry & Co. hurried off to the room where Cousin Ethel was already awaiting them, and they found the girl with a letter in her hand, and a smile upon her face.

"Good news?" asked Arthur Augustus

"Yes," said Cousin Ethel. "Miss Fawcett is coming—"

"Good!" said Tom Merry heartily.

"She says she has had your wire, Tom, and I am to tell you."

"Good!" said Tom again. "I thought she might like to come, so I wired her we were having a Christmas celebration."

"She will be here at eight o'clock, and Uncle Frank is coming with her, and Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath."

"Ripping!"

"Bwavo! I shall weally be vevy glad to see Mr. Dodds again! Do you wemembah how he played cwicket, deah boys?"

"We're not likely to forget," grinned Lowther. "By Jove, we'll all be glad to see Doddy here once more."

"Of course, they'll come to the feed?" said Blake thoughtfully. "That means more chairs. I'll ask Railton if we can have some chairs out of the lecture hall."

"That's about the only thing we can do."

Blake hurried off to ask permission. And, a short time afterwards, members of the School House were amazed to see a long procession of juniors proceeding from the lecture-hall to No. 12 room on the ground-floor, each bearing a chair on his shoulder or under his arm.

CHAPTER 22

The More the Merrier.

"MARMADUKE!" Figgins & Co. shouted out the name as their old chum alighted at the gates of St. Jim's from the station hack.

Marmaduke Smythe grinned at them joyfully, and hugged Kerr round the neck with one arm, and Fatty Wynn with the other, and waltzed them round in the snow.

"Here, hold on!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "I've got some tarts in my pocket, and—"

Snow is not the easiest stuff to waltz in. It was not surprising that Marmaduke slipped, and that the three waltzers biffed into Figgins, and the four of them rolled over on the ground. Marmaduke sat up in the snow, gasping.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

"Ow! My tarts are squashed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's a fearful muck in my jacket!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we're jolly glad to see you!" said Figgins, shaking hands with Marmaduke, and dragging him up. "It's worth a few tarts, Fatty, to see Marmy's old chivvy again."

"Yes but—"

"Exactly! Come on, Marmy."

Marmaduke paid the driver—a double fare, as suited the son of a millionaire—and entered the gates, with Figgins and Kerr taking an arm each, and Fatty Wynn following, trying to squeeze the squashed tarts out of his pockets.

"By George!" said Marmaduke. "I'm glad to see you again! And I've brought a first-class appetite with me."

"Good!" said Fatty Wynn. "We're having a ripping feed to-night, soon after eight."

"Why don't you say soon after Christmas?" asked Marmaduke pleasantly.

"Oh, we'll give you a snack to go on with!" said Figgins, laughing. "Come up to the study, and we'll have tea in the old style, and then go over to the School House and help them with the decorations."

And Figgins explained what was going forward in the School House. Figgins & Co. had tea in their study, in the old style. Marmaduke had a perpetual grin of delight on his face as he sat in the old quarters.

"It's ripping to see you all ag'n!" he said. "Same old soapdish with the jam in it. Same old black kettle. Same old Fatty, scoffing everything he can lay his hands on!"

"Oh, I say!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"It's ripping! And you say Cousin Ethel's here? I wish Miss Priscilla were coming! It does me good to see your old inky chivvies again. I—"

Marmaduke broke off suddenly.

A strange sound had suddenly become audible in the study—a sound strange to Marmaduke's ears, though familiar enough to Figgins by this time.

Tap, tap, tap!

"My hat!" said Marmaduke. "What's that?"

Figgins & Co. smiled a sickly smile.

"The ghost of St. Jim's!"

"The—the what?"

"Either the ghost of monk Rufus, or else some practical joker."

"It came through the wall there—from the old refectory."

"The wall's about eight feet thick."

"By George! There it is again!"

Tap, tap, tap!

The juniors fell very silent. Dark night had set in upon St. Jim's, and through the darkness the snowflakes were steadily falling. The sound was very eerie as it came faintly to their ears, muffled by the distance.

Some minutes passed, and it was not repeated. Figgins & Co. resumed their tea, but with somewhat subdued spirits.

"Blessed if I know what to make of it!" muttered Marmaduke. And the Co. agreed with him.

They had tried to puzzle it out often enough, and they had to come to the conclusion that it was beyond their powers.

Tea finished, Figgins & Co. crossed through the blinding snow to the School House.

Tom Merry & Co., and Cousin Ethel had had their tea, most of them carefully taking only a light meal in view of what was to come. Marmaduke was marched in by the Co., and he received a hearty welcome from the School House juniors. They were all glad to see him.

"Miss Fawcett's coming," said Tom Merry; "and Uncle Frank, and Mr. Dodds."

"Ripping!" said Figgins. "It will be a party, and no mistake. I say, Merry—" Figgins hesitated for a moment.

"Well, go on, Figgy!"



Tap, tap, tap.
The sound echoed eerily along the corridor, and Skimpole, the amateur detective, dared not move. His eyes were starting from his head behind his glasses, and his breath came in thick, short gasps.

"Suppose you ask Skimpole. May as well have him in, on condition he agrees not to talk."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Right-ho! Every fellow is at liberty to bring a friend in, and I'll start with Skimmy."

And Tom Merry, having to go up to his study for more crockeryware, looked into Skimpole's room for the amateur

Socialist. Skimpole was sitting at the table, his chin on his hands, in an attitude of intense reflection.

Tom Merry startled him out of his reverie with a slap on the back.

"Hallo, Skimmy! What are you doing?"

"I am putting the finishing touches to my article on Determinism for the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly,' Merry."

"But it's not going in, old chap."

"I hope to make you see reason on that point, Merry."

"Impossible! I am absolutely incapable of seeing reason on that point."

"I do not despair. Even your sluggish intellect—"

"Eh?"

"Even your sluggish intellect may be moved by argument."

"You'll get some of your features moved if you're not jolly careful," said Tom Merry darkly. "But I didn't come here to argue. Would you like to come to the Christmas feed this evening?"

"Yes, I should certainly be very pleased."

"Then come about half-past eight."

"With pleasure. I will bring the article on Determinism with me, and read it out to the assembled company—"

"If you bring any article on any 'ism,' we'll make you eat it."

"Really, Merry—"

"Mind, you're to come muzzled—at any rate, you're not to talk. One word ending with 'ism,' and you go out on your neck. Remember!"

And Tom Merry left the study. He left Skimpole shaking his head solemnly. As the hero of the *Shell* went downstairs with crockery under his arms and clinking in his pockets, he met Mrs. Mimms, who was looking worried.

"Excuse me, Master Merry," said the house-dame, "have you seen Binks?"

"Binks!" said Tom Merry. "No!"

"He can't be found," said Mrs. Mimms. "I don't know what's coming to that boy. Mrs. Binns says he's always muttering to himself like she don't know what, when he's cleaning the knives. Sometimes he goes off to his room saying he's got a headache, and then he can't be found. Mrs. Binns has looked in his room and he isn't there."

"I hope nothing's happened to the kid," said Tom Merry seriously. "I believe he's a little bit off his rocker, you know. I'll ask the fellows, and if anybody's seen him, I'll come and tell you."

"Thank you, Master Merry."

Tom Merry did ask the fellows, but no one had seen Binks. The Buttons of the School House had apparently disappeared. Most of those questioned, however, opined that he would be discovered in some corner, devouring the adventures of Red-handed Dick, or Black-hearted Bill. Binks was soon forgotten in the hurry of preparation for the Christmas feed.

The room was looking really splendid now. With the gas alight, gleaming on the coloured paper chains and the holly decorations, it had a very Christmassy look. The long table—formed of several tables placed end to end—was covered with a cloth of spotless whiteness, and the preparations for the feast were going forward without a hitch. The seraphic contentment of Fatty Wynn's face is almost impossible to describe.

The supplies for the feed, under the experienced management of Fatty Wynn, were large and varied. One item was lacking—a Christmas pudding; but the fat Fourth-Former had a little scheme in his mind for supplying the deficiency. More than once Fatty repaired to the kitchen stairs with all the caution of a boy scout, and had returned because the coast was not clear. But his opportunity came at last. Fatty Wynn had an accurate knowledge of the supplies Mrs. Mimms was accumulating for the festive season, and he knew where to lay his hands upon them. And if Tom Merry's Christmas party lacked a Christmas-pudding, it would not be Fatty Wynn's fault.

"My only Aunt Jane!" murmured Wally, as he spotted the fat Fourth-Former creeping down the stairs. "Fatty is after something."

"Grub, I expect," grinned Jameson.

"Come on—on the track."

And as Fatty disappeared, a little crowd of juniors followed him cautiously, with suppressed chuckles. Fatty was quite unconscious of it. He was thinking of the pudding. In a couple of minutes he was in the pantry, and he paused for a moment to gaze in ecstasy at the well-filled shelves. Puddings and mince-pies, jams and preserves—a variety and quantity of good things that almost dazzled Fatty. But he realised that he had no time to waste.

The special pudding he had his eye upon was on an upper shelf. He reached for the steps, pushing out of his way a heap of holly and mistletoe prepared for the coming Christmas decorations. A crowd of grinning faces peered round

the pantry door at the fat Fourth-Former. Fatty Wynn reached out for the pudding, and seized it in his greedy grasp.

There was a footstep. Wally looked round quickly, and uttered an exclamation.

"Mrs. Mimms!"

Fatty Wynn heard the words, and started. But he was not in a safe position just then, and the start he gave caused the steps to jerk violently. The next moment Fatty, with the pudding in his grasp, was falling.

A loud shriek rent the stillness. Fatty had plumped down heavily upon the holly, and he was hurt!

"The ghost!" yelled Wally.

"Ow!"

"What—what are you doing here?" exclaimed Mrs. Mimms, in angry amazement. And the juniors scattered right and left to avoid the cuffs she so liberally bestowed. But Fatty Wynn was fairly caught.

He reposed on the holly for about the thousandth part of a second, and jumped up still yelling. Mrs. Mimms glared in at him.

"Master Wynn! You bad boy!"

"Ow! I'm hurt!"

"Serve you right, too," said the angry dame, "trying to steal the nice pudding I was going to give Master Merry for his party!"

Fatty Wynn groaned.

"Ow! Why couldn't you say so before, then? Ow!"

"Oh, be off with you!" said the house-dame unsympathetically. "Be off at once!"

"I'll take the pudding to Tom Merry," said Fatty.

"No, you won't, Master Wynn. It might never reach him," said Mrs. Mimms emphatically. "Be off with you!"

And Fatty Wynn, wriggling all the way, beat a retreat, consoled only by the knowledge that the pudding was to grace the festive board after all.

Arthur Augustus had been sent by Cousin Ethel in search of spoons, and he had made a collection of those useful articles, and was bringing them along to the room, when there was a sudden pattering of feet in the passages, and three inky-fingered fags of the Third raced up.

"Hallo, Gus, old cock!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his right eye, and stared superciliously at D'Arcy minor, Jameson, and Gibson.

"Wally, I must weally insist upon your not addressin' me in that vulgar and familiar manna," he said.

"Rats!" said Wally cheerfully. "What do you mean by overlooking me?"

"I fail to compwehend—"

"You're allowed to take in a friend to the Christmas feed I hear," said Wally, in an aggrieved tone, "and you've forgotten your own brother."

"Weally, Wally—"

"Oh, of course, I know you intended to ask me," said Wally. "It's all right, I'll come."

"I was not thinkin'—"

"And I'm going to have a wash and put on a clean collar," said Wally hurriedly. "I want to do you credit on an occasion like this, Gus."

Arthur Augustus's severe face relaxed.

"Well, undah those circs., Wally, I shall be vewy pleased to take you in to the feed," he said.

"Thanks, Gus! You're an old sport. I hear that every fellow who comes is allowed to bring in a friend."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you'll take me?"

"Yaas, on condish. you have a clean face and a clean collah."

"And as I'm coming, of course, I am at liberty to bring in a friend?"

"Of course!" said Jameson.

Arthur Augustus hesitated.

"I—I weally do not know about that, Wally. You see—"

"Oh, come, it's all right! I'm going to bring Jameson."

"Thanks," said Jameson. "I'll come with pleasure. I suppose I'm at liberty to bring a friend also?"

"Of course!" said Wally.

"Weally—"

"Then I'll bring Curly."

"I shall be delighted," said Gibson.

"It's settled," said Wally. "We're all coming. Thank you very much, Gus."

"But, weally—"

"It's all right. Half-past eight, isn't it?"

"Yaas, wathah! But—"

"Right-ho! We'll be there, and you can rely upon us to be spick and span, old Gus!"

And the young rascals of the Third scuttled off. D'Arcy carried in his consignment of spoons with a somewhat worried look.

"Young Wally is comin', Tom Mewwy," he remarked.



"I'll teach you to tap on the wall of my study!" said Figgins, as he sat on Pratt's chest, and jerked the hammer away, "I'll tap your silly head!"

"Good," said Tom Merry solemnly. "Any relation of Marcus is, of course, welcome to an honoured seat at the festive board."

"Oh, pway don't wot, deah boy! And he's bwingin' in a friend."

"Oh, is he?"

"Yaas, and his friend is bwingin' in a friend, too."

"All the Third Form coming?" asked Tom Merry pleasantly.

"N no! That's the lot. I twust—"

"Oh, that's all right! The more the merrier! Young Wally knows how to behave himself when he chooses, and he'll keep his friends in order. It's all right."

"Vewy good," said D'Arcy, looking relieved. "You"

He stopped short. In the midst of the cheerful buzz and clatter of preparation, a weird sound came echoing through the room.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The voices died away at once. Cousin Ethel looked a little pale, and Figgins half-unconsciously caught her hand to reassure her.

"Bah Jove! The ghost again!"

A dead silence followed. But the sound was not repeated.

CHAPTER 23.

Mr. Lathom on the Track.

DR. HOLMES sat alone in his study. The room was very quiet, the deep silence broken only by the scratch of the doctor's pen. The reading-lamp at his elbow cast its light over the sheet as he wrote; the rest of the room was in shadow.

The Head gave a sudden start, and a blot of ink fell from his pen to the paper.

Through the silence the weird sound he had heard before came to his ears.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The Head sat bolt upright in his chair, and listened.

The sound had been faint, and it was not repeated.

"Dear me!" murmured the Head. "I thought I heard that strange sound again! Perhaps it was only imagination."

He glanced round him rather uneasily, into the dusk that lay thick in the corners of the room.

The room was very still.

The Head turned to his work again. But his pen moved slowly now. In spite of himself, he could not dismiss the mysterious sound from his mind. Thoughts of that strange scene of the olden time were in his mind, of the blind monk tapping along the stone flags with his stick, of the savage blow from the wicked abbot's dagger that had laid him dead, of the ghostly visitations that had haunted the abbot Wolfram to his dying day—so said the legend. In his mind's eye the Head could see it all—could again hear the ghostly tapping of the stick—and his pen ceased to move. No effort of will could concentrate his mind upon his work. He was listening in a state of nervous tension.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The doctor sprang to his feet in alarm.

The mysterious tapping had commenced again.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

Dr. Holmes looked round the dusky room with quick, nervous glances. He was ashamed of the creepy thrill that ran through his limbs, but he could not help it—the sound was so startling, so indescribably eerie.

(Continued on page 33.)

NEXT
THURSDAY:

"FATTY NO. II."

A School Tale of
Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

GRAND FOOTBALL PUZZLE-PICTURE COMPETITION.

FIFTY POUNDS IN CASH PRIZES.

Specimen Picture.



APPLEBY.

First Prize—

£13 0 0: ONE POUND A WEEK FOR THIRTEEN WEEKS.

Second Prize—

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And 122 Cash Prizes of 5s. Each.

The First Prize will be awarded to the person who gets all or, failing this, most of the pictures right. The Second Prize will go to the reader nearest to the First Prize Winner, and so on. In the event of ties, the Prizes will be divided—that is to say, if two competitors tie for the first place, the first and second prizes will be divided between them, and so forth.

What Competitors have to do.—The Competition is very simple. We are publishing thirteen sets of Picture Puzzles, each set consisting of six pictures. This is the Eleventh Set. Keep this set until you have all the others. Each of the pictures represents the name of a well-known Association Football Player.

All you have to do is to write carefully under each picture the name of the Player you think it represents—it is not necessary to add the name of the player's club. Then place the set away until the others have appeared, when the latest day for sending in competitions will be announced. The Editor of the Gem LIBRARY will not be responsible for any loss or delay in transmission or delivery of the lists by post, nor for any accidental loss of a list after delivery. There will be attached to the final list a form to be signed by each competitor, whereby he agrees to these conditions, and no list will be considered unless this form shall have been duly signed by the competitor. No questions will be answered. Read the rules. The Editor's decision is final.

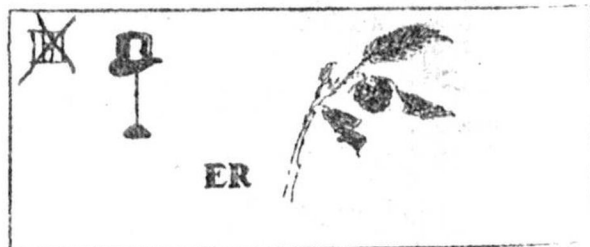
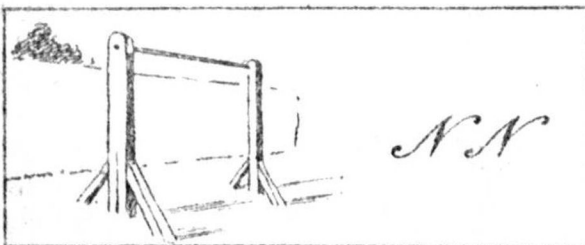
The easiest way to solve the Pictures is to get the issue of "The Boys' Realm" now on sale, price 1d. During the next thirteen weeks "The Boys' Realm" will publish a column of brief biographies of notable footballers, in which will be included all the names of the Players illustrated. Girls may compete. All competitors may get anyone to help them.

THE ELEVENTH SET.



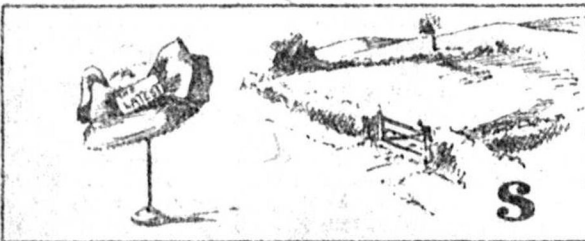
No. 61

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No. 63

No. 64



No. 65

No. 66

KEEP THESE PICTURES BY YOU UNTIL NOTICE IS GIVEN TO SEND IN.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

Whence did it come?

He could not tell. He listened intently. From the wall somewhere—that much was certain! But who—how? The doctor felt himself in a maze. He listened with beating heart, but the deep silence was unbroken.

For some minutes the doctor remained standing, in painful uncertainty and suspense. Then he quietly left the room, and made his way to Mr. Railton's study. The house-master's room was dark, and he was not there. As the Head was turning away, Kildare came along the passage.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Railton is, Kildare?" asked Dr. Holmes.

"In Mr. Lathom's study, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's, with a curious expression upon his face that somewhat surprised the Head.

"Thank you, Kildare."

Dr. Holmes went to Mr. Lathom's study and tapped at the door. There was an abrupt exclamation within. The door opened.

"Really, I— Dear me, it is Dr. Holmes," said little Mr. Lathom, peering out through his spectacles. "Pray come in, my dear sir."

The Head looked into the study in amazement.

The gas was turned down to the lowest point. Mr. Railton was seated in the armchair, and even in the dimness signs of impatience were visible upon his face.

"Please be seated, sir."

"But—but what—?" stammered the Head.

"It is a seance, sir," said Mr. Railton. "Mr. Lathom is endeavouring to trace the mystery of the tapping by spiritualistic means. I need not say that I am here as a sceptic—indeed, Mr. Lathom really dragged me in—"

"I wish to convince you," said Mr. Lathom. "I should be glad to convince you also, sir."

"But really—"

"Pray take a seat."

The doctor unwillingly seated himself. He did not want to hurt Mr. Lathom's feelings, but he regarded the whole matter as nonsense. Mr. Lathom made them a sign to be silent.

"You see, I am a medium," he explained. "I hope that this time we shall see as well as hear. I can feel the mystic influence of the neighbourhood of a disembodied spirit."

"Dear me!"

"Do you not feel a mysterious thrill?"

"Not at all!"

"A sense of impending—of impending solemnity?"

"Not in the least!"

"Ahem! Listen! I am sure! Hark!"

Tap, tap, tap!

The Head started.

It was the same sound that he had heard in his room. Mr. Railton compressed his lips. The Fourth Form master's countenance beamed with satisfaction.

"At last," he murmured—"at last!"

Tap, tap, tap!

"Spirit," said Mr. Lathom, in a deep and impressive voice

"Spirit, I hear!"

"Upon my word, Mr. Lathom—"

"Oh, pray be silent—pray! Spirit, I hear!"

But no more tapping came from the darkness. Mr. Lathom listened for some time, and then he turned up the gas, looking quite disturbed.

"I am afraid the seance is spoiled," he said. "You really should not have spoken just then, sir. It is quite clear to me that your voice scared away the spirit."

"Mr. Lathom!"

"Had you not spoken, I have no doubt that a message would have been written down."

"Upon my word!"

"Surely, sir, that rapping in answer to my appeal to the unseen is a sufficient proof that there is something in the science of spiritualism?"

"I hardly think so."

"More likely a proof that there is a very daring and very impudent practical joker in the School House," said Mr. Railton, with a clouded brow.

"Oh, really, Mr. Railton—"

The Head and the house-master quitted the study, leaving Mr. Lathom very much disappointed with the result of his seance; and yet satisfied that communication had, indeed, been established with the unseen.

"I went to your study to speak to you, Mr. Railton, on this very subject," said the Head. "I have been disturbed by this tapping in my own study."

The School House master knitted his brows.

"It is growing intolerable," he exclaimed. "Yet I cannot tell what should be done to discover the rascally joker. I do not know—"

A sound of voices in the hall interrupted the house-master.

"Where is my darling Tommy?"

The Head smiled slightly.

"That is Miss Priscilla Fawcett's voice."

And the Head went to welcome his guest, and the subject of the mysterious tapping was dismissed for the time. Tom Merry had come out to greet his old governess, and Miss Priscilla clasped him to her motherly bosom before an admiring crowd of fellows.

"My darling boy!" she exclaimed. "How sweet of him to telegraph to his old nurse, was it not, Mr. Dodds?"

"Very," said the curate of Huckleberry Heath.

"How the darling child has grown! Kiss your Uncle Frank, Tommy dear!"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Francis Fawcett, in his abrupt way. "Nonsense, ma'am, do you want to make a fool of the boy?"

"My dear Francis—"

"My dear Priscilla—"

Tom Merry escaped from his old governess's affectionate embrace with a very red face. His chums were all keeping serious faces, but the effort it cost them was tremendous.

CHAPTER 24.

The Secret Out—And a Jolly Party.

 LICK!

Jack Blake gave a start.

It was dusky in the Fourth Form passage, and dark in Study No. 6. It was getting near time for the feed, and Blake had run up to the study for some article that was required. As he came near the half-open door, the sound of that faint "click" from within came plainly to his ears.

"By Jove!" muttered Blake.

The thought of the ghost of St. Jim's was in his mind. He remembered also what Tom Merry had told him, of a mysterious sound in the study, which had proved to be empty. He stepped quickly and quietly to the open door, and looked in.

What he saw almost made him exclaim aloud with astonishment.

Outside, the snow was falling thickly, but there was a glimmer of starlight in at the window. The glimmer fell full upon the oak panelled wall of the study, and it showed one of the panels that had opened like a door, disclosing a dark aperture.

Blake's heart beat hard.

He had heard the old legends of St. Jim's, which told of secret passages in which the monks had hidden themselves or their treasures in the old days of the abbey. The passages, if they existed, were not known at the present day. As he saw the open panel in the wall of Study No. 6, he understood.

A dark form was stepping through into the study.

Blake could not make it out in the dimness, but he knew from the size that it must be a boy.

He had no doubt upon the subject now; he had discovered the ghost of St. Jim's.

The secret panel was the clue to the mystery.

The practical joker had discovered the hidden passages in the thick old walls, and had used them to play this prolonged and daring trick upon the long-suffering inmates of the School House.

Jack Blake's face set grimly.

He stood quietly at the door, waiting. There was a glimmer of buttons as the dark form stepped into the starry gleam at the window.

Then a muttering voice broke the silence.

"Har, har, har! They little know!"

Jack Blake gave a violent start.

"Binks!"

He uttered the name aloud in his astonishment.

The mysterious figure was just closing the panel. The click told that it was fastened. As he heard Blake's voice, Binks made an effort to open it again. It came open, but at the same moment Blake's grasp closed upon him like a vice.

"No, you don't!"

"Oh! Ow! Please—"

The page struggled frantically for the moment. But he was an infant in the grasp of Jack Blake, and his resistance was very short.

Blake closed the door with a kick, and then flung Binks into a corner while he lighted the gas.

The boy was trembling violently now, and seemed on the verge of tears.



An amusing incident in "The Rival Entertainers," the splendid long, complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., contained in "THE MAGNET" LIBRARY, now on sale. Price One Halfpenny.

"You young rascal!" said Blake sternly. "So you are the ghost of St. Jim's!"

Binks began to whimper, but at the same time a grin overspread his face.

"Oh, Master Blake!"

"I've caught you," said Blake grimly. "You'd better own up. By Jove, you ought to have a licking before you're kicked out of the school!"

"Don't—don't tell about me, Master Blake!" whimpered Binks. "I—I only did it for a joke. I—I shall get the sack!"

"Serve you jolly well right, too!"

"You—you wouldn't get me the sack at Christmas time, Master Blake! I—I'll promise never to do it again."

"You young ass! If you had japed us, it would have been nothing; but you've been japing the masters—the Head himself! Nobody but a rotten cad would think of japing the Head! My hat! You'll look rather blue when you're up before him—"

Binks gave a howl of terror.

"Master Blake! Oh, don't tell him! I'll swear—"

"If you swear here you'll get a licking!"

"I—I mean, I'll promise—"

"I don't see how I can let you off."

"I—I'll do anything. Don't get me the sack at Christmas time."

Blake's expression relaxed. He was good-natured, and never angry for long. Binks certainly deserved to be "sacked," but Jack did not care to be the means of his being discharged.

"Well, suppose I keep it dark," he said roughly. "Then the mystery will never be explained—"

"I—I won't do it any more, Master Blake."

"That's all very well. Look here, I'll see what can be done. You have been using the secret passages in the School House, I suppose, to carry on this tapping business."

Binks grinned faintly.

"Yes, Master Blake."

"How did you discover them?"

"There's—there's a panel in the wall of my room at the top of the house," faltered Binks. "I found it out by accident. Then I thought it would be a lark to explore the secret passages, and I explored them with a lantern. There's a staircase leading from the top of the house in the thickness of the wall. I—I never meant any harm, Master Blake. Only—only I heard somebody talking about the ghost of the school, that tapped about the place when the snow was on the ground, and I thought—"

"You thought you'd pull our legs all round," said Blake. "Not a bad jape, either, if you had let the Head and the masters alone."

"I—I couldn't always tell who was in the room, you see. Sometimes I heard voices, but I could never make out the words. Sometimes I caught a chink of light through the panels. I—I thought it funny to startle 'em. I—"

"And I suppose when I caught you in here the other night, you had just come in through that panel," said Blake.

Binks grinned.

"Yes, Master Blake. There's a spring on the other side of the panel, and I found it from the other side. It's a long, spiral staircase up to my room, and coming out this way saved the long climb. So—"

"Good! So you came out, and were caught?" said Blake. He glanced at the open panel. "My hat! This

"BRITAIN INVADED!" ANOTHER SPLENDID LONG INSTALMENT **NEXT THURSDAY.**



This illustration depicts an exciting incident in "Fatty No. II," next Thursday's grand, complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co.

may come in useful to us some time. I suppose there's a secret passage leading towards the New House?"

"Yes; in the thickness of the walls. There ain't any in the New House itself, nor yet in the new wing of the School House."

"Ah, of course! That accounts for Tom Merry never hearing the tapping in his study. Show me how to work this thing!"

Binks obeyed. Blake closed and clicked shut the panel. Then he looked doubtfully at Binks, who was waiting in trembling suspense for his decision.

"I won't give you away, Binks," he said slowly. "You deserve it, but I won't! But mind, anything further in this line, and I'll march you in to the Head by the scruff of your neck, and tell him the whole story."

"Ye-e-es, Master Blake."

"It wasn't wholly for a lark that you did this, either. You've got your silly head stuffed up with Red-handed Dick and Black-hearted Bill, and the Ghastly Ghost of Spotted Spectre Gulch, and all that rot. You've got to give up reading that bosh!"

"Ye-e-es, Master Blake."

"Mind, you're to burn every one you've got, and never buy any more."

"Ye-e-es, Master Blake."

"That agreed to," said Blake musingly. "I think I can let you off with six on each hand. You can look upon yourself as a junior, and me as a prefect, for a few minutes."

He picked D'Arcy's cane out of a corner.

"Hold out your hand!"

"Ye-e-es, Master Blake."

Binks held out his hands in turn, and Blake gave him six on each. Jack rather fancied himself in the role of prefect, and he laid on the cuts with pretty good force. Binks was squirming when he had finished.

"I hope that will be a lesson to you, Binks," said Blake, with a magisterial wave of the hand. "You may go."

And Binks went. A few minutes later, Jack Blake descended to the room where the feast was laid out. He met Mr. Railton in the hall.

"If you please, sir—" said Blake. The housemaster stopped and looked at him.

"What is it, Blake?"

"If you please, sir, I've discovered the chap who was playing ghost, and doing that spirit rapping, sir."

Mr. Railton started, and looked at the junior searchingly.

"Is it possible, Blake?"

"Yes, sir, I rather thought that if the secret was discovered, it would be by a fellow in Study No. 6, too."

The housemaster smiled.

"And who is the rascal, Blake?"

"If you please, sir," said the junior diffidently, "I— I've promised him to keep it dark. It would be like sneaking—"

"But he must be punished."

"I've punished him, sir. I've given him a licking."

"But, really, Blake—"

"If you think I'm rotting, sir—I—I mean speaking untruly," said Blake, with a very red face, "you'll know it's all right, because there won't be any more spirit-rapping." Mr. Railton dropped his hand kindly on the boy's shoulder.

"I don't doubt your word, Blake. I know you too well for that. I think you acted hastily in promising this wretched boy, whoever he is, to keep his secret. But I would be the last person in the world to recommend you to break a promise. I am only glad that the foolish fellow is now stopped."

And Mr. Railton looked relieved as he went on. Blake stepped into the crowded room where the feast was laid, and a dozen voices greeted him.

"Where are those forks?"

"My hat!" said Blake. "I've forgotten them."

"You've been long enough to go to Sheffield for a fresh lot," said Tom Merry. "What the dickens have you been doing?"

"Yaas, wathah, dear boy. What the dooce have you been doin'?"

"Oh, only capturing the ghost of St. Jim's," said Blake airily.

"What?" yelled the juniors.

"Getting deaf?" said Blake pleasantly. "I've captured the ghost of St. Jim's."

"Rats!"

"Fact!"

"Who is it then?" demanded Figgins.

"A silly kid."

"Name! Name!"

"I've promised him to keep it dark."

"Rats!"

"If any gentleman present doubts my word," said Blake, looking round, "I shall be pleased to step over to the gym with him, and argue the matter out with or without gloves."

"Bai Jove, I wegard it as wathah wotten bad form to cast doubt upon the assuance of my wespected fwiend Blake."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "Who's doubting his word? If Blake tells us it is so, honour bright—"

"Honour bright," said Blake seriously. "I'm not japing. I've thrashed the worm who was playing that little game, and there won't be any more spirit-rapping. That's all! Hallo, the guests are coming!"

They were. Wally, Jameson, and Gibson entered the room together. Arthur Augustus cast a rather anxious

glance towards his younger brother, and then brightened up wonderfully.

For D'Arcy minor was keeping his word, and really looked a credit even to the swell of the School House on this auspicious occasion. The neatness of his Eton suit was only equalled by the cleanliness of his collar and the correctness of his tie. Arthur Augustus gave him a brotherly thump on the back.

"Bai Jove, Wally, you look wippin'."

"Well, don't bust my backbone," said Wally.

"Weally, Wally—"

Jameson and Gibson looked remarkably clean and neat, too. They had a subdued manner suitable to the great occasion. More guests were arriving, now. Cousin Ethel came in with Miss Fawcett, with Mr. Dodds and Uncle Frank. Places of honour were, of course, found for them. Figgins, of course, contrived to get a seat beside Cousin Ethel, rather to the disgust of D'Arcy, who had intended to bag it himself. On Ethel's other side there was no chance for Arthur Augustus. Wally had bagged that seat.

Arthur Augustus tapped his cheerful younger brother on the shoulder.

"Pway vacate this seat," he whispered. "I am extremely desiwous of sittin' here."

"Oh, rats!" said Wally.

"Weally, Wally—"

"More rats!"

And Arthur Augustus gave it up. Many expressive glances were cast at Wally, but he seemed quite unconscious of them. He looked after Cousin Ethel, and kept, at least, half her attention away from Figgins.

Tom Merry, of course, was next to Miss Priscilla. Perhaps he would have been glad to have Figgins's place, but he did not seem to mind. He looked after his old governess quite as devotedly as Figgins and Wally looked after Cousin Ethel.

What need to describe that feast; the toasts that were drunk, in lemonade and currant wine and ginger-pop; the speeches that were made; how Skimpole tried to read out his article on Determinism, and was jammed down in his seat by Blake and Lowther; how Miss Fawcett related a thrilling adventure of Tom Merry's childhood; how Uncle Frank grinned amiably at everybody; how Mr. Dodds kept the table in a roar; how Fatty Wynn distinguished himself by the most remarkable gastronomic exploits of his career; finally, how Manners took a flashlight photograph of the whole merry party?

Merry, indeed, they were, and it was agreed on all hands that Tom Merry's Christmas party was the jolliest gathering that had ever met within the ancient walls of St. Jim's.

THE END.

(Next Thursday's number of the "Gem" Library, price One Penny, will contain a grand, complete, School Story of Tom Merry and Co., entitled "Fatty No. II.," and a grand instalment of "Britain Invaded," our powerful New War Serial. Please order your copy in advance.)

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CHAPTER 1.

The Greyfriars Review.

"TRAIL arms! Double!"

The bugle rang clear across the playing-fields, and every fag and junior cheered loudly as the cadet corps of Greyfriars School, in their spotless uniforms, and with the sun winking on eighty well-kept rifles, swept in four half-companies past the stand where the spectators, the ladies, and the headmaster, with his famous warrior-guest beside him, stood to watch the boys' review.

"Egad!" muttered the great general into his iron-grey moustache. "And these are lads—mere schoolboys! Uncommonly well they shape! If we could get more like 'em we should do!"

"Hi, hi, hi!" yelled the fags "Good old Sammy! Hurrah for the old school!"

It was the day of days for the ancient school of Greyfriars, whose ivied houses and tall watch-tower looked down upon the scene. For Greyfriars was proud of its rifle corps; and with good reason, for few of the schools could turn out one to beat them at Bisley or the manoeuvres.

And to-day, of all days, the greatest honour was done them, for General Lord Roberts, the first soldier in the Empire, who had carried the flag to victory through campaign after campaign in South Africa and the East, had actually come down as the Head's guest to inspect the corps.

He stood beside his host in the stand, a great little man, for he was not of tall stature, but tough as whipcord, erect as a dart, and with piercing grey eyes that looked out keenly from under bushy grey eyebrows.

"Bobs," as he was known to the whole British Army, was no man to play with. You could see it by those eyes. But you could also have seen that he was amazingly pleased by what was before him. The young riflemen, smart and ready, came by like one man. They had already passed him, and presented arms, in column of companies. Now they swept by at the double, halted sharply, and formed up just beyond the stand.

"By Jove, sir, they might be a seasoned regiment!" said

Lord Roberts enthusiastically to the Head. "I never expected to see such form!"

Suddenly a roar of cheering burst from the assembled school.

"Sam Slick! Good old Sam!"

Along the line left clear by the companies, as fast as six smartly-uniformed boys could pull it, a wicked-looking one-pounder Maxim gun came trundling along at a fast run. Beside it ran a tall, well-knit youth in gunner's uniform, and it was he whom the school hailed as "Sam Slick."

Up rolled the gun, past the stand, and the clear voice of the boy-officer rang out:

"Action—front!"

Round came the pom-pom in a twinkling, its wicked-looking barrel pointing straight down the rifle-range to a small target at the foot of the distant hill that served as a stop to the bullets. Two sharp commands, the six gunners sprang to attention beside the limber, and the young officer himself took a rapid sight, and gripped the lever.

Crack!—pom-pom-pom-pom!—boom!

The first sighting shot struck just to the left of the mark, and then the Maxim, whirring fiercely, sent its deadly message. The target, after first losing its top corner, absolutely melted to pieces under the hail of blind shells that flew straight to their mark, with scarcely the fraction of a second between them, and the cool, alert young figure at the gun gripping the lever never turned a hair. Then, amid a storm of cheers, the gun was limbered up again, and swiftly departed in a cloud of dust as the boy-gunners dragged it away.

"Well done, Sam!" roared two hundred voices.

"Go an' clear up the mess you've made, Sammy!" squeaked a fag, amid laughter and cheers. "You've been an' spoiled the target!"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the general, in astonishment. "This is amazing! An R.F.A. battery couldn't have shot straighter. And who ever heard of a schoolboy corps with a pom-pom? This is a new experience for me, Canon Howard."

"They do very well, I think," said the Head, a smile on his pale, spectacled face. "Of course, it's only play."

"Play!" said Lord Roberts. "Mark my words, canon, when the day of need comes we shall be uncommonly glad of youths who can 'play' like that by the time they're men! And so will the country. Who on earth is that youngster who handled the pom-pom? Is he the one they call Sam Slick?"

"Yes," laughed a young master standing next to him. "That's Aubrey Harcourt Villiers, better known to the school as Sam Slick. He bought the gun."

"Bought the gun?"

"Yes, sir; and presented it to the corps."

"Is he a millionaire at eighteen?"

"Oh, he's one of the Villiers of Cotehall Towers, farther down the county. His father's very well off. Aubrey wheedled the gun out of him as a birthday present, and gave it to the school."

"By Jove! Have him up here and present him to me. I wish they'd make more like him! Who commands the corps? Do you, Mr. Walford? You were formerly a lieutenant in the Buffs, I believe, and were invalidated out?"

"Yes; Mr. Walford commands," put in the Head stately.

"Oh, I'm a mere figurehead now, sir!" laughed the young master. "Villiers is the real commander. He has learned his work so well, and the boys are so keen, that I'm able to leave them to their own company-commanders. They were anxious to do this review 'on their own,' and, for their credit, I let them. They're quite up to it, sir, as you see."

"Up to it? I should say so! I only wish I could rouse the country to the same spirit these boys show!" muttered the general half to himself. He had worked long and hard to that end, for it was the dearest wish of his heart, but he had been disappointed many times.

"Your influence must help a great deal, sir," put in Mr. Walford, who had caught the remark.

"It's uphill work—uphill work," muttered Bobs, shaking his head. "So many don't seem to care. They don't realise the need; and talking won't make 'em. The authorities don't help, either. The Volunteers are snubbed nowadays instead of assisted. The nation wants things done cheaply. I only pray they mayn't find out their mistake at a fearful cost some day."

"H'm!" said the Head softly, coughing slightly. "Peace, Lord Roberts, is surely a better and a more Christian thing than war."

"It's only the strong nation, sir, that can be sure of peace," said Bobs, with a grunt. "And there's nothing Christian about slackness. Is that the boy Villiers I see there? Bring him here, Mr. Walford, if you please."

Aubrey Villiers was brought forward by the master. He was a tall, well-knit lad of about eighteen, with a hawk-like face, a devil-may-care air, and keen grey eyes. He stood to attention and saluted Lord Roberts smartly as the general turned to him.

Aubrey did not like being brought up for a public presentation, but there was no escape. Besides, Bobs was a hero of his, and the boy had never hoped for the honour of meeting him.

"Mr. Villiers," said the general, "I congratulate you on the smartness of the Greyfriars corps, the good form it shows, and especially your excellent handling of the gun. The whole corps does you immense credit."

Aubrey bowed. Praise rolled off him like water from a duck's back, as a rule; he cared nothing for it. But the approval of so great a soldier meant a great deal to him, for the corps' sake.

"It's not due to me only, sir," he replied. "Mr. Walford really made the corps. And the fellows are so keen, they're bound to shape well whoever commands them."

"Keeness is a great thing, Mr. Villiers. But I want to thank you also for presenting that gun to the corps, as I learn you did. That was an act of service indeed! Where did you learn to shoot so accurately?"

"Well, sir, I had the gun at home last holidays before I brought it here," said Aubrey apologetically, "and I put in some practice. I'm afraid my shooting isn't much. The range is very short here, and it's so easy I should make a poor show at any long-distance shooting, I expect, sir," he added, with a laugh.

"That's soon mended. Have you done more gunnery than anything else?"

"No, sir. I've done more scouting than anything. I'm keenest on that."

"Ah! The most difficult job of all, and the most dangerous, my lad. And the most important to an army. Good scouting has won half the victories on record. Do you know this county well, as a scout should?"

"I can answer for him, sir," said Mr. Walford, smiling; "he's a sort of Red Indian. Spends half his time at it; and there isn't a copse or a ditch or a creek in Essex he doesn't know, I verily believe."

"No wonder they call you Sam Slick," said Bobs, laughing. "If there's war in Essex, I prophesy they'll call you Sam the Scout. I'm not laughing at you, my boy. You don't know how it pleases me to hear this of you. Who is the best rifle-shot in your Corps? Are you as good at it as with the Maxim?"

"He's a middling shot, sir," said Mr. Walford, as Aubrey smiled and shook his head; "but his young brother, Stephen, can shoot all round him. A wonderful youngster with a rifle, though we have several fair shots. We're not stinted in ammunition."

"Let's have Stephen up here," said Lord Roberts. And in a few moments a wiry boy of fifteen, with a cheery pink-and-white face, merry blue eyes, and a broad band of freckles across his nose, was brought before the general.

"A likely pair, by Jove," said Roberts. "So you're the crack rifle-shot, Stephen?"

"N-no, sir," said the boy, blushing furiously, "I'm not much good. I can shoot a little bit with my pet rifle, that's all."

"His pet rifle! Hear that!" The general paused. "Well, my lads, I'm an old man, but what I've seen this morning has cheered me more than anything for many a long day." His voice rang louder. "If only every grown man in this country—or half of them—had his 'pet rifle,' there is no nation would dare so much as breathe a word of invading Britain!"

The boys, and all within reach, listened silently to Lord Roberts's words.

"We all like the work, sir," said Aubrey, "though I suppose youngsters like us couldn't be much good. I expect it isn't likely," he added thoughtfully, "that we'll ever see active service, when we're of age, even. They won't send us out of the country, and, of course, we shall never see an action in England."

"So nine men out of ten may tell you," said the general grimly; "but don't be too sure of it."

"If the present trouble with Germany were to come to anything, sir," said Aubrey, with a smile, "it wouldn't make much difference to our little corps, I suppose. We could only stay here and read about it in the papers. The Regular troops abroad would see all the fun."

"It would be interesting to see der two armies meet together," said a gruff voice close by, with a slight sneer.

Lord Roberts glanced round at the speaker, and saw a bearded, heavily-built man with sleepy blue eyes.

"The German master," whispered Mr. Walford in the general's ear, with a smile.

"Ah," said Lord Roberts casually to the bearded man, looking keenly at him, "you imagine they are likely to meet, then?"

"Nein, nein," replied the German coolly; "your Navy vos too strong. Our men could not get across der North Sea, of gourse," he added gravely; "dot vos quite impossible, no doubt."

He walked away through the crowd, and the general's eyes followed him.

"My time is up," said Lord Roberts abruptly at last; "my train soon leaves. Canon Howard, I have to thank you for a most pleasant morning. Boys, you have made me very happy to-day. Go on as you have begun, and you will be an example indeed in the eyes of the country."

"We hardly hope for that, sir," said Aubrey; "but if we aren't much good, we'll do our little best."

Bobs shook him cordially by the hand.

"Do so," he said. "Keep fit and play the game, for you do not know when you may be wanted in earnest. Heaven help the nation that is found unprepared!"

Those who were present little thought with what awful calamity the general's words were to come true, nor how soon the blow was to fall.

CHAPTER 2.

The Strange Behaviour of Herr Frittheim.

"Peter, my red-headed an' round-ended comrade," said Stephen Villiers, taking his chum by the ear, "we've done our duty to our giddy country, an' the gay throng has departed. Now for a little sport. Whole holidays ain't to be lightly chucked away, let me hint to you."

Peter Blobbs, who was a plump and auburn-haired junior of the Lower Fourth, and Stephen's study-chum, smote his companion severely in the ribs to make him let go, and assented. The general had been gone two hours, dinner was over, and Greyfriars was almost deserted.

"Anything to raise the wind," said Peter. "Got any jape to suggest?"

"I move we annex those young jackdaws in the nest at the top of the tower. They've been hatched out a week, an' they're ready to take."

"We'll bag one each," said Peter; "they make rippin' pets. I'm goin' to teach mine to annoy old Buzzer—Peter's housemaster—in three languages. Hallo, young Sauerkraut! What are you doin' here?"

The boy addressed was a thick-set, tow-headed young German, by name Katz, in the Fifth Form, who came sauntering round the corner with his hands in his pockets. He had sharp, prominent eyes and a sour tongue, and was not over-popular at Greyfriars, for he played no games, and was a noted "swot." He spoke English, with a slight accent.

"So, my prave soldier-poys," he said, with a sneer, "you rest after der labours for der Faderland—eh? How der King Edward must sleep easily, when he know you defend his country, ain'd it?"

"Shut up, Sausage!" said Stephen abruptly. "You aren't in the corps, my buck."

"I asked to join it, but dey would not let me."

"Course not. You're not a British subject. Your job is to go back to the happy Faderland an' enlist in the Potsdam Hussars. Pr'aps we'll meet you there some day. Peter an' I are goin' into the Army."

"Bah!" said Katz. "If you shipped your silly little army into Chermany der Kaiser's men would tie it up mit string, and in der yorkhouse put it till we had taken from Britain her ill-gotten Colonies, and—"

"That'll do, Sauerkraut, my boy," interposed Peter. "If you say any more about the British Army, I'll put my private crest on you—two black eyes sable, and a thick ear rampant. Are you having any, or will you slide off?"

"Der British can only fight mit fists," murmured Katz, as he walked away; "but wait a liddle—choost wait a liddle!"

"I bar these Germans," said Peter, as he and Stephen set off for the tower. "The school's got too many foreigners in it. There's an Italian in the Lower School, two Greeks in the Fourth, an' three Germans. Give me a white man any day!"

"They don't show up much among three hundred Britishers," said Stephen. "I don't mind any of 'em, except Katz. I never could stand Katz."

"Old Fritters is the worst of the lot, though," added Peter. "Of course, you can't expect much of a master, especially a German master. Did you hear him cheek the general at the review this mornin'?"

"Yes. The Head looked pretty sick," said Stephen. "But come on; don't let's stand chatterin' here like a couple of—"

"Jackdaws," put in Peter. "Let's get our fists on 'em. I've got some chopped egg ready to feed 'em."

They reached the foot of the tall, ivy-covered tower, which in times past had been used as a beacon, as long ago as the days of the Danes, who used to harry the East Coast. It had been patched and rebuilt from time to time, and a pair of great iron-bound doors closed the entrance at its foot.

These doors, however, did not lead up the tower, but down into an old dungeon-keep below it. A much smaller door on the other side opened on to the spiral staircase that went to the top. There were three storeys to the tower, and in the middle one was stored the ammunition for the Rifle Corps.

The two chums mounted to the top and reached the square space, walled round by low battlements that capped the tower. A splendid view was to be had from that spot. For miles the low, rolling country, set with pleasant fields and woods, stretched out on every side.

Essex is not so flat as is supposed; but the tower was the highest point of vantage far round Greyfriars, save only for a hill to the eastward, which just shut out a view of the sea at Frinton Gap, two miles away. To the north the salt inlets of Hamford Water could be seen, Clacton was not far to the south, while westwards the hills round Colchester showed on the horizon.

The boys had seen it often enough before, and wasted no time over it. Stephen went to the edge, and, peering over the battlements, looked down at the chattering jackdaws that flew out from half a dozen nesting-places as his head appeared.

"There's only one we can get at," he said. "D'you see that arrow-slit there, with the straw an' stuff stickin' out? We shall have to both get over, an' you'll have to hang on to the outside of the battlements an' stand on the coping-stone, an' I'll climb down by the ivy an' hand the squeakers up to you. It won't take me a jiff!"

"All right; only look slippy. There'll be a rare old shivaree if we're seen."

"We sha'n't be seen, you owl! This side of the tower faces against those trees, an' they can't see us from the schoolhouse windows. Come on!"

Stephen climbed through a gap of the battlements and

stood on the coping-stone that ran round the outside of the tower—a ledge about a foot wide. He was about to climb down over this by the ivy to reach the nest below, when Peter heard heavy footsteps coming up the tower staircase.

"Cave!" he whispered, scuttling over the battlements to join Stephen. "It may be a master!"

There was a penalty of a week's gating for any boy going up the tower without leave, and the two chums, clinging to the coping, crouched outside the battlements.

It was rather a precarious position, and they were in full view of anyone below; but nobody on the tower's top would be able to see them, unless he leaned over the battlements and looked down. They hoped the intruder would soon depart, whoever he was.

The footsteps came to the top opening, and the German master, Bach Frittheim, stepped out into the space within the battlements. He gave a curious furtive look round over the country, and then stepped to the opposite side from the boys.

"It's old Baked Fritters!" murmured Stephen. "He'll report us to the Head, sure as a gun. Week's gatin' in the summer term, too!"

"Let's go an' tip the old terror over the edge when he ain't lookin'!" whispered Peter.

It was by no means sure, however, that the German master would see them at all. They peeped cautiously round the battlements at him.

Herr Frittheim was standing half erect, looking fixedly out to the northward, as if suddenly struck with the beauty of the view. His right hand was raised just above the battlements, and he was moving it slightly from the wrist in a curious manner. The hand itself was closed.

"What's he doing?" whispered Peter. "Has he got the jim-jams?"

Stephen shook his head. He could not make out what the master's hand was wagging for in that odd manner. It was held sideways, edge downwards, palm outwards, and gave sharp little jerks, first one way and then the other, while the arm held quite steady. The master looked at the hand while he did it.

He lowered it presently, and stared to the northward once more for about a minute, when he began again.

Suddenly, as he turned a little more towards them, both the boys saw what was happening, and solved the mystery at a glance. In the master's curved palm was a little round mirror, and for a brief instant they caught the flash of it.

"By gum!" whispered Stephen. "He's signalling to somebody! Who the dickens can it be?"

They followed the direction of Frittheim's gaze, and right away across the Hamford creeks, far to the northward, they saw a tiny spot of light glint from a point high on the horizon.

Flash—flash—flash, flash—flash it went, winking and disappearing steadily. Plainly it came from a mirror like the one the German was using.

Both the boys watched for some time in surprised silence. Then came the sound of a footfall on the tower stairs, and Herr Frittheim started back from the battlements, and listened.

Then, hastily putting the mirror in his pocket, he started to descend the steps.

As he pocketed the mirror and turned to go down, something fell from that same pocket upon the flagstones—a small, folded paper. The master did not notice it in his hurry, but disappeared, leaving it behind him.

"By Jove, that's a rum 'un!" said Peter, as the boys hoisted themselves over the battlements, and regained the right side of them. The jackdaws were forgotten now.

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Stephen stepped over to where the fallen paper lay, and picked it up.

"Blow it all! Here he comes back! Look out!" whispered Peter, making a dash for the battlements again.

Stephen thrust the paper into his coat-pocket, and followed at once. In a few seconds both boys were back on the other side of the battlements once more, just as Herr Fritthem reappeared, looking hot and vicious.

It was evident he had missed the thing Stephen had in his pocket. Fritthem looked hurriedly round for it. The whole floor of the tower's top was bare enough, and he saw at a glance it was not there. He hastily went through his pockets, muttering. Then he looked round again.

"Donnerwetter!" he swore; and, muttering to himself anxiously, he turned and hurried down the tower steps again. This time the boys waited till he was well out of the way before they reappeared.

CHAPTER 3.

The Secret Signals.

"What was it?" exclaimed Peter, who had not seen the paper drop. "What did he lose?"

"This," said Stephen, taking it from his pocket.

"By gum! Did you pouch it? He's gone off, an' thought he dropped it somewhere else, by the look of him."

Stephen opened the paper out.

"It's the code he signals by!" he said, at once. "Look, here it is, all mapped out. By Jove, if we could only use it, an' find out what the message is!"

"But I say, that'd be a bit thick, wouldn't it?" protested Peter, for the code of honour at Greyfriars was strict. "It's his paper, you know. He dropped it. We—"

Stephen looked at him.

"I believe there's something fishy about this, an' I shall follow it up. What right has a German to be signalling from Greyfriars Tower?"

Peter Blobbs gasped.

"D'you mean he's a spy? What for? What can he do here?"

"I'll tell you when I know," said Stephen, whose easy-going manner had vanished. He looked sharp and alert, and spoke rapidly. "It's our duty to find out what this is, an' now's the time. If it's nothing to hurt, we'll drop it. Look here at this code—it's plain enough! Here's each letter marked. 'A, dot-dot-dash. B, dash-dot,' an' all the rest. And here's the shortened signals for starting. 'Wish to communicate,' and 'Message ends.' It ain't Morse telegraph like we use in the corps; it's a private code. They—"

"There goes the flash again, over towards Harwich!" broke in Peter, looking to the northward.

"By gum! We'll try an' speak 'em!" exclaimed Stephen, flushed with excitement. "Nip down to the bottom floor an' get the sergeant's little shavin'-mirror out of the room where he changes. Look sharp!"

"But how the—"

"Go!" said Stephen sharply. He was colour-sergeant of his company, and Peter obeyed the command at once. Stephen studied the paper eagerly till his comrade reappeared hurriedly, bringing a small, round mirror. The flashes on the horizon had ceased.

"Now," muttered Stephen, taking the mirror, and standing exactly where the German had stood. "I don't know whether I can use the blessed thing, but here goes for a try." He took a careful look at the sun, and after a few trials found it fairly easy to throw the reflection the way he wished, once he had found the right angle to hold the mirror. Then, after a glance at the paper, he flashed the message, in three or four dots and dashes: "Wish to communicate."

"How the dickens does it go?" said Peter, bewildered.

"Why the dots are short flashes, an' the dashes long ones, of course. Weren't you at that lecture Walford gave us about heliographs? I don't know if I can make 'em see these flashes, though. It must want practice."

"But that paper's in German. Do you know the—"

"German! I know it like a giddy native," returned Stephen, flashing away. "My people lived there, an' I was at a kid's school in Dresden three years. Have you got a pencil and a bit of paper on you, Peter? Take down each letter I give you, if we get an answer."

"What if Fritters comes back?"

"We'll risk that."

Stephen was beginning to despair, for he had flashed the message three times, with no result. Suddenly his heart leaped as he saw an answering wink far away.

"Got him!" exclaimed Stephen. "That's from Wrabness Steeple, over by the Stour Estuary, or I'm a giddy Dutchman. It's the same one."

Laboriously, glancing from the paper to the mirror, Stephen flashed out in German the words:

"Continue message."

"Now take down," he said quickly, as the answer began to wink in the distance.

He read out the dots and dashes, and Peter jotted them down, every nerve strained to do it properly and keep pace, with the stops between. When it came to an end, Stephen gave Peter the code alphabet, and that worthy, who was sharp enough when given a lead, made out the letters and strung them together. The result was in German, of which he knew very little, but he handed it to Stephen, who read it out in English as follows:

"Report where cadet corps' ammunition stored, also new gun and shells. Do not tamper with gun or rifles, as no resistance feared. Corps can be disregarded. Message ends."

"Holy smoke!" exclaimed Peter. "He is a spy! The hound's givin' away information about the corps! Who's the other signaller?"

"Another spy," said Stephen, whose face was white and set as he flashed an answer with the mirror. "Dry up an' look to your work; there's more behind this. Something's going to happen when German spies signal each other in Essex! We want to know what they signalled to Fritthem just now."

Word by word he flashed the message in German:

"Repeat previous instructions. Not understood."

Slowly the answer came back, and was put together.

"Cut wires 4 a.m., as ordered. Troops start to-night. Third division lands Fritton, morning. Report yourself there for extra guide. Message ends."

"My great James!" panted Peter. "Is this true, or is somebody playing the fool with us?"

Neither of the boys saw the bearded face that suddenly appeared behind them in the trapway that opened on to the staircase. Bach Fritthem started as he saw the boys, and, stepping silently on to the space between the battlements, watched for a moment, for their backs were turned to him. Then, as he saw the mirror in Stephen's hand, and the winking flash in the distance, he turned pale as death.

"Troops start to-night! Land at Fritton!" repeated Peter, in amazement. How? What troops?"

"The Kaiser's army, unless this paper lies," said Stephen, crushing it in his fingers.

There was a hoarse, guttural cry, and Fritthem, first kicking the cover over the stairway trapdoor to prevent any escape, flung himself upon the boys. His face was contorted with rage and despair, and he clutched savagely at Stephen's throat.

The boy dodged desperately, and tore himself away, leaving his collar in Fritthem's hands, and the German, recovering his balance, rushed at him again.

But Peter, the moment he saw what was happening, threw himself into the fray with an excited shout. The sturdy Blobbs was the best half-back in the Greyfriars team, and without a moment's hesitation he had darted at the German and "collared him now," gripping him above the knees, and throwing the whole weight of his body towards the ground.

Helped as much by his own rush, as by the boy's attack, the heavily-built German came toppling over, and stretched his length on the flagstones with a crash.

"Pin him down! Don't let him go!" cried Stephen, throwing himself down across the master's back; and Peter promptly pinioned Fritthem's arms to the ground. The German struggled like a madman, crying inarticulately, and frothing at the mouth, and it was all the boys could do to hold him. Stephen cast an anxious glance between the battlements, against which the combatants had rolled, and, to his joy, saw his brother, with a dozen other seniors, returning to the schoolhouse across the grass-plots below.

"Sam," yelled Stephen, at the top of his voice, "come up here, quick! Hurry!"

Aubrey could see nothing of the struggle from below, but judging his young brother was in trouble of some sort, he ran at once to the tower, and up the stairs.

In the meanwhile, the prisoner had exhausted himself, and lay panting, the boys holding him down with all their force. Peter, in response to Stephen's urgent request, was trying to knot Fritthem's wrists together behind his back with a handkerchief, when Aubrey thrust up the trapdoor and joined the boys.

"Great Scott!" cried Aubrey, as he saw the extraordinary scene. "What on earth are you youngsters doing?"

"He's a spy! Fritthem's a German spy, and he's been signalling to other spies; we caught him at it!" panted Stephen. "Never mind us; we can hold him! Read that paper on the floor, with the messages he's been sending with a flash-mirror!"

Aubrey thought his young brother had certainly gone mad; but he picked up the torn scrap of paper, on which Peter had jotted the dots and dashes, with their letters beneath them. And as Aubrey ran his eye over the roughly pencilled words of the two messages, his jaw stuck out, and he changed colour swiftly.

"Good heavens and earth!" He turned swiftly on his brother. "Is this true, or are you playing the fool with me, Steve?"

"It's true!" cried Stephen. "Can't you see? That's his code in the other paper you've got!"

The young volunteer lieutenant looked through the papers keenly; once now and then glanced at the boys' prisoner.

"Wait!" ejaculated Aubrey sharply. "Hold him there!"

He darted to the stairs, and disappeared down them to the Cadet Corps stores below, reappearing a few moments later with a Martini rifle, into which he slipped a cartridge.

The breech-lock closed with a snick, and Sam Slick's face was hard and set as he motioned to the boys to let the prisoner rise.

"Get up!" he said shortly to the prisoner.

Herr Bach Frittheim rose slowly to his feet. He was disordered by the struggle, and covered with dust, but calmer than before.

Sam Slick, with the rifle in the hollow of his arm, held the muzzle silently to the German master's breast. Frittheim had recovered himself, and began to bluster.

"Vot is der meaning of dis?" he stormed, in a shaky voice. "You young schellums, how dare you deal so mit a master? I—"

"If you make the smallest attempt to escape," said Sam, cutting him short, "I shall shoot you out of hand! I intend to run no risks of your getting away. Turn round!"

The command rang out so sharply, and the keen face of the speaker looked so grim, that Frittheim did not dare disobey.

"Now," said Sam, pressing the rifle's muzzle gently against the master's back, "march downstairs and walk in front of me. The first sign of resistance, or any attempt to run for it, means your death! I am in earnest."

A dewy sweat broke out on the German's forehead, and he obeyed. There was no doubt Sam meant what he said. The revelation of those messages told the boy that a great secret lay in his hands, and one that might make or mar Britain. He put his country before all things, and so his finger rested steadily on the trigger of the rifle.

Stephen and Peter followed behind, waiting for orders, if any should come. They had complete faith in Sam, and were quite confident he was doing the right thing. None the less, it was the biggest shock Greyfriars had ever had.

The amazement when Sam marched his prisoner right across the grass plots to the School House passed all bounds; but, though Frittheim was trying to nerve himself to make a dash for it, or turn and bluff the matter out, he knew it would be fatal.

"Holy Moses! Sam, what on earth's up?" cried a dozen voices, as the boys crowded forward. They could hardly believe their eyes.

"Hold up, Herr Frittheim! Keep straight for the School House door!" said Sam warningly. "Keep back, you chaps! Form a line to the door, will you? Herr Frittheim is the corps' prisoner!"

"Here's the Head!" cried a voice above the clamour of questions.

And the tall, loose-jointed figure of Canon Howard came out of the big entrance-door. He nearly fell backwards with astonishment.

"Herr Frittheim! Villiers, what are you doing? What is the meaning of this?" he cried angrily.

"Ach, Canon Howard, can you explain dis outrage?" cried the German master quickly. "Dis boy of yours is mad, and threaten to murder me!"

"I have arrested Herr Frittheim, sir, as a spy!" said Sam, still holding his rifle against the German's back. "Two of the corps found him on the watch-tower transmitting messages to other spies by private code, and I have the proofs here. Do not turn round, mein herr," he added in German to his captive, "or you are a dead man!"

"Are you mad, Villiers?" cried the Head furiously. "How dare you?"

"One moment, sir. You can see by the messages on this paper, taken down from flash-signals according to his code, that Herr Frittheim has not only sent information to another German about the corps' ammunition stores, but has received orders to act as guide to German troops that are to land in this country. I want him placed in safe confinement at once, if you please, sir, so that he may do no more harm, and a message to be sent to the authorities."

"It vos all an absurd lie!" cried the German excitedly, and he was very pale. "You vill not listen to such ridiculous nonsense, Canon Howard?"

The Head stopped aghast. Sam's statement staggered him, but he refused to believe it; it seemed too unheard-of. The Head did not like the Cadet Corps, and thought it had too much influence in the school. He was not a man of action, but a scholar and no more, and was possibly not the best Head for a school like Greyfriars.

"Villiers," he cried, in a passion, "you are talking folly! I order you to put that rifle down!"

"And I refuse, sir!" replied Sam, in a clear voice. "As a Greyfriars boy, I have always obeyed you. But I hold his Majesty's commission, and it is my duty, having taken this spy in the act of aiding the King's enemies, to hold him prisoner for inquiry. And I shall do so!"

The Head gasped, and so did some of the boys; but a murmur of approval rose at once.

"Here are the proofs, sir. Read them for yourself!" said Sam. "And here are my witnesses, Privates Blobb and Villiers, to whom I owe this capture."

Stephen and Peter, at Sam's bidding, came forth and told their tale briefly. The Head was utterly taken aback, and trembling slightly. He was not a strong man in an emergency, and could not make up his mind what he ought to do, even when he had read the messages.

"I—I suppose Herr Frittheim must be—er—be detained for an inquiry?" he said, in a bewildered way. "I—er—I hope he won't object. I don't understand—"

"I shall appeal to der Cherman Ambassador!" cried Frittheim hoarsely. "Der school shall suffer for dis! You—"

"I take all responsibility, sir," said Sam abruptly. "Give way there, you fellows! Blobbs, get the key of the old Monk's Cell!"

CHAPTER 4.

How the Germans Came to Greyfriars.

Forthwith the German spy was marched, at the point of the rifle, up to the second storey of the east wing of the School House, where Sam double-locked him in the stone cell with the barred window, which had been a place of penitence for the monks of old. The German had fallen into silence now, and said nothing when he was locked in. The place was strong enough to hold a lion, and a housebreaker could hardly have made a way out of it.

"I want two sentries put against that door, with rifles," said Sam; "and now we've got to call a council instantly. There's not a moment to be lost. Stephen, go and summon the corps company officers, and any of the masters you can find."

The council was soon brought together, and an amazed assembly it was. There were three masters, and the sub-lieutenants of the corps, besides Peter and Stephen as witnesses. The Head did not attend—he had gone to his room in a state of collapse—but nobody missed him. In a few moments the messages were read and mastered.

"This means an invasion!" said Mr. Vernon, the youngest housemaster. "The German troops are to make a dash across the North Sea and take us by surprise."

"But war is not declared!" exclaimed Mr. Grant, another master. "Everybody believes the trouble with Germany will be peaceably settled."

"It's not a question of what everyone believes, sir," said Sam. "Here's a plain proof that the Germans mean to strike the blow at us while they've the chance! Our North Sea Fleet hasn't even been ordered to be ready. The War Office has made no preparations. I've read the papers, sir. This piece of paper shows that German troops will make a raid on Britain within twenty-four hours, and the authorities must be warned at once. It cannot be telegraphed. My plan is to take the Head's motor-car and go to London at once, and lay this news before the War Office within two hours."

"You're right, Villiers; that's the only way," said Mr. Vernon eagerly. "Blobbs major, order the chauffeur to bring the car to the door instantly."

"Troops to land at Fritton!" said Hanby major, who commanded the second half-company. "Where's that?"

"Fritton! It's on the Norfolk coast, isn't it? Norfolk's the nearest shore for Germany."

"Near the coast, not on it. It's by the Broads. How can they land at Fritton?" said Sam, with a puzzled frown. "But there it is!"

"What does the message about the school mean?"

"Ah," said Sam, "if they did once get a foothold in the country, and came south, Greyfriars would be the one place they'd need to get hold of. With a wireless telegraph apparatus on the tower, they could command all their forces on the coast, and communicate with Germany as well!"

"I believe the whole thing must be humbug," said Mr. Grant. "They would never dare try to invade us. But

you'd better go, all the same, Villiers. Will you warn the chief-in-command at the Colchester garrison on your way?"

"No; go straight to London, Villiers!" said Mr. Vernon quickly. "You must get this news to headquarters, and they will call up the garrisons quicker than you can. If German spies mean to cut the telegraph wires at four in the morning, you'll have time before then."

"You're right, sir," said Sam. "Here's the car! I'm off! Will you come with me?"

"Go alone, my boy. You'll travel quicker with only two in the car, and speed is everything. Heaven go with you!"

The powerful Mercedes car was throbbing and trembling at the door, the Head's alert chauffeur in his place.

"Good-bye, boys! Wish me luck!" called Sam, as he sprang in, and a mighty cheer arose as the car whirled away like a yellow streak, cleared the grounds, and vanished up the London road.

The school was naturally in the highest excitement all the evening. Stephen and Peter were the heroes of the hour, and nothing was discussed but the messages and the threatened invasion, and many bold regrets were expressed that the Germans hadn't chosen the neighbourhood of the school for their landing. It was not till eight o'clock that a couple of telegrams came, one for Mr. Vernon and one for Stephen.

"Good old Sam! He always lets me know what's going on!" said Stephen, tearing open the envelope.

"Great Scott!"

His face darkened as he read the message, which ran thus, in Sam's short, direct language:

"Fools here discredit story; can't make them believe. Am calling Admiralty—last chance. Pray Heaven they listen to me!"

It was a note of despair, and they could see it in Sam's words.

"By gosh," exclaimed Stephen, the colour mounting to his face, "the drivelling idiots! An' now, when all Britain depends on them!"

"He'll make them believe! He must!" said Peter desperately. "Look, there goes Vernon—to town by train, of course. He ought to have gone before!"

Gloom fell on the school at the tidings. No other message could be expected that night, the telegraph offices being closed.

"What can any ass expect of the Foreign an' War Offices!" said Stephen savagely, as "lights-out" time came. "All I know of 'em is they make a mess of everything, an' do nothing. Look here, Peter, you an' I will take the night sentry-go outside Fritthheim's door. I know Sam'd prefer us to have charge."

Peter was willing enough, and the boys easily got permission from Hanby, second in command—for Mr. Walford had gone to town at midday. The two chums relieved the guard, took the keys, and, with their rifles across their knees, sat outside the heavy, metal-bound door of the old cell.

All was quiet within. Food had been taken to Fritthheim half an hour before, under cover of a rifle, and he had received it in grim silence. The boys said little to each other as they stood the watch. The dark hours slid by slowly, but they preferred not to be relieved.

The night was nearly spent, when Stephen saw a dim form stealing up the stairs towards the landing. He instantly presented his rifle, and saw, to his surprise, that it was Benson minor, a junior, and bugler to the corps. He was in his nightshirt, and barefooted.

"Hist!" whispered Benson; "it's only me. I've come to tell you chaps that Katz has left his bed in our dormitory an' climbed out of window. He's got down by the ivy. I was awake, an' went to the window to see what he was up to, because he took a coil of cord with him."

"Katz!" exclaimed Stephen, under his breath.

"Yes; I followed him out, not liking the look of it, for I knew you chaps were on duty up here. He's outside, underneath the Monk's Cell window, an' has been for some time. I couldn't find him at first, but when I did I came back, to let you chaps know."

"By gum!" said Peter. "Is he in this game with Fritthheim? One of us must go and nab him—"

"Stop!" broke in Stephen. "Let's see if our prisoner's safe first. I don't like the look of this. Stand by with your rifle while I open the door."

The key was turned twice, and Peter held his rifle ready as the door swung back. Then both boys rushed into the cell with a cry.

It was empty!

Two of the bars had been removed from the window, and round the third was tied a thin rope, that quivered and shook with the bar, showing that someone was descending by it outside.

Stephen sprang up to the window with a bound, and, clinging to the bar, looked down. He was just in time to

see the German's heavy form slide down the the last few feet to the ground, where stood a second figure, that was recognisable in the dim moonlight as Katz. Instantly the pair of them took to their heels and dashed away into the night, nor was it possible for Stephen to use his rifle in time, for the window was too small and deep-sunk in the wall.

"He's got away!" cried Stephen, springing to the floor. "Bunk down an' after them! We're done if we let 'em escape! Benson, rouse the school!"

The boys tore down the staircase, calling themselves all the names conceivable for not having put a third sentry under the window. Now that it was too late, Fritthheim's ruse was easy to guess. He had worked the window-bars loose, and, unravelling his socks, had let down a line, by which he could haul a thicker cord up, provided by the boy Kratz, who was his helpmate and subordinate. But Peter and Stephen spent no time in thinking this over; they made for the spot outside with all the speed they could muster, and Stephen, leading the way, dashed off in the direction he had seen the fugitives take.

Straight across the open grounds went the boys, vaulting the first fence; and, to his joy, Stephen caught a glimpse of two running figures, but a long way ahead.

"There they are!" he cried. "After them! We must shoot if we get a chance!"

"They're separating," said Peter, as the fugitives, with a glance back, parted and struck away in opposite directions at top speed. "You take the left an' I the right!"

Both sprinted away as hard as ever they could go, and Stephen soon found it was Fritthheim who was his particular quarry. But the man surprised Stephen by the pace at which he could travel, and he had a long start.

To stop and shoot, when nothing but a fitting shadow could be seen in the gloom, would have been useless, and Stephen strained every nerve to get nearer.

But suddenly the German disappeared. He plunged into a little coppice, and Stephen, when he reached the other side, could see nothing of him. The boy made a cast each way, but failed to get a sight, and had to go on by guesswork. It was some time later that he thought he caught a glimpse of his man, but he could not place him, and it became evident the German had got away.

The breaking of the dawn, and the dreadful thought of going back and confessing he had let his charge slip away, kept Stephen to what seemed a hopeless task. The day broke and the sun rose, and still the boy scoured the country, hoping against hope to run across the fugitive, whose loss meant so much; and the sun was climbing high in the heavens when Stephen, worn out, at last had to own it was no use, and turned back wearily towards the school.

He was within a mile of it when he sighted Peter—alone. The boys hailed at once.

"Any luck?" cried Stephen, hurrying to join his chum. "Fritthheim got away, confound it all!"

"So did Katz," said Peter gloomily. "They had too long a start, an' in the dark, too. I feel more like drownin' myself than goin' back without them!"

"We've got to report; we must get back. It couldn't be helped. We've held 'em a good while, an' I should think it's too late now for them to do much harm."

Slightly cheered by this thought, the boys, haggard and tired, made their way to the school. Here, beside the tower, they found knots of boys talking earnestly. They hailed Stephen and Peter eagerly.

"Is Sam back yet?" cried Stephen, as soon as he reached them.

"No; no news of him!" was the answer.

"Where's the Head?"

"Gone to the telegraph-office to try an' wire to London. But somebody says the wires are cut."

"Did the spies get away?"

"Yes," said Stephen moodily, "they did!"

Peter, who had placed his rifle against the wall of the tower, looked round, and gave a sudden exclamation.

Approaching rapidly over the rise of ground towards the tower, the sun glittering on their side-arms and short spiked helmets, came six German soldiers and a mounted officer.

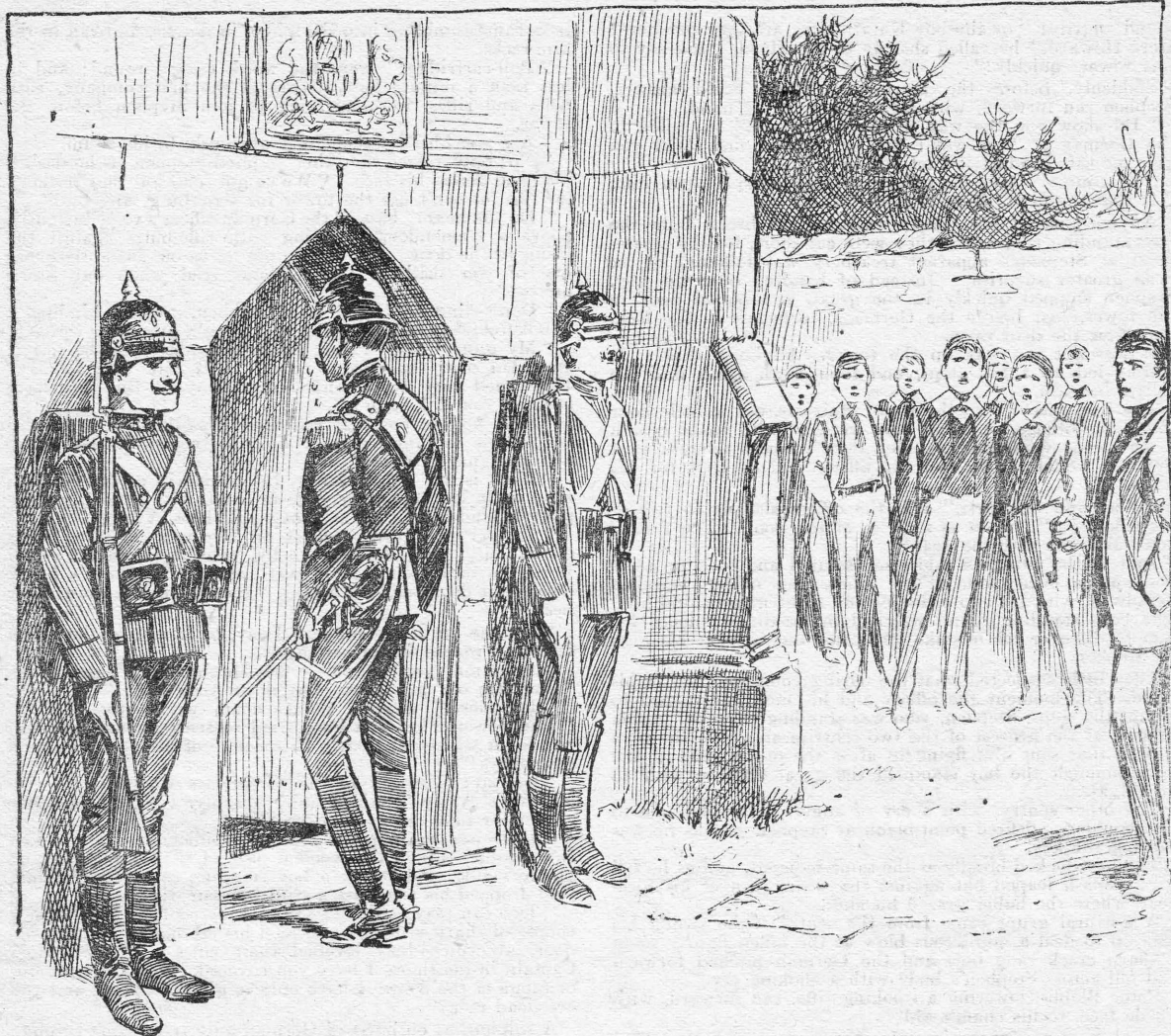
And between two of the grim, helmeted men walked the headmaster of Greyfriars, pale and dishevelled, a prisoner!

CHAPTER 5.

"In the Name of the Kaiser."

So stupefying was the shock that for the moment silence fell on every boy present.

German soldiers at Greyfriars School! Prussian infantry of the line, and the Head a prisoner among them! It was beyond belief. Several rubbed their eyes to make sure they were not dreaming. Canon Howard, white-faced and dazed,



The German officer entered the low door way. It was not the way up to the tower. The boys watched with bated breath to see what would happen, for they scarcely thought that Stephen would try to fool the officer, and be shot for his pains.

between his two captors, looked like a man walking in his sleep.

"Great heavens!" said Stephen between his teeth. "Then it's true; and they've landed!"

Peter shook his head. He could not bring himself to believe it. Surely it must be some grim joke?

The mounted officer spurred sharply forward, followed by an orderly. He reined up before the tower, and, with a quick, commanding glance round, spoke harshly in guttural English:

"I take possession of these buildings in the name of the Kaiser! Any resistance from English civilians will be punished by death!"

Springing down from his horse, he made a sign to his orderly, who advanced, and fixed quickly on the wall of Greyfriars Tower, a printed proclamation with the German Eagle at its head, and the signature of Von Krantz, commander-in-chief of the Kaiser's forces, at its foot.

But no-one stopped to read it, for all were watching with beating hearts, as more men in short, spiked helmets appeared on the scene.

There were three only, however, and two of them bore that seemed to be tripods and signalling apparatus.

The whole arrival had not occupied twenty seconds, and as soon as the proclamation was posted up the officer turned quickly to the Head.

"Herr Howard," he said harshly, "I require your parole that you will make no attempt to escape, or communicate with any person. Otherwise I must put you under guard."

"My parole!" muttered the Head dazedly.

"Come, sir, your decision—quick; else, if you attempt to elude the guard, you will be shot! I have no time to waste. Do you give your parole?"

"Yes—my parole—I give it!" said the Head thickly. He seemed ready to collapse and fall, but the soldiers released him at a sign.

"What's it mean?" gasped Peter.

"His parole—his word of honour not to escape!" said Stephen, whose fists were tight shut and his face set and white. "Don't give it! Pass the word round not to give it!"

But the German officer took no more notice of the boys than if they had not been there.

He called up the men who bore the apparatus, and as they came forward, Stephen, who was well in the background, caught his chum by the arm.

"I know what it is. They're a picket sent ahead to take the tower for signalling purposes!" he whispered. "You remember what Fritter's message said?"

"But how did they get here from Norfolk?" muttered Peter.

"Didn't that carter tell us there were foreigners landing in the Stour, a few miles away?"

"Can't we call the corps out?" whispered Peter eagerly.

"Where are all the chaps? I'll roust 'em out!"

"Wait! That's no good; we shall waste time. Peter, I've a notion. There's no time to tell it you, but it's an off-chance. Are you game to back me up, even if we get shot?"

The boys glanced into each other's eyes.

"You bet!" said Peter.

"Then go an' stand near those rifles of ours that we left against the wall. Be ready to use one if it's needed."

The hurried whispers between the two boys were hardly exchanged by the time the German officer had brought his seven men to the gate of the tower.

"Where the deuce is Fritthem?" cried the officer, looking

round angrily; "or the boy Katz? Why are they not here? Herr Howard," he called sharply to the Head, "the key to this tower—quickly!"

Suddenly, before the bewildered Head could answer, Stephen ran forward, with a large key in his hand.

"I'll show you the way to the tower, sir!" he called to the German. "You won't find it without me. Will you give me safe conduct if I let you in?"

"Of course!" said the officer, turning sharply upon him. "Is that the key? Give it me."

An outburst of hot, angry exclamations broke from the boys standing round; but they were cut short, for the amazement at Stephen's apparent treachery was followed by an even greater surprise. Instead of handing over the key, Stephen stepped quickly to the great, iron-bound door in the tower, just before the Germans, turned it in the lock, and drew the door open.

It was not the way up the tower. All knew that. It merely led up a few steps, and then down again into the cellars beneath.

The real entrance to the tower stairway was a little door round the other side. The boys watched with bated breath to see what would happen, for they scarcely thought that Stephen would try to fool the officer and be shot for his pains.

"Edel and Schwartz," said the officer sharply to two of his riflemen, "remain as sentries at the door! The rest of you follow me with the gear!"

And as the two men addressed saluted and took up their position on either side of the door, the officer marched briskly in, with his two orderlies and three men behind him. The boys standing round watched in breathless silence for him to discover his mistake and come out to vent his rage on Stephen.

They little suspected what the daring youngster had in his mind. The moment the officer and his men had turned to mount the steps, Stephen, who was standing close by, hurled himself at the nearest of the two sentries and gave the man a push that sent him flying in after the others, and at the same moment the boy slammed the great door to with all his might.

The other sentry, with a cry of anger, threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired point-blank at Stephen just as he was turning the key.

The boy ducked blindly at the same moment, and as he fell a red splash leaped out against the white skin of his forehead where the bullet grazed his skull.

A guttural grunt came from the sentry as he swung his rifle up to deal a murderous blow at the fallen figure, when a sharp crack rang out, and the German pitched forward and fell across Stephen's body with a choking cry.

Peter Blobbs, lowering a smoking rifle, ran forward, with a pale face, to his chum's aid.

Stephen struggled from under the sentry, and scrambled to his feet, the blood running down between his eyes.

"The door! Shoot the outside bolts!" he cried, springing to do it himself, as a furious outcry and battering with rifle-butts was heard on the inner side of the door. "We've got 'em! Call out the corps!"

A dozen willing hands, now that the suspense was broken, ran forward to fasten every guard of the great door, through which came the muffled shouts of rage from the astonished prisoners within.

Two small fags, with a wild cheer, ran to pluck the Kaiser's proclamation from the wall, and tore it up.

The Head alone, trembling and white as he stared helplessly at the dead sentry on the ground, broke into an outcry.

"What have you done?" he cried, in a shaking voice. "You have killed him! They'll revenge themselves on us! I—I gave my parole—"

"You gave your parole!" cried Stephen, turning on him fiercely. "But we didn't, and no fellow in the corps shall while there are two of us to stand up! Where's Bugler Bates?"

"Here, sir!" cried a voice, as a score of the senior boys and cadets came running up at the sound of the shots.

"The Germans are on us! Sound the Assembly!" cried Stephen, as he sprang to his own rifle that he had left against the wall. "Belts and rifles, you fellows—quickly! Six men here to guard the tower door!"

What it all meant the new-comers scarcely knew; but they did not stand staring, as the non-corps members had.

They saw the prone form in German uniform lying dead before the door, and their chum with the blood trickling down his face, and every boy ran to arm himself.

Little Tom Bates, who had snatched up his bugle when he heard the shots, stood out and blew like a Briton.

As the stirring notes rang far over the playing-fields, the

boys came tumbling into the school in dozens, and ran to the arm-racks.

"Ball-cartridge!" were the words passed round; and in less than a minute half a score of the first company, with belts and rifles, were hurrying to join Stephen before the tower.

"Are you hurt?" cried Peter anxiously to his chum.

"No; only grazed the skin!" replied Stephen, as he dashed his hand across his face. "We've got 'em, an' they're done, for this lot can't use the tower for signalling, anyhow!"

"Do you hear?" bawled the German officer's voice furiously, above a tremendous battering with rifle-butts against the inside of the door. "If you do not let us out instantly every one of you shall be shot without trial when our forces arrive!"

"Don't sing so loud!" said Stephen, rapidly binding a handkerchief round his forehead. "You'll hurt your throat!"

"My gum!" said Peter, with a shudder, as he nearly stumbled over the dead sentry. "I—I shot that fellow!" He turned very white, and looked away. "But he'd have brained you if I hadn't."

"Hold up, old boy! It was their lives or ours, and we're the King's servants, even if we're only cadets. Hurry up with the guard, there!"

"What is it?" cried Hanby, the second in command, running up in belt and tunic, rifle in hand, with six of the company behind him. "What have you done, Villiers?"

"Locked an advance picket of Germans in the tower cellars, sir," said Stephen coolly, saluting; and in a few words he told them how it was done. "They can't break down that door, sir," he added, "though they're doin' their best."

"Let me out! Let me out, I say, or it will be the worse for you!" roared the officer inside.

"Attention, you there!" cried Hanby, in a clear voice. "You are our prisoners. Lay down your arms!"

"Prisoners!" shouted the German, with oaths of rage. "Donnerwetter! You have tried to trick us, and you will pay for it with your lives! Prisoners—of dirty civilians and schoolboys!"

"No, sir; prisoners of the Greyfriars Cadet Corps—his Majesty's Army!" said Hanby sharply. "You will surrender, or take the consequences!"

The answer was a rifle-shot, and a bullet, fired at random from inside, drilled the wooden part of the door, sang past Hanby's side, and struck a boy standing some way behind, who dropped his arm with a stifled exclamation.

"Two can play at that!" said Hanby coolly. And, with a couple of sharp orders, he formed his six men up before the door, at which they levelled their rifles. "Now, Herr Captain inside there, I have you covered. You can't get out of range of the door. I have only to give the word, and you are dead men!"

A sulphurous outburst of German adjectives came through the door, but no more bullets.

"You can swear till your belts burst if it's any comfort to you!" said Hanby. "There's a loophole on the right side, over your heads. It's too high for you to fire from, but I'll trouble you to shove your rifles and side-arms through it—all six of you. I'll give you one minute before I fire!"

A laugh came from the assembly, where two companies were already drawn up awaiting orders, as half a dozen rifles and sword-bayonets came cascading through the narrow slit in the tower's side, one after another, to the accompaniment of German growls, and fell on the gravel.

But as the last one fell the laugh was cut short, for the quick throbbing of a motor driven at high speed was heard on the road, and Mr. Vernon's car dashed up and halted before the school.

Out of it sprang Sam Slick, dust-caked, worn, and haggard.

CHAPTER 6.

The Landing at Frinton Gap.

As he tumbled out of the car, the corps presented arms to their leader, and, weary as he was, Sam looked round with surprise to see the corps drawn up. Stephen ran forward to meet his brother.

"Sam, any success? Are they calling out the Army?"

"No!" said Sam huskily. "The fools won't believe me. Nobody would listen to me—neither the War Office nor anybody. They say it's impossible. We're at the mercy of the enemy if they come, an' I've— Good heavens, what's that?"

His weary eye fell upon the German sentry lying on his face, the guard of six, and the surrendered weapons lying at the tower's foot.

"They've landed!" exclaimed Stephen. "An advance

picket came to seize the tower, and we've shut 'em up in it. Fritthiem escaped in the night. I believe he was to have shown these beggars their way about, but as he wasn't here, I did it for him, an' they're boxed up in the cellars. Peter shot that chap—he was the sentry. Hanby turned out the corps."

The fatigue, the weariness seemed to fall off Sam Slick like a mantle. His eye shone, and in a moment he was his old, alert self again.

"Well done, Steve! Break off a fatigue-party there, and shore up that door with timber baulks from the sheds! Blobbs, up the tower with you by the back way, an' report if you see any men on the move. Where's the Head!"

Before anybody could reply the clattering of hoofs was heard, and a young farmer from one of the homesteads on the cliffs came galloping in on a sweating horse, and reined up hastily.

"The furriners are on us!" he cried. "There's a whole fleet o' tugs an' barges an' ships o' war headin' in for Frinton Gap, wi' thousands o' men aboard! They're Germans, an' they're goin' to land!"

Sam Slick was at his side in a moment.

"How far off are they?"

"Four mile out when I left, an' comin' in fast. I seed the men aboard 'em wi' my owd telescope, an' the sun glintin' on their helmets. An' I've tried to send messages at the telegraph offices, but none can't get through—they tell me the wires is broken down. Let me go! I must push on!"

"Stop! Where are you making for?" said Sam, catching the horse's bridle.

"I dunno! To Brightlingsea, to warn the police, an' try an' wire agen."

"Nonsense, man! Ride to Colchester Garrison, as fast as your horse can travel, and warn the commanding officer! My motor's out of petrol, and we've no more!"

Away went the horse at full gallop, and Sam turned and faced the corps.

"Boys," he cried, in ringing tones, "we're left in the lurch; but we'll do the little we can, even if we're wiped out for it!"

"Hurrah!" The cheer rose from forty throats as one.

"I want volunteers for a forlorn hope! Who'll help me to take the gun to Frinton and plant a load of shells into the Germans? We'll strike for ourselves; they sha'n't set foot in England without one blow!"

Every boy in the corps flung up his hand at once.

"I can only take six of you. You five there in uniform, fall out and limber up the gun as quick as lightning. We must be away in two minutes. Steve, you'll come with me!"

The gun-crew dashed off in a moment to do his bidding, and as they did so Sam gave his orders to Hanby.

"Get your men into their regimentals instantly! Remember, any fellow found fighting who's not in uniform is shot by the Germans as soon as he's captured! Tell your first company off to slip into their duds, and let the second prepare to defend the school. The outer walls will be the line of defence."

"Yes, sir."

Rapidly Sam gave Hanby his instructions, as he tumbled into his own tunic and breeches in the lower room of the tower. He told his lieutenant how to prepare the place for defence as well as he was able, and to guard the five German prisoners at all costs. Within two minutes he was ready to start, and the gun, with its ammunition-boxes and hoppers, looking grim, spruce, and ready, the five privates and Stephen at attention beside it.

"One word before we start, boys," said Sam crisply, as he took his place. "We are a forlorn hope, an' that means not one of us can expect to get back alive. If any of you objects to give his life, let him fall out!"

"We're all ready, captain!" returned the team.

"Up ropes, then, and off!"

A rousing cheer—with a choky note in it from most—gave the gunners their send-off, and away went the one-pounder at a fast run as the team pulled on the drag-ropes. Though the chances of the little party to ever return were not worth counting, there were few in the corps who did not wish they could go with it.

Through the gates in the big wall and down the long, white road went the gun in a cloud of dust, and soon Sam turned it off into the by-lanes for a short cut to the sea. He had still over a mile to cover before he reached the beach, and every moment was precious.

"To think of their choosing Frinton!" panted Stephen as he ran.

"The very place for 'em!" said Sam grimly. "An' it's only one of many. That message to Fritthiem said they would be the Fifth Corps, didn't it?"

"But that was for Fritton! By gum, I see it! I made a mistake of a letter—Frinton, not Fritton!"

"That's about it. Pull there!" cried Sam, relieving one of the boys at the ropes. "Make her travel!"

"What a pity we've only practice-shells—blind ones!" said Stephen.

"They're not!" replied his brother gleefully. "I had four cases of live shells down for experiment, thank Heaven! I've brought two of 'em."

"Gosh! Shall we be able to stop the landing, d'you think?"

"Good heavens, no! A full battery couldn't do it alone. But if we can strike one blow at 'em an' delay the landing a bit before they mop us up, we shall have done a little good."

"They won't call the Greyfriars a maiden corps now!" chuckled a grim voice from the team.

The boys were white and tense with the strain, but there was no fear among them, for the best of all reasons—they had absolute confidence in their leader. There were a hundred things that all were burning to know—whether war was really declared—how the Germans had eluded the British Fleet—but it was no time for questions or theories. There was the grim fact that the enemy was close upon them. And a few minutes later, as they cleared the lanes and came in full view of the sea, an astonishing sight met them.

Right before them was the low land of Frinton Gap, stretching between the Frinton cliffs on the north side, and the cliffs leading south to Clacton on the other. It was like a gateway from the sea to the land, and on the sparkling blue waters beyond, usually deserted, save for a few fishing-boats or coasters, was a thronging host of vessels.

Six powerful-looking steam-tugs were standing in towards the beach, each with a train of large, open lighters behind her, and every lighter was packed with men, horses, and guns.

The morning sun sparkled on thousands of tiny points aboard each lighter—the metal spikes of the short, round helmets that the German soldiers wore.

Behind them all, standing in as close as she dared, steamed a stately, grey, steel-clad cruiser, cleared for action, and an escort of torpedo-boats brought up the rear, protecting the lighters from seaweed. The latter were barely three hundred yards from the beach, and nearing it fast.

"The Germans at last!" cried Stephen.

"Faster—faster! Put the pace on!" exclaimed Sam. And they made the gun fairly fly over the ground. "Thank goodness for this! I feared they'd have got ashore. We'll put our mark on those gentry yet!"

Round came the gun, just short of the beach, and faced the sea, with a clump of rough broom-brushes to screen her. In a few seconds deft fingers pulled back the levers and filled the ammunition-hoppers.

"Down flat! Take cover!" ordered Sam.

The six cadets threw themselves on their faces on either side of the limber, and Sam sprang to the gun and gripped the levers in his strong hands. His eye bent to the barrel, which swung on its pivot, and with a steady look seawards along the sights, he jammed the lever home.

Rat-tat-tat-tat-boom! Tat—boom—boom!

The one-pounder opened its vicious, whirring note, and the first three shells tore the water just short of the nearest lighter. Raising the barrel, and thanking his stars the range was short, Sam sent his message of death straight to the mark.

Every boy of the six could see the surprise and consternation as the deadly hail of shells burst among the closely-packed invaders. The white puffs of smoke showed where the missiles were strewing death and destruction, and the shouts of dismay came over the water and were heard above the machine-gun's deadly stammer.

"Oh, for a dozen of these!" said Sam between his teeth. "Just twelve of 'em, an' we could cut the Eagle's crest an' send him back, crippled, to his own country!"

Swiftly the stinging hail of shells left the first lighter and travelled over the others. The tugs had cast off the lighters, and were circling past to let them reach the beach by their own impetus. The biggest tug received a dose of shells that crumpled her funnel and bridge, and then Sam, aiming right on the water-line of the nearest lighter, drove in such a fire that he tore her side open, and she began to sink rapidly.

A vicious, spattering musketry fire replied from one of the barges, and the bullets came screaming overhead. The attack had already succeeded beyond Sam's dreams. The nearer tugs and lighters were thrown into confusion and mixed up in a panic, nor could the lighters reply effectively, for they were carriers, not fighters.

"You'll do it yet, Sam!" cried Stephen, beside himself with excitement, when suddenly a crash and a rattle came from seaward, and a new and terrible force replied to the boys' attack.

The grey cruiser, circling quickly in, and showing her

broadside, suddenly opened fire in answer. A puff of white smoke spirted from her after-barbette, and a great shell came singing over the beach.

It burst far wide of the boys, for the thin smoke of the little machine-gun was not much for the Germans to go by, and Sam had chosen his position cleverly. The next shell came nearer, and a third burst with a loud roar eighty feet beyond.

Sam gave it not so much as a glance. The lighters, confused as they were, had but a little way to go, and four were all but on the beach.

While his team behind were busily filling the second belt of shell-cartridges—for it had proved slightly out of order—Sam drove in his fire with withering effect at the lighters nearest to the beach. A second was slowly sinking as he transferred his aim to the next.

"Keep it going!" gasped Stephen. "Sam, you've done for two!"

"The belt here—quick!" cried Sam, springing back from the gun for an instant to take it from them.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a four-inch shell from the German cruiser lit slap upon the very gun itself. There was a deafening crash, a blinding sheet of flame, and all was blank.

CHAPTER 7.

The Defence of Greyfriars.

The first thing Stephen knew was the face of his brother, who was standing over him and shaking him. Sam's face was blackened and grimed, and his cheek bleeding freely from a cut by a flying piece of shell. The gun was a mass of wreckage, dismantled, and ruined.

"Are you hurt, Steve?" cried Sam.

"I don't think so," coughed Stephen, who was deafened and half stunned by the explosion, and his mouth and throat were full of sand. "Great Scott! Sam, I—I thought you were killed! Are we—?"

"Four of us are laid out, poor little chaps! You an' Beckton are the only two not hurt. Can you run? The Germans are nearly on us. The gun's done for. If we can escape them we must retreat on the school. Try!"

Steve staggered up. Only one glance he gave at the four prostrate forms of his comrades who had gone to their last account. Death was new to the boy, and for the moment the sight turned him sick.

By some freak such as shells often show, the missile had spared the nearest, and destroyed the four together in one spot. Down on the beach the lighters had arrived, and men were swarming out of them like ants from an ant-hill, with gear, horses, and field-guns. A detachment was already doubling sharply towards the broom-bushes where the boys lay.

"Must we run?" said Stephen, with a sob.

But he obeyed, and, following his brother's lead, crept rapidly away under cover of the bushes till he reached the other side of a rise of ground. Then he became aware that Beckton major, of the gun-team, was panting beside him.

The three ran swiftly off together without a word, and in two minutes Sam had led them into the lane, and they doubled back towards the school as fast as their weary legs could carry them.

They were too stunned to realise how skilfully Sam's scouting powers had drawn them clear of their enemies without their retreat being seen. Sam halted presently, and, cautiously making his way to the top of a high mound alone, took a quick survey of the path by which they had come.

"We've given 'em the slip!" he said when he returned, and they continued their rapid journey. "It's a hateful thing to have to run, but we can do no good there, and we're wanted at the school. If only the gun had lasted we could have used it till they swamped us!"

"We've lost four chaps!" said Beckton gloomily, thinking of the lifeless little figures left behind.

"The first to fall in one of the biggest struggles the world'll ever see!" said Sam sadly. "Good little chaps, they fell for their King!"

The school came in sight as they doubled over the hill, and they found the gates shut. Greyfriars was surrounded by a high, thick wall, built by the monks of old, and which enclosed the school buildings and the tower. Two sentries were keeping watch on the top of the wall by the gates, which were flung open to let the boys in.

"What news?" cried Hanby, hurrying to meet them.

"They've landed," cried Sam—"fully 15,000 strong! The gus's dismounted, and we've lost four men. We've sunk two of their lighters, an' tickled them up well. They must have lost over a hundred from our fire, but they'll soon be on us!"

"Below!" cried Peter's voice from the top of the tower, where he was watching with a pair of field-glasses. "There's a couple of full regiments an' a battery comin' over the hill from Frinton! Germans!"

"Listen, you chaps!" shouted Sam, in a voice that rang right through the school grounds. "In half an hour they'll be on us. We know from Fritheim that they want the school buildings, an' mean to make use of 'em. Now, every fellow that's here may go if he will, an' those who aren't in the corps have got to go! For myself, I'm goin' to stay, an' those who will can stay with me. I'll hold the place against the enemy as long as I can, if it's only five minutes!"

"We're all with you, Sam!" shouted the corps, with a cheer.

"Good! Then the rest of you leave by the west gate, an' escape inland as quickly as you can, for there'll be blue murder here when the ball opens. All fags, non-members, an' the staff an' servants to leave instantly!"

There was a great outcry and bustle among those who wanted to go and those who did not. But Sam reduced them to order with surprising swiftness, and he was inexorable in clearing the place of all who could not handle a rifle. There was now not a master in the place beside the Head, who was put in charge of two of his menservants, for he was still in a state of collapse.

Sam was the supreme head in all things now, and his authority astonished even the corps. In ten minutes every non-combatant was out of Greyfriars, and retreating rapidly towards Colchester.

Sam saw to the defences of both the entrances, and had the great iron-bound, solid gates made fast and piled up with barricades behind each that would have defied anything but artillery.

"Won't they shell us an' knock the place into smithereens?" said Stephen, as he toiled at the barriers.

"No; because they want the buildings an' tower for their own purposes. But they'll very likely shell a breach in the wall. We can't hope to hold out against an army of them, but the slightest check we can give 'em will be worth something, for every minute is precious to the country. If we can even worry 'em we shall do some good. They didn't dream that anyone suspected they were comin' at all. They know there's no force to meet 'em short of Colchester, an' all the wires are cut."

"Scouts comin' up across the meadows!" called Peter from the tower.

Sam mounted on the wall, and saw that it was true. The force that had been seen in the distance was now out of sight behind a rise of ground, but the mounted scouts were reconnoitring on every side. Then the force itself—an entire regiment, with a battery of light field-guns—rapidly appeared over the hill, marching in extended order.

"They're sent on to occupy Greyfriars," said Sam grimly; "an' probably they little think their first picket is already in limbo. They won't expect any resistance. Ready there, B Company! Sight for 400, and don't show yourselves!"

With beating hearts the boys watched the sullen, steady oncoming of that great company of armed men—the fore-runners of the mighty host that was to throw Britain into the throes of a death struggle. They came forward like machines, faultless in formation, and no machines could have looked more merciless. Then, through the silence, Sam's voice gave the word.

"Fire!"

One swift, raking volley rattled out from the whole length of Greyfriars' wall, and the front rank of the invaders suddenly crumpled and became ragged as a dozen men dropped in their tracks. The range was point-blank—too short to miss.

A cheer rose from the boys, and swiftly as thought, the Germans changed their formation, then scattered, took open order, and lay flat to the earth, and ten seconds later a roar of musketry rattled from end to end of their line, while the bullets came slashing and pattering on the school walls.

After the first volley the corps fired in frontier fashion, every boy for himself, and Sam's cool voice steadied them wonderfully. Inexperienced as they were, they could see the sudden surprise their volley had given the enemy.

"That's stung 'em up!" said Sam, with a curt laugh. "They think there's a regiment here, waiting to give them blazes! See 'em spread an' hop!"

Then the fight opened in earnest. The roar and rattle of the rifle-fire became continuous, and but that Sam had ordered his men from the wall-top to the loopholes, they would have been swept away by the hail of lead. Galloping messengers swept back and forth from the German regiment, and a terrific rifle-fire was poured in.

As though with a thunder-clap, the horrors of war suddenly fell on Greyfriars School and its hopeless, plucky little defenders. They used their rifles smartly and well, and at the short range many a big Prussian bit the dust, while

Sam passed quickly from point to point, steadying his men.

But the infernal tattoo of machine and field-guns soon began to add to the din as a German battery came into action on the crest of the hill. The enemy did not know what trap might be waiting for them behind those walls, and they took no chances. The cruel shrapnel began to burst overhead, sending its hail of death among the boys, and rifle after rifle became silent as its young owner went to his last account.

"Cease firing!" cried Sam. And Tom Bates's bugle sounded the call.

"Keep cover! Load up, an' be ready for 'em when I give the word!" said the young leader.

The fearful din of the machine-guns continued, but soon it ceased. All was quiet for a moment; and then, believing the little garrison to be silenced, four German companies were detached, and, with loud shouts of "Hoch!" they charged down upon the gates with the bayonet.

"Now! Let them have it!" shouted Sam.

Such a withering flood of lead was poured into the charging companies at the short range that their front crumpled as rank after rank was broken, and they checked. No infantry, as any soldier knows, can charge in the face of modern rifle-fire at point-blank range, and Sam's first company had repeating Lee-Enfield rifles. This ruse had succeeded. The Germans broke and retreated in disorder, and a wild cheer rose from the boys.

It was drowned ten seconds later in a withering blast of shell and shrapnel that came in with withering effect. The enemy were not to be caught twice, and Sam set his teeth as he saw the red havoc the guns were making in his little force.

Then came the thudding shells of a heavy field-gun away on the right. Two great shells burst at the gate; and then came a third, that crashed into the wall, and blew a breach in it large enough for a coach-and-six to pass through, while one last devastating hail of shrapnel raked the defenders from above.

Gallantly as the little garrison had fought, that gaping breach shattered the last hope. With harsh shouts the German troops, rapidly covering the open ground, charged through the smoking gap with bayonets fixed, and the doom of Greyfriars was sealed.

"Meet 'em with the bayonet!" cried Hanby's voice, high above the uproar.

Like an avalanche the Germans rushed in through the gap; and in five seconds they were hand-to-hand with the little force of defenders.

A groan burst from Sam Slick as he realised he must give the order to surrender. There was nothing more to be gained now; the school was taken, and the rest would be mere butchery. He had no right to throw away the lives of his cadets uselessly, and though he would rather have died twice over, he gave the order.

"Quarter! Throw down your arms, lads! Down with them!"

The ringing voice carried above the din, and those who remained of the Greyfriars Cadets obeyed. Hanby alone, for the first time in his life, defied a superior's order, and, with a cry of despair and rage, he rushed at a huge Prussian, who came at him with the bayonet.

Two swift counters were exchanged, and then the boy went down as the German's bayonet passed under Hanby's guard, and laid him lifeless on the ground, just as Sam's order was repeated, in a voice of thunder.

The Germans came swarming through the gap by scores, and those who were first in held their hands as the cadets surrendered. Now that they saw who the defenders were, the grim looks of the soldiers turned to astonishment. A dark, sallow-faced officer, who had led the attack, strode up to Sam.

"Vere is your commanding-officer?" he cried fiercely.

"I command here!" said Sam curtly, facing him. The youth's cheeks were white as marble, not with fear, but with the knowledge that he was beaten.

Before the officer could reply, a tall, distinguished-looking German, in full brigadier's uniform, hastened up to him.

"What is this?" he exclaimed, in good English. "Is the place defended by boys? Where is your garrison?"

"It is here," said Sam, "all that remains of it. You see it before you."

"What?" cried the brigadier sternly. "Are you trying to play with me? These are not soldiers! What uniform is this you wear? You are civilians, and schoolboys at that!"

"I beg your pardon," said Sam stiffly; "we are attached to the British forces—the Greyfriars Cadet Corps! You have taken the compound, and we are your prisoners!"

"Do you mean to say," cried the sallow-faced officer angrily, "dot you und dese children haf dared attempt to check our advance? Do you know der penalty for—"

"Donnerwetter! If it's true, they're as gallant a set of

youngsters as ever lived!" exclaimed the brigadier, in German. "It's almost miraculous; they held us off for twenty minutes, and stopped one of our charges! Von Ralte, I must rejoin my column at once; I leave you in charge here with your battalion!"

"Yes, sir."

"Set up your wireless telegraph installation on the tower there at once, and get into communication with the Commander-in-Chief, also with our Fleet. Remember how much depends on you!"

Both officers saluted, and the brigadier hurriedly withdrew. The sallow colonel of Engineers, Von Ralte, turned fiercely to Sam, who had been joined by Stephen.

"I shall inquire into your rights to conduct dis-pertinent defence of der school," he said harshly; "and if I find you are not entitled to be looked upon as soldiers, you'll be shot to der last man! For der present, answer me dese questions, and fail to tell the truth at your peril! A picket of our men should haf come here this morning and taken possession of dot tower—where are they?"

"Prisoners in our cellars," said Sam coolly.

And Stephen, despite all he had gone through, gave a chuckle. The German turned green with rage.

What might have happened is uncertain, for just then a lieutenant hurried to the spot and saluted Von Ralte.

"Hasenfeldt and his men are shut up in the base of the tower, sir," he said quickly. "We've just discovered it, and my men are breaking open the door."

"Here," cried Von Ralte savagely to four of his riflemen, "bring these two brats along!"

He hurried towards the tower, Sam and Stephen following, under guard of the German linesmen, who had their bayonets fixed. Nobody had yet done any more than keep a watch on the rest of the boys, who were all disarmed. As the party reached the tower, the door was just giving way to the blows of the sappers' pickaxes, and out stepped the five men Stephen had so neatly trapped in the morning, and their officer, who was blue with rage.

"Captain Hasenfeldt, what does this mean?" cried Von Ralte ferociously. "Have you allowed yourself to be taken by these schoolboys?"

"Pardon, colonel," said the officer, flushing scarlet with vexation; "but we were tricked by one of these young scoundrels, and it was impossible to get out of the tower. See! There is one of my sentries, who was shot! I believe it was that little scellum there who did it!" he cried fiercely, pointing to Stephen. "He is in some uniform now, but he was not then, and I think, sir, he should be summarily shot for what he did!"

"Ah, I thought as much! Bring him forward there!" began Von Ralte grimly, when suddenly Peter Blobbs pushed forward anxiously.

"It was not him, sir," he said to the colonel; "it was I who killed the sentry, and you can shoot me for it if you like!"

"Shut up, Peter!" said Stephen quickly.

But, at a sign from Von Ralte, the boy was arrested. "So," said the colonel, "they are all in the same boat, it seems to me; but I will make use of this one first. Men, guard those two below here. Bring up the apparatus, there, and let it be set up instantly on the top of the tower. Bring that youngster, too; I want him. It seems neither of our spies are here, and we shall use this cub instead."

The party started for the tower stairway; and Peter, with a quick nod to Sam as he went, showed them the way, for there was no use in concealing it now; they were bound to find it.

"Let me go with you!" cried Sam, his face very white and drawn. "I'll show you the way; I was in command here!"

"Silence! Stay where you are!" was the stern reply. "Guards, shoot him instantly if he attempts to resist! Remain with him there!"

Sam struggled to try and join the party, to Stephen's surprise; but he was held in an iron grip. It was Peter who was taken up with the colonel and the men who carried the wireless apparatus.

Obedying the harsh orders given him, he led them up to the second storey, where the colonel halted, while the orderlies took the wireless apparatus up to the roof.

"Ha," said Von Ralte, glancing round, "this seems to be the ammunition-store for this corps of children who have caused us so much annoyance. Hasenfeldt, you will make this room your quarters, and your guard will occupy the bottom floor. Do you hear?"

"Yes, sir," said the Engineer captain, saluting.

"As for you," said Von Ralte, glancing grimly at Peter, who was still under guard, "we need no more of you than a couple of questions. Is der whole of der ammunition belonging to dis corps of yours here?"

"All, except what we fired off at you, when your men turned and hooked it!" said Peter, looking up at him.

The German bit his lip.

"You will regret dot remark, mine young vrient, very shortly!" he said. "In der meantime," he added, with an ugly laugh, "it vill nderest you to know dot dis tower of yours vill be von of der chief places from which der ruin of your gountry vill be worked; from here der great Cherman Army vill be directed und der pride of der British people brought low!"

Peter's face was white as paper as he heard the words, but he made no sign. His eyes were fixed on the open ammunition-boxes, left in disorder when the cadets had filled their pouches before the fight.

There were twelve heavy cases of rifle-cartridges remaining. Nearest him, with the lids wrenched off, were two great cases, that held each a hundred live shells for the one-pounder Maxim.

As Peter's gaze fell on these, a sudden resolve came upon him. His heart beat as though it would burst his ribs, and he did not dare stop to think. But he steeled every nerve in his body, and, with one quick glance at Von Ralte's belt, he replied, in a quiet voice:

"Will a German give his life for his country, sir?"

"If der Kaiser commands it—yes!" said Von Ralte, with a sour smile.

"And a Britisher will do it without any command!" said Peter.

And, with one swift snatch, he plucked the heavy Service revolver from Von Ralte's belt and leaped away again.

The German sprang at him with a cry, but before Von Ralte reached him, the boy fired the heavy pistol point blank into the case of shells.

Once and twice the revolver spoke, and at the second shot a frightful shock blew out one wall of the chamber bodily, followed by one appalling, devastating crash as the ammunition-stores exploded.

Amid a sheet of livid flame, the old tower leaped into the air in riven fragments, and fell back, burying the bodies of captors and captives in its smoking ruins.

CHAPTER 8.

A Hero's Death.

When little Peter Blobbs went into the tower with Van Ralte and his men, on their way to the top, Sam was almost beside himself. He struggled with his guards in a way that astonished even Stephen.

"It's no use, Sam," said his young brother anxiously. "Stop it, or they'll bayonet us, which is just what that brute of a colonel wants! He means to shoot us, anyhow, I believe! What is it you're trying to do?"

"I want to get up that tower," said Sam, in a strained voice. "That's where I ought to be—I should have gone there directly they broke in through the breach."

"What for?" said Stephen, as the guards, paying no heed to what the boys said, for they could not understand them, moved their prisoners further back from the tower. One of them held up his bayonet, as though to drive it through Sam, bidding him curtly, in German, to stand still.

"Can't you understand?" replied Sam hoarsely to his brother. "That tower's of the greatest value to them, and it's the highest point for miles—they can send wireless messages to their whole army and to their flotillas at sea! Very likely to Germany as well, for all I know! I'll get away from these brutes, or they shall kill me for it!" he said, between his teeth, wrenching one arm free and grasping at the bayonet of the man who threatened him.

The next moment would have been his last, for the German, with a grunt of anger, freed his weapon and drew back to strike it home. But before the blow was struck, a loud, shattering explosion was heard, and a whole section of the tower's wall, half-way up towards its top, was blown bodily outwards. Both prisoners and guard looked up with startled faces, and for one brief instant, through the shattered wall above, they saw a sight that no man there ever forgot.

In that brief, fleeting glimpse between the two explosions, they saw the figure of Peter, revolver in hand, firing swiftly into the open ammunition stores, the scared Germans rushing to prevent him. Then came the awful crash that lifted half the tower into the air and blotted out every living thing within its walls.

What happened then, the boys hardly knew. A mass of masonry from the upper battlements came right down upon them, and Stephen felt himself dashed to the ground, for a heavy scarp of stone struck the Prussian who was guarding him, and the soldier pulled the boy down in his fall. The next thing he knew was his brother's strong arm plucking him to his feet, and Sam's voice in his ear:

"Run for it! To the west wall!"

By what trick of fate the falling masonry had struck down the guards and left the boys unhurt, Stephen never knew, nor did he trouble to think. Amid the uproar and smoke and dust of the explosion, he took to his heels, and ran like a deer, skirting the broken masses of the tower, and narrowly missed by heavy missiles that had been driven sky-high and came raining down in all directions.

Shouts and outcries came from every side, and, for the moment, even the iron German discipline was shaken, but Stephen paid no attention to anything but his own speed, and not for some moments did he realise that his brother was running beside him.

"Make for the old pear-tree!" panted Sam.

Up till now, Stephen had scarcely thought of escape—it had seemed hopeless. But the explosion in the tower gave the two boys their chance. Then the shouts arose as several Germans, recovering from the shock, saw them running.

By instinct, the brothers made for an old pear-tree that was trained against the enclosure wall. They had used it often enough in times past, when escaping from their house-master, for it was one of the few places where the wall could be easily scaled.

They reached it in ten seconds, just as their dash for liberty was noticed. There were no men near enough to stop them, but half a dozen rifles cracked, and the bullets drummed on the wall all round the boys as they scaled it, clambering up swiftly by the aid of the tree's branches growing flat against the bricks. A bullet drilled Sam's coat-sleeve, and another struck the wall so close to Stephen that the flying brick-dust stung his cheek, but the snap-shots were taken quickly through the smoke that filled the compound, and in the twinkling of an eye the boys had swung themselves over and dropped on the other side.

"Stick to me, an' run like blazes!" was all Sam said; and off they went as fast as they could lay two feet to the ground.

It was not long before several Germans came blundering over the wall after them, but the heavily-clad linesmen, in their ammunition boots, had little chance to overtake the fleet-footed boys, who plunged through a coppice and soon shook off their pursuers.

Sam pulled up quickly as he caught sight of a column of the enemy away to the right, and, for a moment, both the boys crouched behind a tree to take a survey and make sure they were not running into the lines of the Germans, who were now advancing rapidly across the country-side.

"If only we can get clear away," said Sam, taking a quick look round, "the information we've got will be worth anything to the British commander, if we can find him. I believe we're still ahead of most of the Germans, an' what we want is speed, to get up inland. If we'd only got horses!"

"There's Farmer Gray's ponies in the paddock, two fields away, or should be," returned Stephen quickly, "unless they've been taken. I've often ridden one of 'em, bare-back."

"The very thing! Come on!" exclaimed Sam. And even as he started to run, several of the pursuers suddenly appeared over the crest of the rise behind them, and three or four bullets whizzed round the boys' ears.

"They're precious anxious not to lose us!" said Sam grimly, as he quickly put the hedge between himself and the linesmen.

It then became a race for the paddock, which the boys reached first.

Being so hard pressed, they feared lest it should be impossible to catch and mount the ponies before they were overtaken. But the paddock was soon reached, and, to their joy, they found the two ponies tethered to ring-stakes by grass-halters, to allow them to graze in a circle.

They were rough, skinny little beasts, but far better than nothing, and Stephen at once raced off to the one he had ridden before, cut its halter with his knife, and threw himself upon its back. Sam had the bigger of the two, and had some trouble to mount it, for it swerved and lashed out viciously; but in a very short time both boys were mounted.

Not a moment too soon, for the pursuers came into view again, and once more the futile rifle-bullets began to sing past.

Men who are blown with running seldom shoot straight, and the boys, crouching low on their ponies' necks, charged boldly at the low hedge and crashed right through it.

Each of them had snatched up a stick before reaching the paddock, and, plying these lustily, they swerved round a couple of haystacks in the next field. Putting these between themselves and the German rifles, the brothers galloped away at top speed, and were soon beyond hope of capture.

Sam's knowledge of the country and his training as a scout came to his aid, and when they caught a last glimpse

of the pursuers behind them, the Germans had halted and were waving and gesticulating vehemently.

"Wave your arms about, you beggars! Shout away!" said Stephen, exulting at their escape.

"Keep the pace up! They're signalling to someone we can't see! Ah! Look out for yourself! Wheel!"

The cry broke from him as a solitary horseman suddenly leaped a hedge away on the right and came straight down upon the boys, a long lance in his hand.

He was a Uhlán—the light cavalry of the Kaiser's forces—thrown out for scouting, and it was he to whom the shaken-off infantry-men had signalled.

Stephen was the nearest to him of the two, and, clapping spurs to his horse, the Uhlán bore down upon the boy with the pennon of his lance whistling wickedly in the wind.

The scrubby little pony, without even a bit to guide it, had no chance of escape before the German's great black horse, and the Uhlán overhauled his quarry at every stride.

Sam's heart leaped into his mouth as he saw his young brother's danger, and, with a shout, he laid his stick across his pony's ribs and galloped madly to cut the Uhlán off. He was weaponless and nearly helpless, but there was one thing he could do, and he did it without a thought of the peril to himself.

The Uhlán, intent on his victim, suddenly found a second boy on a pony, in the same grey uniform, almost upon him at right angles. Before he had time to shift his lance over, Sam had ridden slap into him.

The shock of the collision was tremendous. Horse, pony, and both riders rolled over in a heap, and lay among a whirlwind of kicking hoofs.

Stephen, seeing what had happened, wheeled round and throwing himself from his pony, rushed up to aid his brother.

Sam, gasping heavily, for the breath was nearly knocked out of his body, scrambled up, and the Uhlán's horse, wild-eyed and trembling, plunged till it got upon its feet. The Uhlán lay doubled up beside Sam's pony, his neck broken, and Sam, very white and shaken, grasped the bridle of the dead man's horse as it rose.

The thudding of hoofs was suddenly heard up the hill, and more Uhláns came into view—an advance picket of them, with a corporal in charge. They caught sight of the boys, halted for an instant, and then wheeled and galloped down towards them.

"Up behind me, Steve! Quick!" gasped Sam, clambering painfully into the saddle, and five minutes later the black horse was flying over the field with both boys on its back, Stephen gripping tight with his knees and holding on to his brother.

"Hang on, for all you're worth!" said Sam, between his teeth, as the horse rose at the first fence, and the Uhláns came thundering along behind.

Luckily, the boys had a start of some three hundred yards, or the doubly-laden horse would soon have been overtaken.

It was Sam's wonderful knowledge of the country-side that beat the Uhláns, for, as the chase swept along over the low grass-lands, he doubled and twisted like a hare from field to field, heading for Merton Marshes, a swampy bottom of ground, where there was a single narrow path that was dry and safe, which Sam knew and had often tested. Taking it at full gallop, he soon gained the farther side, and the German lancers, following blindly, soon got into trouble in the boggy ground. One was pitched from his horse headfirst into a mud-hole, three more blundered into a dyke with banks too rotten for a horse to jump from, and the boys, vanishing quickly into the distance, heard the oaths and shouts of their baffled pursuers in the marsh. Another quarter of a mile and the Uhláns were lost sight of for good and all.

"We've done 'em!" cried Stephen exultingly. "Good-bye, my giddy stick-in-the-muds! I say, Sam, ain't you hurt?"

"Shaken an' cut about a bit, that's all," said Sam, shaking a loose rein on the horse's neck. "Gum! I thought that fellow's lance was through you for sure! It nearly turned me sick!"

"You saved my life, Sam! I say, isn't it good business we can ride? We owe the governor's racing-stud a good deal now. I never thought when we used to ride the colts at exercise in the holidays it'd mean so much to us! Where are we making for now?"

"Colchester, if we can get there. We must get through with our news without a moment's delay. Hold up, Steve! You were nearly off!"

"I feel a bit used-up, somehow," muttered Stephen. He was swaying in his seat, and his eyelids drooped heavily in spite of painful efforts to keep alert.

"No wonder," said his brother thickly. "It's all I can do to keep in the saddle myself. We've been at it hard for thirty hours, an' the sun's settin' now. But we're better off than the poor little chaps behind, who'll never see it rise

again. It shows you what training'll do, Steve—the way they stood to it, an' never flinched."

"You saw what Peter did in the tower?" said Stephen, with a shudder.

"Yes," replied Sam, very soberly. "It makes a fellow feel rather proud he ever shook the hand of a youngster like that. He gave his life without a thought; to save an advantage for his country, he blew up the tower with his own hand!"

"He was my chum," said Stephen. And he choked down a sob. "Sam, d'you think our chaps who were prisoners'll be shot? That man Von Raite said they would."

"I don't believe it for a minute! Von Raite might have, but he's dead, and most German officers are not such brutes as he. The brigadier'd never have allowed it. He was a gentleman, if he was a German. Our chaps are King's men as much as the Regulars are, an'—Great Scott! Look there!"

A wide bivouac of armed men—regiment upon regiment, with a couple of white tents in the midst, were seen across the low valley as they mounted the next hill.

"The Colchester garrison!" cried Sam. "They've turned out, an' they're entrenching themselves here for the defence, while the main forces come up!"

"Hurrah!" cried Stephen.

His weariness fell away from him as he saw the British colours waving above the distant white tents, and Sam urged his horse to its utmost pace. Before they were half across the valley, half a dozen men sprang out of a coppice, and met them with levelled rifles.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friends!" called Sam, reining up short. "Greyfriars Cadet Corps! Let us through! We've come through the lines, an' we've news of the enemy."

"Well done, young 'uns!" cried the sergeant of the picket, lowering his rifle. "Go through, an' good luck to you! General's tent just inside the lines!"

Five minutes later, ragged, weary, caked with dirt and blood, the two boys galloped into the British camp on the Uhlán's black charger.

CHAPTER 9.

How Britain Learned the News.

Why was the Kaiser's army in England?

For a little space we must leave the two lucky survivors of the Greyfriars fight to find their way to General Nugent's tent, while we turn to London for the answer.

During the first day the great city was like a brain without a body. Nobody knew anything. Every wire through the Eastern Counties was cut—no news could be got. Even the War Office and Foreign Office had none to give. Motor-cars came rushing in hourly from Essex and Suffolk, but the people learned nothing from them. Wild rumours were afloat—the Germans had landed! Our fleet was destroyed! A great battle had been fought, and the invaders swept back into the sea! It was all a hoax—nothing had happened at all! Such were the reports spread.

Many refused to believe them. "How can there be war? What is there to fight about? How could German troops land in Britain?" said thousands. Yet London waited in keen anxiety.

In the morning there was still no reliable news. The papers were full of reports, but there was nothing official or certain. The uneasiness spread. Crowds besieged the Government offices for information, and groups of men gathered in every street. It was not till eleven o'clock that "The Daily Mail" office in Carmelite Street, posted a placard in its window, and a huge crowd flocked eagerly to read it. It was headed:

"Official News.

"GERMANS LAND IN EAST ANGLIA.

"FIGHTING IN ESSEX."

A hoarse roar rose from the mob as the words were read, and hardly had it died down when the shouts of newsboys were heard, as they rushed for the main thoroughfares, each bearing a bundle of papers under his arm. The smartest of the afternoon journals, "The Evening News," having obtained the latest information, brought out its special edition, and the boys shouted as they ran:

"German Invashern! First news from the Front!"

The people absolutely fought for the papers, which sold easily for a shilling each, and soon for anything that was asked. The first man to get hold of one opened it eagerly, and the following words met his eyes:

**"KAISER'S ARMY INVADES BRITAIN!
200,000 GERMAN TROOPS ON THE EAST COAST!
OUR FLEET EVADED. NAVAL BATTLE IN
PROGRESS!"**

"The blow is struck.

"For a week past a little cloud has hung over us—the cloud no bigger than a man's hand—while our dispute with Germany about the East African frontier, and the seizure of a British ship, alleged to be carrying arms to the rebels, was in progress.

"The British Government flouted the idea of war. Perhaps none of us believed the small dispute would end in blows. There were some who warned us that Germany, so long our rival, was ready to strike at last, that she would take any excuse that offered, and that the blow would be sudden and deadly. Those few who gave that warning were laughed at. They have been terribly justified.

"The Government believed in peace, and refused to make ready. It would 'create bad blood,' they said. Warlike preparations were not called for.

"So they did nothing. Not a man was recalled to his regiment—not a ship warned for service. Our North Sea Fleet is not even on a war footing.

"The Kaiser was given his chance, and he has taken it. The secret preparations, of which we have so often been warned in vain, were finished. Two nights ago the wires connecting the East Coast stations with London were simultaneously cut by organised German spies at a given hour. By that time, unknown to any soul on this side, five army corps, fully equipped, had started in a great fleet of lighters and barges from the Frisian Coast, in tow of powerful tugs, and were flung across the North Sea on to our shores, where they landed at five points—near Hull, Boston, Cromer, Lowestoft, and Frinton, in the early hours of yesterday morning.

"They were escorted by torpedo-boats and light-draught cruisers. The German Fleet, steaming north, while the invading army made for England, attacked our North Sea Squadron as it lay in the Firth of Forth, and has held it in check there. A heavy naval engagement is said to be in progress off Dunbar, but of that no reliable news has yet reached the South. The result is anxiously awaited, but if the victory is ours, it will come

TOO LATE

to save Britain from the horrors of war, for between 200,000 and 300,000 Germans, perfectly equipped, with guns, horses, and stores, already hold strong positions on our coast, and have seized the towns mentioned above, commandeering all stores. The German forces in Essex have moved their patrols well inland, and have posted proclamations in English, in the villages within their area. One of these brought in by our special commissioner this morning, from the neighbourhood of Maldon, where a German transport corps and a full division have landed, reads:

BY ORDER OF
KAISER WILHELM II.

TO THE INHABITANTS OF GERMAN ESSEX.

WHEREAS, having occupied the German Province of Essex, formerly the territory of King Edward VII., we make proclamation as follows:

ANY PERSONS discovered conveying information to the British Forces, or attempting to hinder the German Arms, or giving false information when engaged as guides to the German Imperial Army; also any person not in the recognised uniform of the British Forces, carrying arms against the Kaiser's men, will be **SUMMARILY SHOT**, in accordance with German Military Law.

HARBIN VON KRANTZ
(Commander-in-Chief).

German Forces in Britain.

"The above needs no comment. It rests with Britain to wipe out this insult, and expel the invaders.

"All available forces are being moved rapidly to the front. Lord Ripley is organising the defences with skill and energy. General Sir Sholto Nugent has already moved out of Colchester, and is confronting the Fifth German Army Corps in Essex. But the great fact remains, and the blame with it lies not with our military or naval leaders, but with those above them.

"WE ARE NOT READY!"

"We have been taken unprepared; the greatest military nation of the age has caught us napping, thanks to this

belief in our security. We have been asleep, dreaming of everlasting peace. This is our awakening!

"STRANGE NEWS FROM ESSEX!"

"One bright spot in this dark cloud reaches us, and later news will confirm it if true. A strange report is circulated that in one place, at least, a resistance was offered, and the Germans did not land without a blow being struck.

"The old public school of Greyfriars, near Frinton, has a smart cadet corps of its own. Report says that a gallant little band of these schoolboys, led by their captain, Aubrey Villiers, a lad of eighteen, actually took their solitary machine-gun to the shore, and opened fire upon the Germans.

"The gun was dismounted, but not before a severe loss was inflicted on one section of the invaders, who were caught at a critical moment.

"The boys are then said to have retreated upon the school, and made a plucky defence of it, finally being swamped by superior numbers. They contrived, however, to blow up the school tower to prevent its falling into the hands of the Germans, to whom it was of great importance. Whether this is so we shall know later; certain it is that the tower no longer exists.

"If it is true that it has been left to schoolboys to strike the first blow for Britain, and give their lives for her while strong men slept, what shame upon us! Arise, Britons, wipe out this stain, and let us win back the national honour, to guard which the lads of Greyfriars died!"

CHAPTER 10.

Sam's Sporting Offer.

Only those who see the British colours flying over a British corps, after such a time as the boys had gone through, can realise all it means. They rode in past the sentries, between the bivouac of regiments and the toiling thousands, who were digging trenches as fast as they could lay spades to the ground.

Stephen, who knew less about the theory of war than his brother, felt rather surprised that the British troops did not march straight ahead till they met the Germans, and had it out with them; but Sam knew battles are not fought in that way nowadays. He paid little attention to anything but the need for getting at once to the commanding-officer's tent, and he called aloud to be taken there as soon as he reined up, while a knot of surprised men came quickly up, and surrounded him.

"Who the dooce are you? Where are you from?" exclaimed a young adjutant, hurrying forward. "Great Scott, is that you, young Villiers? What have you been up to?"

"Hallo, Devine," said Sam, dropping off his horse, and helping Stephen down. They both recognised the adjutant, who often stayed with their father. "We've come through the German lines from Frinton. Get us before your C.O. as soon as you can, will you? We've all the information he wants."

"What?" cried the adjutant; and then, smothering his astonishment in the need for haste, he brought Sam and his brother before the small Service tent beyond the lines. "Wait here a moment," he said, and entered.

A few moments later he reappeared, and brought the two brothers in past the sentry, and they found themselves before General Sir Sholto Nugent, a fierce-looking, white-haired old warrior, sitting at a camp-table covered with plans and despatches.

"Well, my lads," said the general crisply, "who are you, and what's your news!"

"Captain and Corporal Villiers, sir," said Sam, saluting, "of the Greyfriars School Cadet Corps. We had news of this invasion yesterday afternoon, so—"

"What?" exclaimed the general, bouncing up from his seat. "What the dickens do you mean?"

"It's quite true, sir. My brother caught a German spy—one of our masters—signalling a message. I motored to town and warned the War Office. They wouldn't listen to me; but that's all done with now. When I got back we had news that the enemy were landing at Frinton. A farmer told us, and I sent him on to you—"

"Yes; he came. I've had other news since then. Go on!"

"We thought we ought to try and do something, sir, so we took our one-pounder Maxim to Frinton, an', catching them on the hop—I mean, finding them just about to land—we were able to sink one of the lighters an' do some other damage. But a shot from a German cruiser dismounted our gun—"

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the general, staring at him under beetling eyebrows. "Are you making this up, boy?"

"BRITAIN INVADED!" ANOTHER SPLENDID NEXT THURSDAY.

LONG INSTALMENT

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Sam stiffly; "I am giving you my report of my corps' action."

"I apologise," said Sir Sholto, after a keen glance at him. "Go on, Captain Villiers!"

"We fell back on the school and held it for an action of about twenty minutes, when the first German column breached the wall and swamped us, sir. We lost half our men, the rest were taken prisoners, and the Germans started to set up a wireless telegraph installation on the tower. They took one of our fellows—Private Blobbys—up with them as a prisoner, and he fired our ammunition-stores and blew up the tower to prevent the Germans using it. He was killed in the explosion, and so were all the Germans in the tower at the time. We got away in the confusion, and escaped here."

There was a moment's pause.

"This boy is speaking the truth," said the general to Devine. "I can feel it. It is so amazing that I thought at first he must be crazy."

"I saw Lord Ripley yesterday, sir," said the adjutant, "and he told me their corps was the smartest in the country. These two came in on a German charger, sir—both of them together!"

"Where did you get that?" said the general, who still seemed incredulous.

"Well, sir, we came across a Uhlan," said Sam awkwardly. "We were on ponies, and he tried to stick us; but I rode into him, an' he came down heavily. So we took his horse and rode it over here. Hold up, Steve!"

Stephen, who had been hardly able to stand with fatigue, collapsed altogether at this point, and Sam caught him.

"He's had a rough time of it, sir, and he's done!"

"Poor little chap!" said Sir Sholto. "It's a marvel he's not dead! Here, Devine, carry this plucky youngster to the Red Cross tents, and let him be well tended. Captain Villiers," he said quickly, turning to Sam, "I want you to call up your strength enough to tell me what you know of the German troops before us. I believe every word you have told me. Now for the information, which my own men have as yet failed to get! Can you do it?"

Sam was swaying where he stood.

"That's what I'm here for, sir," he said thickly; "if you can take it down quickly."

The general gave a sharp order to his orderly outside, and at once a cup of hot, bitter, black coffee was brought. Sam gulped it down quickly, and it braced him up and stimulated his brain enough to keep him going. Dropping on to a camp-stool, he at once began with the details of the German forces.

There was very little Sam had not noticed—his ability for scouting had trained him in this. At Frinton and Greyfriars he had noted in his head every detail of the enemy, and nothing he took notice of was ever forgotten. He gave his report rapidly and clearly, the general jotting it down in shorthand, and Sir Sholto's moustache bristled with satisfaction as he wrote and listened, for here was everything that he wanted to know. Horse, foot, guns, engineers, and formation—the whole story of the German Fifth Army Corps—did Sam set before him.

"Well done!" exclaimed Sir Sholto at last, rising and clapping Sam on the shoulder. "My boy, you've done your country a service that the oldest soldier in the Army would be proud of, and you've shown a pluck and nerve that the best of us couldn't beat! You've earned the D.S.O., sir; and I'll see you get it!"

And Sam, now the strain was relieved, dropped quietly on his face across the table, and his senses left him. Nature, worn out to breaking point, could bear no more.

Neither of the boys knew what happened to them after they blandly went to sleep before General Nugent, until they awoke to find themselves in a couple of fairly comfortable camp-berths in the Red Cross quarters outside the bivouac, having slept solidly for seven hours. A medical corps surgeon grinned as he saw them awake.

"You'll soon be pitched out of those quarters when the fighting starts, my young sparks," he said. "We shall be filling up with wounded pretty quick, then. Better sleep while you've got the chance."

Sam sat up in his berth. He felt alert enough, save for a raging hunger, for neither of the boys had taken any hurt beyond fatigue, and sleep had mended that.

The dawn was breaking outside, and Stephen thought the surgeon's advice good enough, when suddenly a loud, singing whir and a boom, followed by a rattling sound somewhere in the distance, made both boys jump out.

"The Germans!" cried Stephen, springing for the door.

"You'll be safest here," said the surgeon, who had been told nothing of the boys' story; "they don't fire at the Red Cross flag, and we shall be out of the wet!"

"Then it's no place for us," said Sam to his brother, as

they left the tent in a couple of jumps, and hurried towards the lines of the defenders. "How d'you feel, kid?"

"Fit as a flea!" returned Steve, who was burning with eagerness to know what was going on. "We ain't at Greyfriars now, though, an' we're precious small beer among all these regiments. I say, d'you think there's a chance of our bein' allowed to do anything? Can we get a job?"

"We'll do our best, you bet!" returned Sam, as they ran. "We showed the general we could be same, as you mayhap he'll give us a chance."

"If he don't, I vote we take it for ourselves," said Stephen. "Hang it all, what are we for?"

"Discipline's discipline," returned Sam sharply. "Soldiers are no good without it. I shall do as I'm told; an' see you do, too, whatever I think personally about it. But I've hopes of getting us a good chance for service, with luck."

They reached the lines quickly, and found the force in very different order. All the rifle battalions were in well-made trenches, and away on the left a battery of field-guns was keeping up a brisk fire.

All that could be seen of the enemy for the present was a line of smoke-puffs that seemed to sprout from the side of a hill a couple of miles away. Thence came the long, droning whir of big shells that seemed to suddenly appear in the British lines from nowhere, bursting with a deadly crash when they lit. They seemed to be seeking the British battery, creeping nearer and nearer to it at every discharge, and one fell with deadly force among a group of transport waggons far in the rear, wrecking them and killing several men and horses.

"That's a chance shot; they're often the worst," said Sam.

And so quickly does a trained person get used to the effects of gun-fire that both the boys, after their experiences of the day before, felt cool enough. Sam, with his useful knack of finding his way about quickly, was not long in reaching the trenches in which lay the Fusilier regiment of which Devine was adjutant. Nobody had leisure to trouble about the boys at the time, and, jumping into the trench, they found themselves close to Devine. To their surprise, a short, hearty cheer was raised when the men saw them.

"Hallo, my young Marlboroughs!" said Devine. "What, not had enough fighting yet? You're the heroes of the brigade, I can tell you. They know all about your exploits!"

"Rot!" said Sam. "I say, Devine, has the row begun? Are we holding 'em? Tell us."

"Oh, this is only a bit of a flourish!" said the adjutant. "They aren't attacking yet. One of their batteries has taken a position, and is exchanging shots with ours; but they aren't attacking in force, and they don't seem in a hurry to. They're bivouacked beyond the next valley there."

"What are they waitin' for?"

"Goodness knows! We wish we did. May be for more reinforcements from the sea, or else they've orders to hang on till some of the other army corps to the north have got to work. While they wait, we must. We aren't nearly strong enough to attack 'em with the little force we've got here. The old man don't like waitin', but he gets his orders from headquarters, you see."

"Do you think the general would give us a job?" said Sam eagerly. "I know the country like a book. We can both ride, an' Steve's a first-class shot."

"Don't you worry him now, or you'll get your heads bitten off! In fact, he wouldn't see you at all. He's hard at work directing the defence of the batteries. What d'you want to do? Better stay here."

"Can't we go, then?"

"If you like. You're not under my orders, or anyone's, that I know of. But if you leave the trench you must go to the rear and right away out of it all. Do you hear? No loitering allowed."

Sam nodded, and, touching Stephen's arm, led the way quickly and quietly back through the lines. One or two officers called to them and bade them make themselves scarce at once; which they did. Reaching the transport at the back, Sam slipped into a special correspondent's tent, and when he joined his brother again, out of sight of the lines, exhibited a beautiful pair of Weiss field-glasses.

"Did you bag those?" exclaimed Steve. "Where the dickens is the owner?"

"He wasn't there, my son," grinned Sam.

"We ain't armed. I s'pose that doesn't matter?"

"Got to take the risk. That's a scout's business."

Stephen asked no more questions, but followed silently. With the precautions he well knew how to take, Sam

picked his way amid the copses and hillsides, avoiding all chance of being seen by either German or British scouts, if any were about. He came nearly half-way to the enemy's position, and then, halting at the foot of a leafy old elm-tree, he rapidly climbed into its upper branches, and perched himself in a foliage-hidden fork about eighty feet from the ground.

From there he had a capital view of the German position, for he had chosen his point well. Focussing his glasses, he looked it over thoroughly, and found it had taken a strong position, and did not look as if he meant to move at once. In a central part were three separate tents, and it was not hard to see which was the one used as headquarters by the German general.

As he looked, Sam's face changed, and he gave a silent whistle of surprise. He lowered the glasses, put them up, and looked again.

"By gum," he muttered, "there's no doubt about it! What a rum go! I wonder—"

He fell into silence, watching very intently through the glasses, as if to assure himself of something he had seen.

"See anything?" called Stephen cautiously from below.

Getting no answer, he quickly and quietly climbed up till he was beside his brother.

"I'll swear I'm right!" muttered Sam. "Steve, take the glasses an' look at that tent—the middle one!"

Stephen did so. The powerful binoculars brought it so near that he could see even the buttons on the uniform of the sentry and the knots of the tent ropes.

"D'you see where they've pitched it?" said Sam eagerly.

"Why, it's near that old water-pipe thing, whatever you call it, I believe," said Stephen, "where we explored last term."

"Near it? It's right on top of it," whispered Sam—"the old Roman conduit! The tent's pitched on the round patch of flagstones where the tunnel ends. They chose it for a dry spot, likely enough. You remember our going through it just before the holidays? We— By gum, there's no time to explain it now! Come on back to camp! I'm going to see General Nugent!"

They descended the tree hastily, Stephen wondering what his brother was excited about. Then he thought he understood, and an exclamation broke from him as they set off at a run.

"Sam, d'you mean you're goin' to try to—"

"Don't talk now—hook it! You'll see what I mean soon enough."

In less than half an hour, for they had to go warily at times, the boys were back in the British lines. The artillery firing had ceased, and all was quiet.

Sam had some difficulty in seeing the general, who was in an irascible mood.

"Well, Villiers," said Sir Sholto, "what is it?"

"Can you give me and Stephen a job, sir? Our corps is wiped out, an' we aren't attached. Anything, if only we can serve—"

"Job! What job?"

"If we could scout for you, sir," said Sam eagerly. "We know the country like a book. I don't want to act without your leave; you command here, and I've been taught to obey. But only give me a chance, and I think I can bring you news worth hearing of the German camp."

The general tapped impatiently with his foot.

"What news can you get me? The position of the enemy is already known. My scouts have informed me of that, and his strength in guns. If you were a wizard, and could tell me the German commander's plans, or capture me the despatches and plans from his tent table, I might employ you," added the general, with a short, irritable laugh.

"Give me the word, sir," said Sam quietly, "and I'll do what you say. I'll get you those despatches from the German general's tent table!"

Sir Sholto Nugent stared as if he thought Sam had taken leave of his senses. A dapper young aide-de-camp, who had entered the tent, put up his eyeglass and regarded the boy with amazement.

"I'll bet forty to one in sovs. you don't!" said the aide-camp cheerfully, dropping his eyeglass.

"Done!" said Sam.

"Stop him! The boy's mad!" said the general. "He sha'n't—"

But Sam had saluted and slipped quietly out of the tent, nor did the sentry know which way he had gone.

Three minutes later he had left the British lines, and made his way rapidly and silently eastwards in the direction of the German camp.

CHAPTER 11.

In the Enemy's Camp.

Just before Sam left the last of the British lines, he stopped for a moment before a little rough sleeping-tent—called in the Service a tent d'abri—which was hung over a cord stretched between two uprights. It belonged to the smart young aide-de-camp; and Sam, with a wink to himself, entered it.

There were several rather costly-looking accoutrements on a rug at one end, and among them was a neat, little silver-plated "electric torch," or pocket-lamp, which gives a bright light on pressing a button.

Sam, on the scout's great principle of war—"take anything you want, except from the private soldier"—gleefully annexed this torch, leaving the other things alone.

"The very thing I wanted," he murmured to himself as he continued his journey. "What a blessing these swells from London are—they've always got something a fellow needs for his work. This plaything's no use to him, but once I get into the tunnel yonder—"

He stopped in his stride and faced round, hearing footsteps behind him, and Stephen ran up and overtook him.

Sam did not look pleased.

"I say! Isn't there anything I can do, Sam?" said the younger boy pleadingly. "Am I to be left out of it?"

"You can't come, young 'un! It's a one-man job. You'll be better out of harm's way."

"But I must do something! Shall I go to the German camp an' draw 'em off while you're doing your work?"

"Rot!" said Sam. "Don't talk like a kid—this is serious." He thought for a moment. "If you want a job, I'll tell you what to do—if you can. Get a couple of horses and take them to Cooper's Spinney—if you can get there without being seen. Wait in the spinney with them till I come. I don't know where you'll get the horses, but there's your job if you can do it."

"I'll steal a couple from somewhere, by hook or crook!"

"If I get away easily there'll be no need for a horse, and I shall be better without one; so in that case I sha'n't come near you. If I'm hard-pressed I shall make for the spinney. Do you see?"

"But if you're caught in the German camp?"

"Then I shall be shot!" said Sam quietly. "So long!"

"Give us your fist before you go, old boy!" was all Stephen said, though he said it rather huskily, and, after a quick hand-grip, the boys parted, and Sam made all speed on his mission.

Down the valley he went, keeping as sharp an eye about him as a fox that has stolen out of cover before the hounds have entered it. Taking advantage of every hedge and coppice, he soon made his way within a short mile of the German forces.

He came within sight of a low, brambly hillside, with furze-bushes here and there; and his eye brightened as he saw his chances were good.

A patrol of Uhlans came riding round the foot of the slope, and Sam crouched like a partridge among some briars till they had gone by. Then he streaked quietly out across the open ground and gained the shelter of the furze-bushes. From one to the other he dodged silently, for there was no saying where an outpost of the enemy might be lurking.

The Germans were active enough. Their camp was no great distance away—up the slope to the left—and they left nothing to chance. The ground was well patrolled by little parties of mounted infantry, that came past every five minutes or so. But Sam did not think much of their scouts on foot. A couple of these, in rifle-green uniforms, came through the gorse together, and nearly stood on Sam as he lay flat in a clump of scrub. He heard their gruff voices plainly.

"It won't be much longer," said one, in his own tongue. "I tell you, the general has got them cornered."

"I wish he'd start!" was the reply. "It'll be better fun, wiping up these hanged British, than potting Hottentots."

"Think there'll be any chance of loot after we've finished these fools in front?"

"May be! The Commander-in-Chief's down upon it, but our old man isn't so particular. There'll be some fun in the villages, I dare say, and we have a better chance of it than the men of the line and the gunners."

The voice died down as the men passed on, and Sam grinned to himself.

"Those are what they call scouts, I s'pose. Scouts should always go about in pairs, talkin' and makin' enough row with boots to wake the dead. Scouts—oh, my aunt! Why, they haven't even learnt how to walk quietly!"

He crept along under the ridge of a low, grassy bank, and, after a swift look round, dived silently into a mass of bushes on the hillside. He slipped between a couple of them and entered a dark, cool cavity that opened in the slope.

"This is a bit of luck a fellow can't always count on," thought Sam. "I was half afraid they might have found it."

His pulse beat faster, and the blood ran in his veins like wine. His hopes were about to be realised at last.

During the last term, Sam and Stephen, in one of their exploring trips, had made a curious discovery on this hillside. They found the old conduit, or tunnel, which had been lost sight of for years, and had made their way through it.

Sam stood in the mouth of it now. It looked rather like the entrance to an ancient sewer, but had most likely been a water-course.

Its mouth was screened by the bushes on the hillside, and it led upwards through the hill in a long curve, always well below the surface of the ground.

When they first found it, the boys procured candles and went right through it. They found it ended near the top of the slope, and its upper entrance was closed in by flagstones which were laid on cross-bars of stone.

With a little trouble, for the flags were not very heavy, the brothers had loosened one and pushed it up. They had climbed through the space it left, and found themselves in the open air again, on the flat space at the top of the hill, nearly a third of a mile from where they had entered. They replaced the flagstone carefully, and all that was then visible was the circle of ancient pavement in the open ground, half overgrown with grass, and no one else would have suspected that any opening was beneath it.

What the tunnel was, nobody knew—some professors in time past said it was a Roman aqueduct, for there are plenty of Roman relics in Essex. However that might be, there it was.

So much for the tunnel.

When Sam had surveyed the German camp that morning from the treetop, his glasses showed him something that made his heart beat quicker, and caused him to make his strange offer to Sir Sholto Nugent.

At first he could hardly believe his eyes, but it was true enough.

The German general's headquarters-tent was pitched right over the old pavement which closed the top of the aqueduct.

There was nothing very surprising in that in itself. The stone paving made the driest and most even floor for a tent on the entire hill, and so it was naturally chosen for the commanding officer's headquarters. No one dreamed that anything lay beneath, nor that it could matter if anything did. And Sam, after his journey across country, now stood in the lower entrance, prepared to stake his life on the result.

"I've got to leave something to luck," he muttered, as he left the daylight behind. "If there are several to tackle, I shall be done. If I can meet Von Adler face to face, or thereabout, I may win. Either I'll beat him or they shall shoot me, there are several chances in my favour."

The little electric lamp in the silver torch flashed out as he pressed the button, and it showed a bright light over the dark walls of the tunnel, which was paved and lined with ancient, crumbling bricks, centuries old. The space was very narrow. The height of the tunnel was not much more than five feet, so that a passenger had to stoop as he walked, and it was nearly circular in shape.

Here and there masses of brick had fallen from the roof, and had to be stepped over.

The silence and gloom of the place were chilling. Sam went steadily on, the daylight of the entrance behind him dwindling to a mere star in the distance, till it disappeared altogether as the tunnel curved round to the left. The floor sloped slightly uphill all the way, and soon Sam knew he was nearing the end.

Fifty yards or so before he reached it he came upon a great ragged stone and a heap of bricks, larger than any of the other downfalls, that had to be edged round before he could get on. Once beyond it, he soon reached the point where the tunnel ended altogether, and, glancing up, he saw the cross-beams of stone and the square flags that closed the entrance through the roof.

Cool as he usually was, a thrill ran through Sam's veins as he realised he was in the very centre of the enemy's camp. Unless he had made a very big error, he was within a few feet of General von Adler and the plans for the advance on London.

Sam hesitated a moment. He wondered whether it would not be possible to make a regular attack through the tunnel, pouring a corps of men right into the midst of the German force, and take the enemy unprepared.

But an instant's reflection showed him that was useless. Enough men could not be brought to the tunnel unseen; and a few alone would soon be wiped out by the swarming thousands of the German bivouac.

"The plans are the thing," he thought. "I must get them. And I've got to do it alone."

He took out his knife to dig away the earth round the paving-stone just overhead, and as he did so a muffled voice fell on his ear in guttural German, and he started, till he realised it came from above.

He had not expected to hear anything; but the flags were thin and loosely laid.

"Any fresh message arrived?"

A higher voice, like that of a young man, replied:

"This one, sir."

"Very well. Von Hauptmann's division is moving south. Take this written message to Colonel Sapt."

"I'm right on it!" thought Sam, remaining still as a mouse. "That must be the general, Von Adler, sending his aide-de-camp out with orders. Anyone else in the tent, I wonder?"

He distinctly heard footsteps leave the tent, and judged it was the messenger departing on his errand.

Sam at once began to scrape as silently as possible round the edge of the stone he and Stephen had pushed out when they first found the place, when another voice above made him pause.

Some member of the staff was evidently in the tent.

"A scout reports, general, that our wireless telegraphy station has been set up on Little Bently church steeple. But it isn't very satisfactory. We can't get any messages from the south and west."

"No," growled the first speaker's voice in reply, "thanks to those young devils of Britishers who blew up the Greyfriars Tower! We're badly handicapped without that. The steeple isn't high enough. That idiot Von Ralte should have shot the confounded cubs!"

"I believe he meant to do it, sir."

"Meant to! He should have done it as soon as he captured them!" growled the first speaker.

"O-ho!" thought Sam, smiling grimly, as he worked away at the flagstone. "If that's your view, General Sausage, I needn't have any compunction about doing you in the eye. If shooting kids for doing their duty to their corps is one of your amusements, you deserve all you get." He finished clearing the edges of the stone, and pocketed his knife. "I wonder if that other chap who's in there means to go?"

He waited for a couple of minutes that seemed like hours. The aide-de-camp, or whoever he was, returned, and was sent out with another message. Then Sam heard the general swear viciously.

"My scouts are a pack of fools! It's only the secret agents who are up to their work. Has Frittheim returned yet?"

"No, sir."

"Hallo!" mused Sam, pricking up his ears. "Frittheim—eh? That's our old friend of Greyfriars!"

"Let me know at once when he returns!" said the gruff voice. "He is to be ready to signal with the heliograph to General von Hauptmann, who moves shortly to take the British on the flank. Go and send this message back to our base by the field-telegraph."

To his joy, Sam heard the second man reply and leave the tent, after which there was silence.

"Now for it!" muttered Sam. "I must trust to luck for there being no one else in the tent."

He placed his hands under the loose flag, and with a slow, steady heave of his muscular arms pushed it up from its bed. What might be over it he did not know, but it moved silently enough, and Sam's head, which was just beneath, followed it.

One glance showed him how the land lay. He was emerging near the rear of the tent, and a couple of yards away a big, bald-headed man in heavily-laced uniform sat with his back to the opening stone, writing busily at a camp-table covered with papers and despatches in neat bundles.

It was General von Adler, commander of the Kaiser's Fifth Army Corps. There was no one else in the tent for the moment.

To wait was useless; nor could Sam hope to creep through and gain his feet without the general hearing him. So, with a powerful heave, he sent the stone toppling over backwards, and swung himself nimbly up through the opening.

At the sudden noise behind him the German general leaped from his seat and spun round.

A cry broke from his lips as he saw the young Britisher—an oath of astonishment and dismay—and he grabbed at a large Service revolver that lay at the side of the table.

(Another splendid long instalment of this thrilling War Story in next Thursday's number of "The Gem" Library. Price 1d. Please tell your friends about "Britain Invaded."—Ed.)

CONCLUSION.

A THRILLING TALE OF THE COAL-MINES.

By MAX HAMILTON.

The Rescue Party.

For a moment Grafton stared at the boy speechlessly; then he clapped his hand on David's shoulder.

"By Jove," he exclaimed, drawing a long breath, "I believe we shall save them, after all! Can you find your way about the old mine—I mean, do you know the spot we shall have to work at?" he asked anxiously, as an afterthought.

David nodded.

"I can find my way from the foot of the shaft to the place where I came across Markham," he replied confidently, "and it's just beyond there that the opening must have been."

"Right you are!" said Grafton joyously. Renewed hope had made him forgetful of his fatigue, and even of his hunger. "Look here, my boy," he went on, growing grave again, "you must think what you are doing. If you are going to guide a gang of men into the old mine, the matter will get to the ears of the police, and—"

"Don't think about me, sir," David rejoined quickly. "There's sixty lives at stake!"

Grafton wrung his hand; then, opening the front door, he peered cautiously up and down the street.

"There's no one in sight," he said, "so the best thing you can do will be to be off to the old shaft and wait there for me. I'll have a gang out there in less than an hour; then we'll go down, and you shall show us the way."

David nodded assent, and, turning up the collar of his coat to hide his face, quickly disappeared into the darkness.

He was soon safely out of the town, and, reaching the edge of the shaft, he sat down to await the arrival of Grafton and the rescue-party.

It had been no easy task for him to reach Wrexborough and gain access to Grafton unobserved.

He had come most of the distance by train; but he had not dared to show his face openly in Wrexborough, so had left the train at a little wayside station some ten miles away, where he was fairly safe from recognition.

The remaining distance he had tramped, taking every precaution against being seen and arrested. When night had come on, he had hung about the neighbourhood of Grafton's house until the manager entered it, when he had approached and tapped upon the window.

He knew well the risk he was running—the practical certainty of his recapture. But, as he had often told Grafton, there were sixty lives at stake, and he had not hesitated.

It had flashed into his mind, on reading the newspaper account at Leeds, that, if that account were correct, it would be comparatively easy to reach the entombed men from the old shaft; but, at the same time, he knew that it was unlikely that this idea would occur to anyone but himself.

The pit had been deserted for so long that no one in Wrexborough had any but the vaguest idea of its extent and windings.

He, and he alone, could guide a rescue-party to the exact spot at which the rock must be pierced, and he had determined on fulfilling his plain duty, though with a clear knowledge of the peril he ran in so doing.

The manager was as good as his word. In well under an hour he and a number of willing volunteers arrived at the edge of the shaft. He had said nothing to them about David until their destination was almost reached; then he turned to them, and remarked quietly:

"My lads, I told you that I knew someone who could guide us through the old shaft, and show us just where to

cut a passage into our own deep-level seam. You'll be surprised to hear who that someone is. It's the escaped convict, David Steele!"

There was a murmur of amazement as Grafton went on: "Whether he is guilty or innocent of the murder of George Scott is a matter for the law to decide, and I'll pass no opinion upon it; but this I do know, that, having got clear away, he has risked his liberty to come back to Wrexborough and show us how those sixty poor fellows can be saved!"

"Then he's a plucky chap!" said a decided voice from the group of miners; and a murmur of "Ay, ay!" followed on the words.

"Where is he?" demanded Stevens, striding forward. "I should like to shake hands with 'im!"

"He'll be waiting for us at the pit's mouth," returned Grafton.

A Momentous Discovery.

Stevens was not the only one who wanted to shake hands with David Steele. There had always been a strong feeling in his favour among the pitmen, and they were quick to see the heroism of his present action.

But Grafton did not allow much time for greeting. By his orders ropes were slung over the side of the shaft, and preparations made for the descent.

He and David were the first to go down; the others—some twenty in all—followed in quick succession.

"Now then, lad," said the manager, when they were all assembled, "lead the way!"

Picking up his lamp, David started through the disused corridors, the others following in single-file.

The boy had no difficulty in recollecting the way. The terrible events of the last visit to the old mine had branded each twist and turning of the galleries upon his memory.

Passing the stable in which Scott had been imprisoned, he kept straight ahead, picking his way over the loose stones with which the road was strewn.

"Hope the whole place don't come down on the top of us!" muttered Stevens, who was next to David, looking up at the roof. "It looks mighty shaky in parts, lad. Sure we're going right?"

"Quite sure!" David replied. "It was just about here when I heard the explosion that night, and— Hallo! What's that?"

There was a note of horrified surprise in his voice, as he pulled up short and turned the light of his lantern upon something lying stretched upon the ground—something against which his foot had struck.

"Why," cried Stevens, as he followed the direction of the boy's trembling finger, "it's a man—a dead man, for sure!"

And as the others came crowding up along the narrow passage he and David fell upon their knees beside the body which they had so strangely discovered.

It lay huddled up upon its face, one arm outflung, the other clasping something tightly to the now lifeless breast. The rigid stiffness of the man's attitude told Stevens at once that he was dead. But death could not have taken place long before, for his face, as the miner turned it to the light, was perfectly recognisable, and a simultaneous cry of "Markham!" broke from those who were near enough to see it.

"Markham!" exclaimed Grafton. "Here, and dead—for I suppose he is dead!"

"Not a doubt about it!" returned Stevens in hushed

"BRITAIN INVASED!" ANOTHER SPLENDID LONG INSTALMENT **NEXT THURSDAY.**

tones. "And what he was doing here, poor fellow, goodness only knows! Look, here's a sort of bag what he's got pressed against him. His fingers are that tight on it, I don't believe I can unfasten 'em!"

"Why, David," cried Grafton, suddenly turning to the boy, "what's the matter with you?"

For, with a low, gasping exclamation, David had reeled back against the wall. The manager imagined for an instant that he was overcome by the sight of the corpse. But it was a sudden rush of hope—not of fear—that for the moment almost deprived the boy of speech.

"Mr. Grafton," he stammered at last, indicating the "sort of bag," as Stevens had called it, which the dead man was still clutching tightly to his breast—"Mr. Grafton, that—that is George Scott's despatch-box—the one he took away from the hall—the one that has been missing since the night of the murder—the one the police believed that I had stolen and hidden!"

"Good heavens!" cried Grafton, a light breaking in upon him. "Then, Markham stole the despatch-box! So Markham must have been the man who killed George Scott! Dave, lad, you'll stand cleared before the world yet!"

Dave covered his face with his hands. For the moment he was utterly overcome by a rush of emotion at the thought of all that this discovery would mean to him; and not to him alone—to all his friends, and most of all to his mother.

After a moment or two, however, he looked up calmly.

"Hadn't we better go on, and get to work, sir?" he asked.

"You're right," Grafton returned. "We mustn't forget what we came for, and keep the poor chaps waiting in torment longer than need be. But the police must know of this at once. You go back to the foot of the shaft, Bevan, and signal to the men at the top to haul you up. Then make the best of your way to the station, and tell the inspector in charge what we've found, and he'll send some of his men to take possession of the body and the despatch-box. As quickly as you can, mind!"

"Right you are," replied Bevan; and, turning round, he soon disappeared by the way he had come.

He lost very little time in carrying out his instructions. Once at the mouth of the shaft, he set out for the town at his best pace, and within a few minutes of his arrival there was pouring out his tale to an amazed inspector.

That personage was at first inclined to be incredulous, but it was his duty to examine into the truth of the story,

and, accordingly, guided by Bevan, he set out for the scene of the discovery, more than half inclined to suspect a hoax. Very unwillingly, he descended into the pit, feeling himself a martyr in the cause of duty. But his tone changed when he stood beside the dead man, and saw the leather case held between his fingers.

"H'm!" he said thoughtfully. "There's brown marks on the leather. Looks like blood-stains. And if this turns out to be the missing despatch-box—mind, I say if—I shouldn't wonder if there wasn't a free pardon for that young David Steele!"

"A free pardon!" exclaimed Bevan indignantly—"a free pardon for what he ain't never done! I like that! Why, the whole blessed judge and jury ought to go on their knees and ask him for a free pardon!"

The inspector smiled loftily at his companion's ignorance of the inscrutable ways of the law.

"Wonder where he is, that young Steele?" he said reflectively. "He's a sharp 'un, he is, getting away like that!"

Bevan chuckled silently. He had not thought it necessary to inform the official that David was only a very short distance off.

Though he did not suppose that, after what had occurred, the lad would be greatly distressed at being arrested as an escaped convict, there was no purpose to be served in handing him over to the arm of the law, so Bevan held his peace.

The Flooded Mine—The Rescue.

Leaving the inspector to make the necessary arrangements for the removal of the body, it is time to return to the rescue-gang at their work of mercy at the extremity of the old mine.

In grim silence the toil was carried on—toil that might even now be useless, since it was probable that the entombed men had already succumbed to the rising flood. For several minutes there was no sound to be heard but the rapid strokes of the picks and the bubbling of the water; and then the foremost workers sprang back as a mass of rock, yielding to their blows and to the pressure of the water behind it, rolled forward and crashed on to the floor of the gallery.

Where it had stood showed a black, cavernous opening, through the lower part of which a torrent streamed.

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NEXT THURSDAY:

"FATTY NO. II."

A School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

Instantly the light from the miners' lamps was flashed into the opening—where, at the same moment, a drawn and haggard face showed itself. With a shout of joy, Grafton and Stevens waded and clambered forward, and, seizing the man by the shoulders, dragged him into comparative safety. Another and another followed, as the men who had believed themselves doomed a few minutes before came crowding to the hole.

Acquitted—The End.

It had been pierced none too soon. The entombed miners were standing well over their waists in the water. A very little time longer, and they would inevitably have perished. By Grafton's directions, the rescuers guided and assisted them as they emerged to the foot of the shaft, where they would be out of reach of the still flowing water.

One after the other, every one of the sixty missing men was hauled through the opening. Thanks chiefly to David's knowledge of the old shaft, not a life had been lost of the many that must have otherwise been sacrificed.

Scott was the last to make his appearance.

One of the miners had already ascended to the pit's mouth to carry the good news of the rescue to the anxious crowd that had gathered around it at the rumour that the work of digging out the entombed men was proceeding from the side of the old shaft.

When the last of the rescued men had arrived at the surface it was the turn of the rescuers; and another mighty cheer went up as Grafton was recognised, climbing out of the barrel.

Accompanying him was a slight, boyish figure, who for the moment passed unrecognised under a coating of grime and coal-dust. But not for long.

For, stepping up to one of the police who were keeping order among the crowd, and preventing them from approaching too near to the head of the shaft, the lad said quietly:

"I am David Steele, the escaped convict! I wish to give myself up!"

It was by the advice of Scott that David had taken this step.

"As soon as that is over you will be released, David," Scott had said. "To surrender to the police will only mean a few days' further imprisonment; and you will very likely be called to give evidence at the inquest, which may be an advantage to you."

Scott was right. At the inquest held a few days later on the body of the collier, David was brought from Wrexborough Gaol to give his evidence.

The first and strongest proof of Markham's guilt which had been thus discovered was a belt slung round his hips at the time of his death—a belt fitted with a leathern sheath that contained a knife. This knife, it was remarked, had evidently not been made for the sheath, and did not fit it. And it had entered someone's head to compare the latter with the weapon by which George Scott had met his death, which had afterwards been discovered in the possession of David Steele.

The result was the discovery that the one was obviously made for the other, and the practical certainty, therefore, that the knife with which the crime had been committed had been the property of Markham.

Whether Markham had simply struck Scott down in a fit of furious mania, and was therefore not responsible for his action; or whether he had met and quarrelled with his accomplice over the posses-

sion of the booty, and deliberately robbed and done him to death, could never now be known.

And the impression made upon all present by the hearing of the evidence at the inquest was that there could be no doubt that the result of the Home Secretary's attention being called to the case would be a free pardon for David Steele. So convinced were the prison authorities of this that, instead of despatching the young convict for the second time to Portland, he was detained at Wrexborough Gaol, pending instructions from the Home Office, and allowed all the privileges of which prison discipline admitted.

Nor was he long detained there. The governor himself was the first to bring him the anxiously expected news that the prison doors were to be opened to him, and that he was free to go forth into the world again without a stain upon his name.

Immediately on the receipt of the expected news the governor had sent a messenger to Scott; and ten minutes after the man had reached him the mine-owner drove up to the doors of the gaol.

"I've come to take you to your mother, David," he said.

But it was not behind Mr. Scott's spanking bays that David left the precincts of the gaol. He and Scott were seated in the carriage, it is true; but in place of the horses a score of stalwart pitmen had harnessed themselves to the shafts. It was perhaps as well that they had done so, for the thunderous blare of "See, the Conquering Hero Comes," performed by the Wrexborough brass band, as it marched ahead of the carriage through the shouting throng, might have been too much for the nerves of the high-spirited bays.

Micky Jones, it need hardly be said, was not left out of the fun.

As for David himself, his arm was nearly wrung out of the socket by the time the carriage drew up at the door of Mrs. Nichol's house, where his mother stood on the step, waiting to clasp him in her arms.

If the most eventful part of David Steele's career at Wrexborough was over, the most prosperous was yet to begin. It is owing to the mine-owner's help and advice, as well as his own hard work, that David is at present a well-known mining-engineer, who has made a name for himself in the North Country.

He has fulfilled the boyish desire with which he started out—a good many years ago now—on his lonely and almost penniless march to Wrexborough. Mrs. Steele is established in a comfortable home of her own again, and feels that her son has made up to her for all her past troubles.


Micky Jones, the former barge-boy, is now a smart grocer's assistant in Wrexborough. He is still small of stature; but he cherishes the fond belief that he has not yet done growing, and will develop some day into a fine specimen of manhood.

Strangers to Wrexborough will often have David Steele pointed out to them, and they will be told not only that the young engineer began his career as a "trammer" in Wrexborough Pit, but the stories about him that are still current in the town—his hairbreadth escapes from the mad collier and Scott's rascally brother, his trial for the murder of the latter, and his heroism in coming back to the pit to save his mates.

"Ay, he's a good-plucked 'un is David Steele!" the narrator will remark, at the end of his tale. "It's no wonder that in these parts they call him the 'Pit Hero!'"

THE END.

Will you please hand this number of "THE GEM" Library on to your friend, so that he may commence the opening chapters of "Britain Invaded."



How do you do?

WHOM TO WRITE TO: The Editor, "GEM" Library, 23-9, Bouverie Street, Fleet Street, London, who will be pleased to hear from you.

"FATTY No. II."

Next Thursday's number of "THE GEM" Library will be usual size and price: 1d.

Mr. Martin Clifford has written a splendid school tale of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's entitled: "FATTY No. II." You will find it exciting and amusing.

There will also be another long instalment of "BRITAIN INVADED."

What do you think of the opening chapters?
The EDITOR.



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You Can Choose from the following: A Ladies' or Gent's **REAL DIAMOND RING**, a Ladies' **FASHIONABLE BROOCH** set with a **REAL DIAMOND, RACE, MARINE, or FIELD GLASSES** (all as illustrated), or a Beautifully Carved **WALNUT** stained Wooden **CLOCK**, suitable for Dining Room, Drawing Room, or Hall, will be given **ABSOLUTELY FREE** to every **FIFTH** Person who sends for our Special Sale Price List, and to **EVERYONE** who sends for a Price List, but who is not entitled to a Clock, Brooch, Glasses, or Ring, we will send with Price List, and **ABSOLUTELY FREE**, a beautiful Gold-cased Gem-set **BROOCH** if the applicant is a Lady, or a Handsome and Useful **FOUNTAIN PEN** if a Gentleman. If you are entitled to a **FREE DIAMOND RING, GLASSES, BROOCH, or CLOCK**, our only condition is that you purchase goods from our Price List (either for Cash or Weekly Payments of 6d. or upwards) to the value of no less than 4/6. **REMEMBER**, even if you do not get a Diamond Ring, Glasses, Brooch, or a Clock you are sure of getting a Gem-set Brooch or Fountain Pen for your **Halfpenny** (the cost of sending) **Even if You Buy Nothing.**

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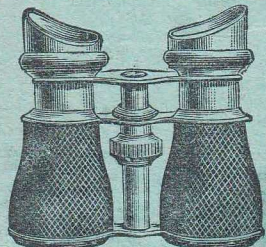
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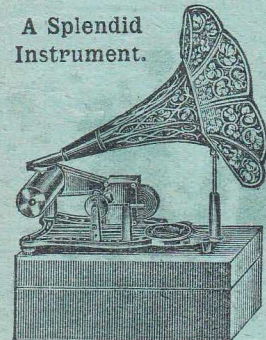
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- SUITS, 10/6. FURS, 7/6. OVERCOATS, 10/6.
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- 18-ct. GOLD-CASED WATCHES, 6/3 & 7/9. REAL SILVER WATCHES, 6/6. GOLD COMPASS PENDANTS, 4/6. FIELD, RACE, or THEATRE GLASSES, 8/6. ELECTRO-SILVER CRUETS, 8/6. TEAPOTS, 8/6. GOLD GEM RINGS, 4/6. ACCORDEONS, 5/6. WEDDING RINGS, 8/3. KEEPERS, 8/6. STERLING SILVER LEVERS, 15/6. 18-ct. GOLD-FILLED DOUBLE ALBERTS, 7/- Ditto Long GUARDS, 6/6. GOLD and DIAMOND RINGS, 7/- CAMERAS and OUTFITS, 7/-.

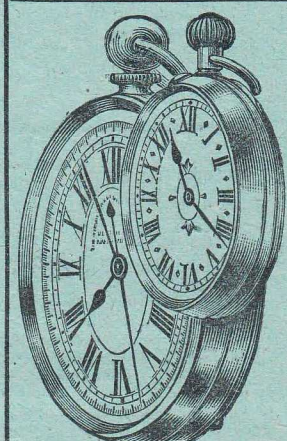


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Dear Sir,—I received the Watch and Clock in good order. I sold the Watch next day for 14/- more than double I gave for it. I have bought a good many Watches in my time, both at wholesale and retail prices, but I have never received such astounding value as you have sent. I have shown the Free Clock to several people, and they say it is first-class. Hoping to send another order before long, I remain, yours truly, G. HILTON.

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Dear Sir,—I thank you for your prompt attention to my order for the three Brooches, which arrived safely, and are quite beyond my expectations. The Free Ring which you kindly sent me is a very handsome present, and my friends whom I have shown it to are as much surprised as I was when I first saw it myself.—L. TURKINGTON.

4, Kirk Gate Street, Old Walsoken, Wisbech, June 9, 1904.

Lodge Farm, Chicheley, Newport Pagnell.

Cheshunt Locks, River Lee, Cheshunt, Herts, Jan. 3, 1905.

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