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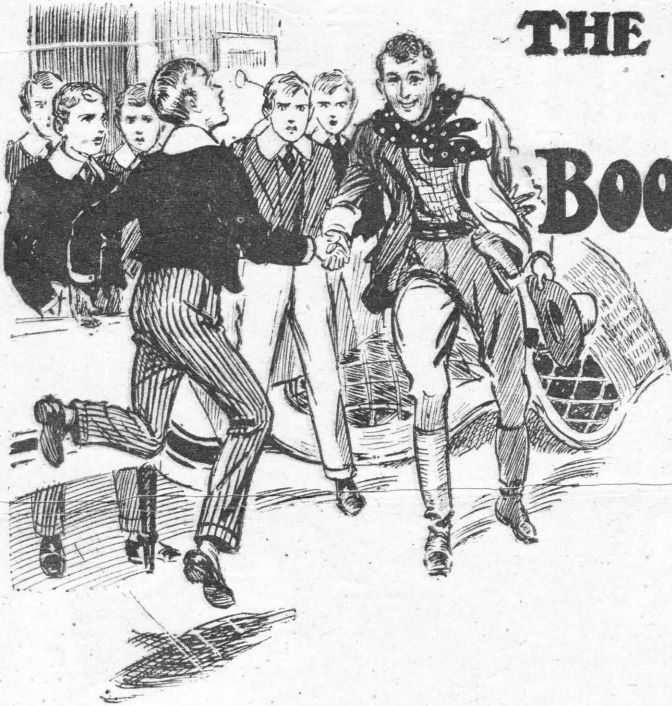
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THE ARRIVAL OF THE MAN FROM THE BOOT LEG RANCH!

(A sensational incident in this week's grand, extra-long story of Tom Merry & Co., at St. Jim's.)

ONE OF THE BEST! Buck Whipcord certainly causes a sensation at St. Jim's with his picturesque cowboy attire and his deadly six-shooters! But he speedily wins over Tom Merry & Co. to his side, for there's something about this rough-and-ready man of the plains that goes right home at first meeting!



THE MAN FROM THE BOOT LEG RANCH!

A Magnificent New Long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co., the Chums of St. Jim's, introducing Kit Wildrake's old friend from British Columbia.

BY
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

To Play or Not to Play!

"WHY the thump aren't you changed?" Tom Merry poked his head round the door of the Fourth Form dormitory at St. Jim's and asked that question in tones of great exasperation.

Kit Wildrake paused in the act of untying his shoelace. "Sha'n't be half a jiffy, old chap."

Tom Merry breathed hard.

"That's all very well," he snorted. "But you ought to have been on the ground long ago."

"I know that," answered Wildrake. "But I had some lines to hand in to Lathom, and the silly old buffer kept me chinwagging."

"Blow Lathom!"

"Blow him, bless him, burst him, if you like!" retorted Wildrake. "I'm with you!"

"Didn't you tell him you were wanted on the footer ground?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Of course I did," said Wildrake patiently. "But it didn't make any difference. And I couldn't very well walk out of his study while he was gassing to me, could I? Do be reasonable!"

Tom Merry was annoyed. It was a quarter to three—time for the match between the St. Jim's junior eleven and Harry Wharton & Co. from Greyfriars to start. And here was Wildrake not even changed. Really there was just cause for Tom Merry's annoyance, but he couldn't slang Wildrake in the circumstances. Neither could he tell Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, what he thought of him for keeping a man away from the footer ground when he was wanted there. It was quite possible—indeed, it was highly probable—that Mr. Lathom would have brought a cane into play at the mere suggestion of such a censure.

Still, facts were facts. And the important fact at the moment was that the Greyfriars fellows were cooling their heels waiting for the eleventh member of the St. Jim's eleven to show up.

"Well, get a move on!" said Tom Merry crossly. "We can't keep the Greyfriars chaps hanging about all day!"

"I'll be along in three minutes if you stop gassing," said Kit Wildrake tartly. "You're almost as bad as old Lathom!"

It was on the tip of Tom Merry's tongue to make some retort, but he thought better of it and swung out of the dormitory, leaving Wildrake to get on with his changing. The junior captain of St. Jim's felt his position keenly. He had brought a storm of criticism about his head when he had put Wildrake's name down on the list of players to

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represent St. Jim's against Greyfriars. True, Wildrake had shown great form recently, but it was difficult to make every other applicant for the vacant place in the team see that point of view. But undeniably Tom Merry was fair. He had sifted the Form of all his reserve men when Figgins of the New House had dropped out of the eleven on the eve of the match owing to a bad cold. And Kit Wildrake's claims to a place in the team had stood out prominently. Thus Wildrake's name had appeared over that of Figgins.

There was certain to be another storm of criticism from the disgruntled juniors when it became known that Wildrake, who had just scraped into the eleven, so to speak, had had the cheek to keep the team waiting. The life of a football captain was anything but a bed of roses—Tom Merry realised that more than ever on occasions such as these.

He walked out of the School House with a frown on his face and hastened towards the players on Little Side. Knox of the Sixth, who was refereeing the match, beckoned him.

"I suppose you're going to start some time?" he said sarcastically. "The Greyfriars chaps haven't come over here to admire the scenery, I suppose?"

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"We'll kick off in three minutes' time if Wharton doesn't mind waiting—till then."

"I don't mind a bit, old chap," said the captain of the Greyfriars eleven.

"It's not Wildrake's fault," said Tom Merry. "Lathom, his Form master, kept him, you know."

Wharton nodded sympathetically.

"These things will happen."

Kerr of the New House sauntered up.

"If you had played Lawrence, Tom Merry, the game would have been started by now," he said. "New House chaps don't mess about with footer fixtures, you know."

"Oh, ring off, for goodness' sake!" said Tom Merry testily. "Wildrake's late, I know, but it isn't his fault. Lathom kept him."

"Bother Lathom!" grunted Manners.

"Well, Lawrence is here," persisted Kerr doggedly. "He's changed. Why not play him and make a start?"

"Lawrence is first reserve!" snapped the junior captain.

"But—"

"Oh, dry up!" said Monty Lowther loyally. "You New House chaps are too fond of listening to your own jaw!"

Kerr's eyes gleamed.

"If you're looking for a thick ear, Lowther—" he began wrathfully.

"Rats!"

It really looked as if two of the leading players in Tom Merry's side would be engaged in a fistic encounter, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who prided himself on his tact and

judgment, hastened to pour oil on troubled water, so to speak.

"Weally, Kerr, I think——"

The Scottish junior started.

"You what?" he asked.

"I think——"

The New House junior looked puzzled.

"But how can you?" he asked. "Doesn't it require a brain to do that?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's eyes gleamed.

"Weally, Kerr!" he exclaimed with some heat. "If you think there is anythin' funnay in that wemark, I fail to see it. I wepeat, I think——"

"And I repeat," said Kerr, with a grin, "how can you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A titter of laughter ran round the footballers, and the face of the swell of St. Jim's turned the colour of a beet-root.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed. "If it were not for the footah match I should be undah the painful compulsion of administahin' a feahful thwashin'."

"Then you can thank your lucky stars that there is a footer match," muttered Monty Lowther, sotto voce.

"What did you say, Lowthah?" demanded Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, turning swiftly on the humorist of the Shell.

"I was saying it's about time that slacker, Wildrake, turned up," said Lowther innocently.

"Yaas, wathah! I weally must go and apologise to Hawwy Wharton for the delay."

And the swell of the Fourth strolled away elegantly in the direction of the Greyfriars visitors.

Meantime, Kit Wildrake was changing with feverish haste. He realised that he had let Tom Merry down in keeping the game waiting, although he was not to blame.

But at last Kit was changed.

He rushed out of the dormitory and took the stairs leading to the Fourth Form passage three at a time.

"Wildrake!"

It was Kildare's voice, and Kit Wildrake stifled his feelings as he stopped and confronted the stalwart captain of St. Jim's.

"You're wanted on the phone," said Kildare.

Wildrake's face clouded.

"Oh, hang!" he exclaimed. "I'm due to play footer, Kildare, and I've already kept the teams waiting!"

He cast one eye at the door of the School House, and then shifted his glance to the Sixth Form passage, where the prefects' telephone was installed.

Kildare read his thoughts.

"You had better cut along to the phone," he said. "It's rather important, I believe. It's your uncle from British Columbia——"

"Eh?" Kit Wildrake's astonishment was written plainly enough in his good-looking face. "But I didn't know Nunks was over here!"

"Well, you know now," said the captain of the school, with a grin. "Cut off!"

Kit Wildrake "cut off" at top speed. All thought of football had flown from his head temporarily. His mind had gone back to his early youth, spent on the Boot Leg Ranch, in British Columbia. Nunks, as he called his uncle, who owned the ranch, had been a rare old sport, and a great bond of affection existed between them. And here he was in England——

"Hallo!"

In great excitement, Kit grabbed hold of the telephone instrument and spoke into the transmitter. A familiar, deep rich voice floated back to him:

"Say, is that you, Kit?"

"Nunks!" exclaimed Wildrake joyously. "I didn't know you were in England!"

"Well, I am, sonny," came Nunks' voice. "Thought I'd spring a surprise on you, Kit! I am at Wayland Junction now, and that rascal Buck is with me."

Kit Wildrake let out a whoop of excitement at that piece of information, for Buck Whipcord was the foreman of the Boot Leg Ranch, and he had taught Kit all he knew about ranch life from the time Kit was a toddler.

"Reckon that's good news for you, sonny," said Uncle Wildrake. "Buck's fair crazy about meefin' you again! And that's why I'm phoning you, my boy. I've some business to attend to in London that'll keep me quiet for a couple of days or more, and Buck's got a job o' work to do for me in this part of the locality. I figured that you'd meet him at the station at Rylcombe. He's due to catch the connection in about two minutes. He'll explain everything to you, sonny."

"I—I——" Wildrake realised with a start that he was due to play footer.

"Reckon I didn't catch you!" came Nunks' voice. "Speak up, sonny!"

"I—I didn't say anything, Nunks!" stammered Wildrake.

"Well, you'll look after Buck and keep him out o' mischief. You can guess Buck feels a bit lost in this country. That's why I want you to meet him at the station. You'll do that, o' course?"

"Y-e-es!"

"Good! Can't stay any longer, sonny. My train to town is expected any minute. Shall be with you for Christmas, Kit, and then I guess we'll make it a slap-up reunion celebration——what?"

Nunks rang off, and Kit Wildrake replaced the receiver on the hooks. Then he stood there for a few seconds, turning the matter over in his mind. His duty to his football skipper was to turn out for the match with Greyfriars without loss of time. His duty to his uncle and his old friend, Buck Whipcord, was to make for the station at Rylcombe at once. Obviously, he couldn't do both. Really, it was an unfortunate situation.

"Just my luck!" muttered Kit, and a frown settled on his clean-cut, healthy-looking face.

"Ah, you're still here!"

Eric Kildare came into the prefects' room. "He was in a fearful stew!"

"You told him I was wanted on the phone, Kildare?"

The captain of the school nodded.

"I tried to. I said you were engaged for a few moments, and he stamped off without waiting to hear more. I believe the footer match has started. It's up to you to explain."

"Buck up, St. Jim's!"

Kit Wildrake stared as that shout penetrated the open window of the prefects' room. Evidently the game between the St. Jim's junior eleven and Greyfriars had started——without Kit Wildrake.

Kit turned to the captain of the school. "I'll cut down and explain things now," he said.

Kildare nodded, and the Fourth Form junior sped out of the prefects' room, hot foot for Little Side.

The game was in progress when he arrived there, breathless. A roar of applause went up as Harry Wharton, the captain of the Greyfriars eleven, opened the scoring with a fast ground shot that beat Fatty Wynn all ends up.

"Played, the 'Friars!"

"Wake up, St. Jim's!"

Really it was not a propitious moment for Kit Wildrake to make his belated appearance, and George Alfred

Grundy of the Shell told him so in forcible language.

"Here comes the slacker!" he boomed. "Like his blessed cheek to think that he can keep a junior match waiting!"

Kit Wildrake's face crimsoned. He scanned the St. Jim's side as the teams lined up again and saw that Lawrence had been called in to fill his place. There seemed little need to hang about the ground listening to the gibes of Grundy & Co.; his explanation to Tom Merry could keep until after the match. Besides, Buck Whipcord's train was due in at Rylcombe in ten minutes' time, and to meet it Kit would have to get a hustle on. He stood there irresolute for a moment or two, and then swung round on his heel and made for the gates.

Taggles, the porter, eyed the Fourth-Former in some astonishment as he sprinted through the gates, for Wildrake was still clad in footer attire.

"My 'eye!" exclaimed Taggles. "What's this 'ere game?"

But Wildrake did not stop to enlighten the astonished porter. He raced down the lane and then took the path through the woods, which was a short cut to the station. It was unfortunate for him that he did, for three juniors wearing Grammar School caps, suddenly barred his way.

They were Gordon Gay & Co., old-time friendly rivals of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.

"St. Jim's rotter!" exclaimed Gordon Gay.

"Collar him!" hooted Frank Wootton.

"What-ho!" grinned Monk.

Kit Wildrake stopped. He had to, for the Grammarians ranged themselves across the narrow lane.

"No ragging!" he panted. "I'm in a hurry!"

Gordon Gay & Co. exchanged grins.



"We've heard that little story before," said Gordon Gay.

Kit Wildrake breathed hard. He realised that he had fallen into the hands of the Philistines, a circumstance that called for direct action. His thoughts flew to the train, due at the station at any moment, and he clenched his fists.

"Collar him!" roared Frank Wootton. "Rag—Yaroooooo!"

The Grammarian junior had no intention of saying that, but Kit Wildrake's fist landed on his chin with terrific violence. Next moment a wild and whirling scuffle was taking place as the Grammarians closed in on their victim.

CHAPTER 2.

The Unconventional Traveller!

"WELL, my heye!" The solitary porter at Rylcombe Station uttered that ejaculation as the three-ten connection from Wayland Junction came in sight with a shriek and a roar.

"My heye!" The porter stood in petrified astonishment as the train drew to a standstill, his eyes glued to the roof of a third-class compartment. Standing on it was the weirdest passenger the ancient porter had ever set eyes on during his long spell of service.

"My heye!" Well might the porter have given utterance to that astonished ejaculation three times, for apart from the extraordinary appearance of the passenger was the fact that he had, apparently, travelled on the roof of the train. And as comfortable seats were provided in the interior of every carriage for the benefit of travellers, and the train was practically empty, the astonished porter came to the conclusion that he was at close quarters with a madman. "Git off that roof!"

The man—six foot and more of bone and muscle—who had travelled in this unconventional style, grinned down at the porter.

"I sure will, pard!" Next moment, before the amazed railwayman knew what was happening, something landed at his feet. It was a large kit-bag of stout canvas. Its owner grinned down cheerily at the prter.

"Jest keep your maws off that grip, pard. Guess I be 'long with it in two shakes!"

Whatever period of time "two shakes" was meant to cover is not known, but the owner of the grip jumped from the roof of the compartment and landed alongside the porter under three seconds.

"Well, my heye!" gasped that astonished individual. He gazed at his remarkable passenger as if he were beholding some freak from a circus. Certainly the man's appearance was unusual for Rylcombe. A wide-brimmed sombrero was pulled well down over a face that was tanned the colour of mahogany—a face that was a pleasant combination of good humour and determination. A rough scarf of a deep crimson was slung carelessly round the stranger's neck and a coarse homespun jacket failed to hide the strength of a pair of shoulders that spoke eloquently of an open-air life where muscular shoulders were as good as money in the bank, so to speak.

Having run a critical eye over his remarkable passenger thus far, the porter's attention was drawn to the broad belt that encircled his waist. Two holsters were supported from it on either hip, and from these holsters protruded the butt ends of two serviceable-looking revolvers. "Jumping jiminy!"

In his amazement the porter's scanty vocabulary imported two expressive words. His eyes nearly popped out of their sockets as they rested on those two six-shooters, for such things were only seen at Rylcombe behind the doors of the local museum.

From those fearsome looking guns the porter's inquisitive glance travelled to the coarse corduroy trousers that encased a sturdy if a trifle bowed pair of legs. Even the porter did not want telling that his passenger was used to the saddle. And finally the stranger's footwear came up for inspection. They were unusual boots, quite in keeping with the man himself, being made of rawhide and finishing just below the knees.

"Say, bo," drawled the stranger in a pleasant voice, "are you all plumb loco in this goldurned country? Heven't you spiked yore mincers on a real he-man before?"

"Eh?" said the porter, scratching his scanty locks. "What did you say?"

The stranger hitched up his trousers and jerked a gnarled thumb over his shoulder, indicating the driver and fireman

of the train. These two worthies were looking on with great interest, not having recovered from their astonishment at Wayland, where the "freak," as they had dubbed him, had entrained.

"These galoots in thet little firebox are also plumb loco!" drawled the stranger. "Guess they won't forget Buck Whipcord nex' passage!"

"Buck—Buck Whipcord!" stammered the porter.

"The't's me, pard! And what's yore handle?" The railway official felt himself hopelessly at sea in this exchange of words.

"My heye!" he exclaimed. Buck Whipcord's lined, mahogany-coloured face became sympathetic.

"Sure, if it's yore optic the't's worryin' you, pard, I'm thet sorry! Guess these crawlin' locomotives are real bad fer a man thet has to watch out for 'em all day!"

The porter grunted something unintelligible. Buck Whipcord's grey eyes lighted on the station clock. The hands indicated that it was three-fifteen. Next those grey eyes fastened on the grinning driver and fireman.

"Guess I'll do somethin' lively fer thet eye of yourn, pardner!" drawled Buck, turning to the porter again. "This blamed locomotive is already five minutes the wrong side of schedule. 'Tain't good for humanity to wait whiles two doggone hoboes give their faces a bit o' exercise!"

As he spoke Buck pulled the two six-shooters from his belt, a proceeding the porter watched with gaping mouth and wide-open eyes.

"W-w-what are you going to do with those?" Buck tossed his guns up a foot in the air and caught them dexterously.

"Reckon I'm goin' to put thet train up to schedule. Jest watch!"

With easy, swinging gait Buck strode towards the engine of the train. The driver and fireman on the box eyed him uneasily, the grins dying a sudden death on their faces.

"Say, you fire-shifters," drawled Buck, "I reckon this locomotive is five minutes late. And it strikes me thet I'm responsible. I hates to think of the folk at t' other station kickin' their heels 'cause o' me. Guess yore goin' to make up time, pronto!"

As he spoke he loosed off his guns skywards. Crack-crack!

"Mad!" gasped the fireman. "'Ere, Bill, let's get off!" "The't's the ticket!" drawled Buck. "Next time these shooters do a bit o' talkin' I guess the words'll come nearer you fellers!"

But the driver and the fireman had no further desire to linger at Rylcombe. With more haste than it had ever experienced before, the "three-ten" forged out of the station as if it were an express. Undoubtedly the folk at the next station down the line would have no cause for complaint that their train was late.

When it had steamed out of sight Buck Whipcord replaced his pistols in their holsters and grinned broadly.

"Reckon they don't know Buck!" he muttered. "But they'll sure put that schedule right!"

He strode back to his grip, and then looked round for the porter. But that individual had vanished at the first sound of shooting, and had locked himself up in the station-master's cabin. From behind the small curtain he watched the "mad" stranger like a cat watches a mouse.

"Reckon I've been asleep in me time," drawled Buck Whipcord aloud; "but this li'l old one-hoss caboose sure beats anythin' I've struck before! Where's everybody? Where's Kit? The boss said that the younker'd be here to meet me."

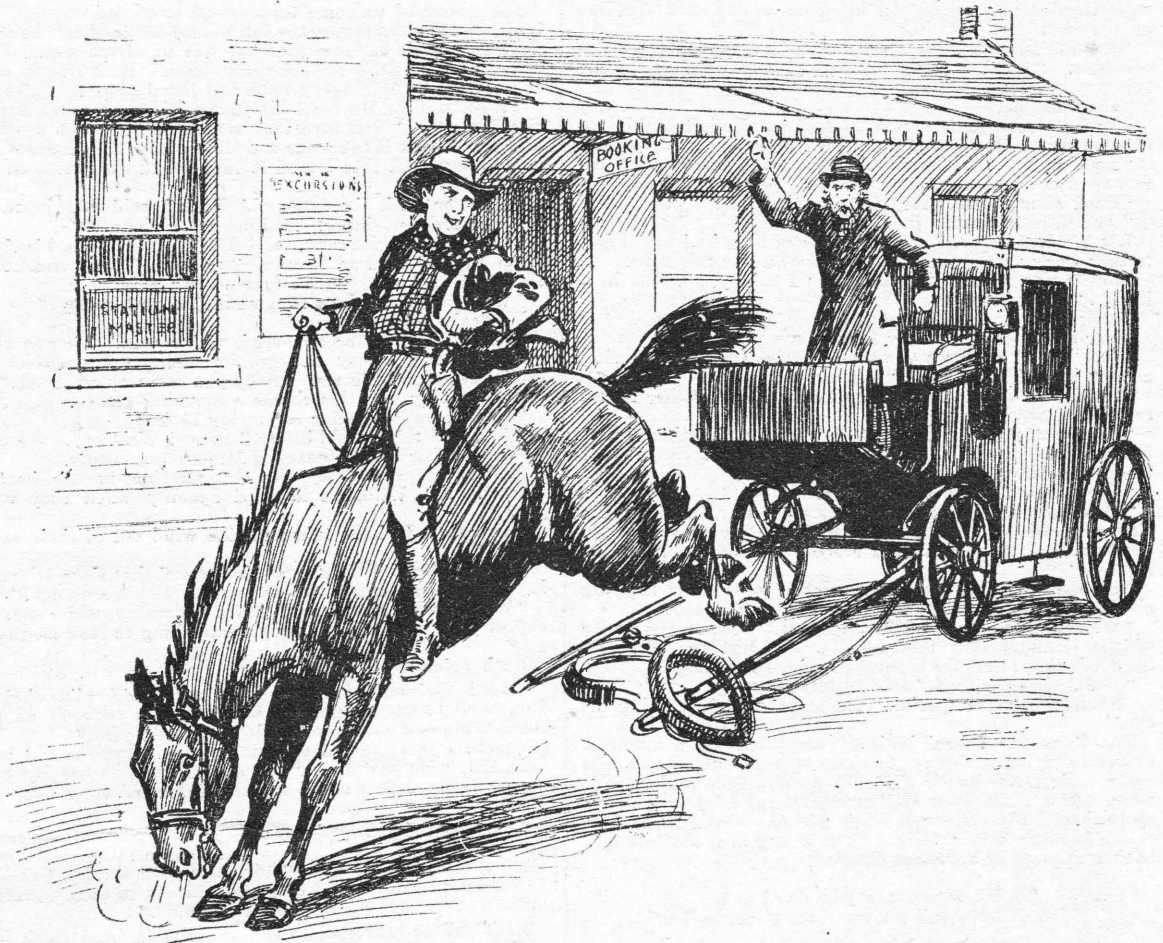
He picked up his grip, and lounged with easy grace to the station exit. Not a soul was in sight save the ancient cabman who plied an uncertain trade between Rylcombe and its neighbouring villages. At that moment he was sound asleep on the box of his antiquated cab, not even the shooting having disturbed his afternoon nap.

Buck strode up to him and bawled in his ear: "Are ye sufferin' from sleepy sickness, bo?"

The cabman passed an impatient hand over his ear as if he were dismissing a fly that persistently settled there, and snored on.

Buck regarded him with something akin to wonder. "Mebbe it's summatt in the air thet gives 'em extry doses of beauty sleep. Not that he can't do with all the beauty sleep being served out," he added. "Seems a durned pity to wake him. But I reckon I'd better borrow his nag if I want to get to St. Jim's this side o' sundown."

Without more ado Buck began to unbuckle the harness that secured the horse to the shafts of the cab—a proceeding the animal regarded with great friendliness, thinking, doubtless, that work for the day had ceased, and that he was to be led back to his stable. Unfortunately for these pleasant thoughts that roamed through the equestrian mind, Buck's next action came as a great blow.



A few futile bucks that the horse remembered from its infancy failed to unseat Buck Whipcord, and at last, with a loud neighing, the cab horse trotted off out of the station yard. The neighing awoke the slumbering cabman. He came out of his sleep, with a start, and his jaws gaped open as he saw that his horse was gone. "Hi!" he roared. "Come back! That's my horse! I'll have the law on yer!" (See Chapter 2.)

The harness being freed of the shafts and the horse led out, Buck leaped agilely on to its back. His grip was dumped across the animal's back.

"Git busy, Tishy!" said Buck, digging his heels into the animal's flanks. "You're sure a bit ancient; but beggars can't be choosers. Reckon you'll know the way to St. Jim's pretty slick, 'cos you an' me don't say good-bye till we do find the durned place!"

The horse resented the burden on its back; but it had as much chance of unseating Buck Whipcord as a cat has of jumping over the moon. A few futile "bucks" that it remembered from its infancy failed to do the trick; and at last the horse, with a loud neighing, trotted off out of the station yard.

But the neighing awoke the slumbering cabman where the shooting and the shouting had failed. He came out of his sleep, with a start and rubbed his eyes. Then he rubbed them again, and his jaws gaped open as he saw that the horse was gone.

It was not often that "Old George" bestirred himself; but he came down from his seat on the box like a monkey. Then he gasped as he saw the strange figure of Buck Whipcord astride his horse's back.

"Hi!" roared Old George, waving his fist at the departing twain. "Come back! That's my horse! I'll have the law on yer!"

Buck heard the yelling cabman, and he drew rein. "Say, boy, don't walk in yore sleep like that! I've just half-inched this nag of yours for a spell. You'll find it at St. Jim's and a ten-dollar bill with it. Is it a trade?"

"Come back!" roared the cabman.

But his voice was lost. Buck did not come back. He drew away from the station in a cloud of dust; and, wheezing like a broken-winded bull the irate cabman panted along in his wake.

Fortunately for Buck Whipcord, a sign-post lay just outside the station approach, and he grunted with approval

as he saw that one of the hands showed the way to St. Jim's.

"Hustle, Tishy!" he growled. "I'm thet impatient to meet Kit thet I can hardly sit on yore back!"

And "Tishy," who had by this time completely surrendered, pulled at the bridle and stepped out at a fine pace.

CHAPTER 3.

Obliging P.-c Crump!

"Y AROOOOH!"

Gordon Gay was responsible for that ejaculation of pain as Kit Wildrake's bunched knuckles found a billet on his nose.

"Wow!" howled the leader of the Grammarians, clasping his injured organ.

"Collar him!" panted Monk, who was also showing signs of the fray.

"You silly asses!" roared Wildrake. "I tell you I'm in a hurry! Let me pass!"

But it was too late for the rival juniors to come to terms now. The Grammarians all bore trace of Wildrake's active fists, and Kit himself possessed quite an original art shade of purple in black eyes. Doubtless the Grammarians would have preferred a truce, but in the circumstances that was now out of the question. They closed round Kit Wildrake in an avenging circle.

"Rush the rotter!" gasped Gordon Gay.

The three Grammarians came at their victim again, and this time better luck attended their efforts. Gordon Gay & Co.'s original intention was a harmless rag on the St. Jim's junior, but they had not reckoned with Kit Wildrake's resolute resistance to their charitable intention. Certainly he was giving a good account of himself. But his fists were knocked flying at last, and Kit found himself on his back

with Gordon Gay sitting on his chest and Frank Wootton on his feet.

"Got the silly ass!" panted Gordon Gay, mopping a crimson nose. "What did you want to give us all that trouble for?"

"Groooooogh!"

The St. Jim's junior scarcely had breath left in him to make a reply. He glared up at his captors.

"Look at my eye!" groaned Monk, who was nursing his damaged optic with great tenderness.

"Look at my nose!" said Gordon Gay.

"And mine!" chimed in Wootton.

Kit Wildrake forced a smile. His captors had something to take away with them whatever his own fate might be.

"Serve you right!" he gasped. "I told you I was in a hurry!"

Gordon Gay grinned sheepishly.

"Far too much of a hurry for me, my pippin!"

"But I had to meet someone at the station, you silly asses!" hooted Wildrake. "Let me get up!"

Considering the damage he had done it was rather a cool request. Gordon Gay grinned.

"You won't be fit to meet anyone by the time we've finished with you!" he said. "You St. Jim's chaps want teaching a lesson!"

"Hear, hear!" growled Wootton.

"Tom Merry & Co. ragged us the other day," said Gordon Gay reminiscingly. "Tied us up like a lot of scarecrows and marched us back to the school. We've not forgotten that—"

"Or the fact that our Form master caught us hopping about the quad like a lot of silly hens!" said Monk.

"We've got to go one better than that," went on the leader of the Grammarians thoughtfully. "Just to show you St. Jim's chaps that the Grammar School's top-dog!"

"Well, get on with it," said Wildrake coolly.

"Something extra special!" murmured Monk, nursing his eye.

The Grammar School juniors were silent for a moment, evidently trying to evolve the extra special stunt that would make their rivals at St. Jim's sit up and take notice, as it were. And while they cogitated Wildrake, lying helpless there, heard the clatter of hoofs and the sound of a voice raised in song—a voice with a nasal twang in it that brought back memories of a distant country.

"A Western sun, a goldurned gun,
A hoss, and the wurld is mine, bo."

"Buck!" exclaimed Kit Wildrake eagerly. "Great Scott!"

He struggled anew, and Gordon Gay & Co. had the greatest difficulty in keeping him a prisoner.

"Has he gone potty all of a sudden?" gasped Frank Wootton.

"Squat on his head, Monkey!"

"Yarooooh!" howled Kit, as Monk hastened to obey. "Rescue! Buck! Buck! Whipcord!"

The sound of singing ceased as Kit's repeated yells rang through the wood and penetrated to the road beyond. Next moment a bellowing roar reached the astonished Grammarians.

"That you, Kit? Hold 'em, sonny!"

A plainsman's whoop followed that message of encouragement, and Gordon Gay & Co. jumped to their feet in amazement.

Clatter, clatter!

The sound of a horse's hoofs came nearer, and then, through the thickets burst Buck Whipcord, riding Tishy without "hands." The afternoon sun gleamed on the two six-shooters he held at the ready, and a ferocious expression lined his hatchet features. Doubtless Buck imagined that Kit Wildrake was in the hands of desperadoes, as he had once been in British Columbia, for he galloped down on the party beneath the trees, the light of battle gleaming in his steel grey eyes.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" gasped Gordon Gay.

That schoolboy expression brought home to the ferocious Buck realisation of where he was. The horse was dragged to a standstill, almost slipping on its hindquarters; the pistols were returned to their holsters, and Buck slid off Tishy's back.

"Great jumping crackers!" muttered Frank Wootton, eyeing the newcomer in great astonishment. "Wh—who is it?"

"Blessed if I know!" exclaimed Monk. "But he seems to know this St. Jim's rotter!"

Kit Wildrake had scrambled to his feet now, and he advanced on Buck with outstretched hand and a welcoming smile. Buck, on his part, whipped off his sombrero and flung it in the air.

"Hurroooooo!"

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His whoop of welcome echoed and re-echoed amongst the trees, and the Grammarians felt almost inclined to put their fingers in their ears, so piercing was it. Next moment, to Gordon Gay & Co.'s further astonishment, Buck caught hold of Kit as if he had been a babe and lifted him off his feet.

"Well, Kit!" He eyed his young friend at arm's length appraisingly. "You sure look some swell in these knickerbockers. Guess it takes me a double glance to recognise the wild young buck that I used to take round the plains on me saddle!"

"But you look the same old Buck," said Kit joyously. "Same hardened sinner. And not a day older!"

They laughed heartily, and Buck set Kit on his feet. Then they seemed to become conscious of the presence of Gordon Gay & Co. Buck's face became grim.

"Were these youngers rough-handlin' you, sonny?"

Wildrake grinned.

"Not a bit of it," he answered, with a grin. "It was what we call a rag. They had got something extra special up their sleeve for little me. Lucky you came along, Buck."

Gordon Gay gave his chums a meaning glance.

"I think we had better be getting back!"

"Ahem—I think we'd better," agreed Wootton.

"It's getting late," remarked Monk thoughtfully.

And rather sheepishly the Grammarians juniors beat a retreat. Kit Wildrake laughed heartily when they were gone.

"You seem to have taken all the wind out of their sails, Buck!"

"Reckon I've bin doin' a whole heap o' that since I landed in this li' old country. What's wrong with me, sonny?"

"Wrong with you?" said Kit. "Nothing, old chap. I expect your rig-out gives people something to look at, that's all."

Buck grimaced.

"Gee! This outfit suits me better'n that stiff collar choker. I've tried to be respectable, sonny, but it tweren't no go. Buck Whipcord was never made for a town gent."

"Well, I don't care a hang what clobber you've got on," said Kit, with a smile. "It's a real treat to see you! I nearly threw a fit when I heard old Nunks' voice over the phone."

"Sure, and I nearly threw a large size in fits meself when the old boy persuaded me to pal up with that telephone. Durned queer noises started to hum in me ear, so I reckon I sold out on the spot. I don't take kindly to these scientific talkers. A hoss is more in my line, sonny."

Kit's glance travelled to the sweating animal Buck had rode up on. There was something about the horse that was familiar to him.

"You don't seem to have struck much of a bargain in that nag!" he remarked.

Buck placed his hands on his hips and regarded the animal with a quizzical smile.

"Well, I ain't exactly bought it!" he muttered. "I jest borrowed it from a cab."

Kit Wildrake started.

"Do you mean Old George's cab—at the station?"

"Don't know whether 'is name is Old George or Young George," said Buck. "But he did a whole heap of hollerin' when I took his ancient nag for a bit o' exercise."

Wildrake's face became serious.

"You haven't got his permission?" he asked.

"Reckon not," answered Buck. "You see, the old boy was asleep, and it seemed a durned pity to wake him, so I jest slipped the harness and—well, here we are!"

"George will make things pretty hot for you, Buck!" said Kit. "He's an irritable old fossil! Likely as not he'll report you to the police!"

A sound of running footsteps and heavy breathing burst upon the ears of Buck before he could make reply, and a moment later the cabman, perspiring freely, lumbered into sight. He gave a roar as he sighted his ancient horse and the tall Westerner who had borrowed it.

"Ye thievin' rascal!" he bellowed, shaking a furious fist under Buck's amused face. "Which I'll 'ave the law on yer!"

"Don't he make a pretty picture?" grinned Buck. "Reckon he'd make his pile at motion pictures down Los Angeles way!"

Kit grinned, but it faded from his face as he saw another portly figure heave in sight. It was P.-c. Crump, the village guardian of the peace. Old George saw him, too, and he waxed more eloquent than ever. In the race to recover his "stolen" horse, the cabman had encountered P.-c. Crump, and had poured out an exaggerated account of how an armed desperado had run off with his horse. The village constable had lumbered leisurely on the heels of the outraged cabman in pursuit of this daring desperado, not a little apprehensive as to how desperate the alleged robber was.

"Now, you scoundrel," hooted the cabman, "I'll give you in charge!"

P.-c. Crump rolled up pompously.

"Wot's all this 'ere?" he began officiously.

Buck, not a bit perturbed by the appearance of the man in blue, lounged with his back against a tree. He made a queer noise in his throat like the muffled clucking of a duck, and, to the cabman's further rage, "Tishy" immediately trotted over to the Westerner and rubbed his nose on Buck's sleeve.

"Hi," roared the cabman, "you leave that 'orse alone!"

Buck strolled away from the tree—and the horse followed him, as if drawn by a magnet.

"My 'eye!" exclaimed P.-c. Crump. "Do you say this

"So!" Buck's booming voice nearly made the worthy cabman and P.-c. Crump collapse. "This bag of skin an' bones, meanin' you, George, accuses me o' rustlin' his hoss. Waal, I figure it this way. That ole nag saw a friend when his lamps lit on me and came away from that cab to say howdydo. Bein' a friendly guy meself, I says to Tishy we'll take a li'l walk to St. Jim's, and I informed the guy wot owns him of me intentions. Bein' generous-hearted, I announces my willingness to pay ten dollars for that li'l walk. Did I or did I not, stranger?"

Old George scowled.

"Oh, come orf it with your airy falk of ten dollars! Dessay you'd have a job to scrap ten 'a'pennies together!" he said derisively.

CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE.

TOBOGGANING!

THE snow lies deep on the Sussex downs;
The air is keen and nipping;
No season, this, for sullen frowns,
For life is simply ripping!
"Who says tobogganning?" cries Blake,
"For this is just the weather!"
"A ripping wheeze, and no mistake!"
We all reply together.

So off we go, a cheery band,
When we have finished lurching;
The snow extends on every hand,
Beneath our feet it's crunching.
We find amusement on the way
In pelting dear old Gussy;
His shining "topper" sails away,
And he's extremely fussy!

Up to the snow-capped heights we climb
(We're dabs at mountaineering);
Blake gains the top in record time
Amid a storm of cheering.
And Baggy Trimble, far below,
Comes panting and perspiring;
For Alpine-climbing in the snow
A porpoise finds most tiring.

Sledge and toboggan, in our wake
We're resolutely dragging;
"Buck up, you fellows!" cries Jack Blake,
"Just look at Trimble lagging!"
But all are on the top at last,
And then the fun is furious;
This is a sport that's unsurpassed
(I won't saw uninjurious).

We shoot down together from the slope,
Scarves in the wind a-waving;
All hang on grimly, and all hope
Their sleighs will be behaving!
Jack Blake descends at fearful pace,
With Gussy hard behind him;
Of Baggy Trimble there's no trace—
Deep in a drift we find him!

This is the sport of thrills and spills,
We take it up most busily;
Here's to the lofty, snow-clad hills,
Down which we dash so dizzily!
When snow lies deep upon the ground,
And whitens roofs and hedges,
All cheery schoolboys will be found
Disporting in their sledges!



feller stole your 'oss? Looks to me as if you'll 'ave a bloomin' job to get it back agin'!"

"I tell you he took the 'orse out of the shafts and made off with it whiles I was asleep!" howled the cabman. "Ain't that robbery on the 'igh road?"

"Robbery in the station yard, to be correct!" said Crump, pulling out his notebook. "Which you're charged with stealing, an' making off with a 'orse, the property of this pusson!" he added pompously, turning to Buck. "And it's me dooty to warn you that anythin' you sez will be taken down and used in evidence agin you!"

After which lengthy oration the estimable officer of the law puffed out his chest and regarded the offender severely.

Kit wanted to laugh, despite the seriousness of the occasion, but he restrained himself as he caught a surreptitious wink from Buck.

Buck looked pained.

"Then you sure don't take kindly to my offer, pard?"

"Oh, cut it out!" snorted the incensed cabman. "Horficer, I charge this man with——"

P.-c. Crump held up a podgy hand and interrupted Old George's discourse.

"Which I've 'eard all that before!" he said majestically. "Now, my man," he added, turning to Buck, "I've me dooty to do! Your name and address?"

"Buck Whipcord, Boot Leg Ranch, British Columbia," rattled off Buck.

The constable started.

"Now look 'ere!" he said at length. "This is a serious matter, an' I don't want no sauce! I asked for your name and address. S'pose you're from the circus at Wayland?"

"Then there's sure somethin' a whole heap wrong with your supposer, pard," returned Buck. "Reckon ye've had my handle and locality!"

P.-c. Crump puffed out a portly chest.

"Best take you in charge," he said. "I've 'ad dealings with the likes of you before. A night in the cells'll teach you a proper respect o' the law!"

Old George nodded his agreement of that statement.

"Take 'im in, Crump," he whispered. "He looks dangerous enough!"

The village constable quite expected to see the tall, picturesque stranger crumple up, figuratively speaking, under that threat; but, to his amazement and anger, Buck only laughed. That did it! P.-c. Crump was not a man to be trifled with when "dooty" stared him in the face. Something glittered in the sun, and a pair of ancient handcuffs were held open invitingly for Buck Whipcord, presumably, to slip into. But another shock awaited the worthy constable; for Buck stepped forward, made a lightning-like move with deff fingers, and—

Click!

The handcuffs snapped home—on the left and right wrists of P.-c. Crump and Old George respectively.

"Hi!" gasped the cabman.

"Wot you doing?" spluttered Crump.

"Helping you to do yore dooty, pardner!" chuckled Buck, with a wink at Wildrake. "You're sure pinin' to arrest someone, and I hate to disappoint a man when he set his heart upon a job. You've sure got a prisoner, bo. Reckon ole George'll do as well as anyone!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Kit Wildrake.

"Take these things horf!" wailed P.-c. Crump, jumping about like a Dervish.

"Stop jerking my wrist!" bellowed the cabman.

"Blow your wrist!" hooted Crump.

"I'll biff you over the 'ead if you talks to me like that!" roared the incensed cabman.

"Oh, will yer?"

P.-c. Crump glared. In the new contingency that had arisen, the one mainly responsible for it seemed to escape his mind. He turned on the infuriated cabman with a growl.

"Which you'd threaten an ofricer of the law, would you?" he demanded.

"If you don't take these confounded handcuffs off me I'll biff yer!" exclaimed Old George, red in the face.

P.-c. Crump puffed out his chest. He had set out to make an arrest. It mattered little to him now that the tall Westerner had offended the majesty of the law. He was, Crump admitted it to himself reluctantly, a little above the estimable constable's weight. But Old George would do just as well. He had threatened to "biff" a police official. That was a heinous offence in the eyes of P.-c. Crump just then; and, besides, the handcuffs could not be unlocked until the village gaol was reached, for the necessary key reposed on the wall there. Really, it seemed a happy solution to what had at first appeared an unsolvable problem.

"Which you come along o' me!" rumbled P.-c. Crump, jerking the enraged cabman by the wrist. "I'll teach yer to threaten me, my man!"

And to Kit Wildrake's astonishment and Buck Whipcord's amusement, he proceeded to march off with his prisoner.

"Waal, this sure beats the band!" drawled Buck. "That perlice johnny sort o' tickles my fancy! Guess I'll make a present of ten dollars to him instead of that guy George."

And with a leap and a couple of strides Buck caught up with the struggling pair and slipped two crisp currency notes in P.-c. Crump's tunic pocket—a proceeding that amazed the worthy constable and doubtless prompted him to greater expressiveness in his denunciation of the wretched cabman's "crime." Really, P.-c. Crump was firmly convinced now that he had arrested the right man.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" shrieked Kit Wildrake.

"That's two good turns I've done to-day," drawled Buck as he rejoined Kit.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Kit Wildrake was nearly doubled up with laughter.

"Reckon you're tickled to death, sonny," said Buck, with a chuckle. "Waal, it's good to hear yore laugh agin.

Guess I'd better send Old George's nag along, too, or that guy in the blue reach-me-downs'll be arresting someone else."

He made that peculiar clucking noise in his throat, and George's horse whinnied softly and trotted over to him. Buck stroked the animal's ears and whispered something in them. Then he stood upright and lightly slapped the horse's flank. Whatever Buck had said the animal seemed to understand, for the cabman's ancient nag set off at a lazy trot in the wake of his master.

"Bet he'll be asleep before old George!" drawled Buck. "If I were a bettin' guy, Kit, my buck, I'd wager that ole hoss'll hop it pronto for his stable."

"And I wouldn't take your bet," grinned Kit, for he had learned from experience that when it came to a matter of handling horses there was no one in the world who could teach Buck Whipcord anything about the job.

"Is that St. Jim's, way over there?" inquired Buck, pointing to the massive grey pile that showed through the trees in the distance.

Kit nodded, and Buck picked up his grip.

"Waal, reckon you an' me, sonny'll step along lively. I've a whole heap to talk about, an' I'm feelin' durned sharp set."

And arm in arm the strangely assorted pair stepped it out for the school, the journey being punctuated by inquiries from Kit as to the state of things at the Boot Leg Ranch and the welfare of his old friends out there.

"Here, you are, old bean," said Kit at length, as the gates of the school loomed up before them.

Buck eyed the fine old place with awe and admiration.

"It's sure a dandy outfit," he ejaculated. "Who's thet fat guy in the l'le house?" he added, jerking a tobacco-stained thumb in the direction of the porter's lodge, at the door of which lounged Ephraim Taggles.

"He's a porter!"

Buck looked surprised.

"He sure looks a swell. Thought for a moment that he was a goldurned sheriff's ofricer, with his brass buttons an' thet chimney hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Guess you'd better interdoose me," muttered Buck.

"That porter guy don't look sort o' comfortable."

And without waiting for the introduction to be made, Buck strode over to Ephraim Taggles and extended a horny palm in greeting.

CHAPTER 4.

Tom Merry & Co.'s Little Mistake!

"HOWDYDO?"

"Wot?"

"Howdydo, pardner?"

"Houtside!" roared Taggles, almost overcome at the apparition that had passed through his gates.

"Clear off!"

Buck's face fell.

"Waal, I kinder reckoned you'd be friendly," he said.

"Guess—"

Taggles' lined face screwed itself up into an expression of crushing scorn.

"Which tramps ain't allowed in these 'ere precinks. Houtside, afore I puts the perlice on yer for trespassing!"

What the outcome of that "introduction" would have been it is impossible to conjecture, but Kit Wildrake dashed forward and seized Buck by the arm.

"It's all right, Taggles," he said, with a grin. "This gentleman is a very old friend of mine—"

"Which the 'Ead wouldn't like to know that you 'ad friends of that type knocking round, Master Wildrake," said the porter severely. "If you take my tip you'll tell him to keep clear of these 'ere gates in the future."

"You silly idiot!" exclaimed Kit. "He's coming in with me!"

"My heye!"

That information seemed to knock Taggles all of a heap, so to speak, and before he had time to recover from his astonishment Kit had dragged the unwilling Buck by the arm and marched him up the drive.

"My heye!" gasped Taggles. "Which I don't know wot this school is a-comin' to these days! My heye!"

"Guess I'd like to have that overfed porter on the ranch fer a couple o' months!" growled Buck. "I'd—"

Kit grinned.

"Oh, Taggy's all right," he said. "He takes his job very seriously, you know."

"Yeh! I kin see thet!" muttered Buck.

"He, he, he!"

That fat cachinnation suddenly broke in on the ears of Kit Wildrake and his Western chum as they mounted the School House steps. Baggly Trimble of the Fourth stood framed in the big doorway.

ANSWERS

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"He, he, ha!" cackled the fat junior. "Where did you pick up your pal, Wildrake?"

"Buzz off, you ass!" exclaimed Wildrake.

"Who's that fat clam?" demanded Buck, with an unfavourable glance at Trimble. "Looks as if he'll burst himself if he takes a deep breath."

"That's Trimble," explained Kit Wildrake. "He's in my study—"

Buck looked surprised.

"Pal of yours, Kit?"

Wildrake shook his head.

"No fear!" he said. "But I have to put up with him the same as everybody else, you know."

Buck looked relieved.

Kit ushered him into Study No. 2. Percy Mellish was there, and he jumped to his feet with an exclamation of surprise as the picturesque Westerner burst upon his vision. "Oh, my hat!"

Buck looked at him shrewdly, noticed his pasty face and his shifty eyes, and then shook his head.

"'Nother pal o' yours, Kit?"

Wildrake crimsoned.

"N-not exactly," he stammered. "This is Mellish. He shares the study with me and Trimble. Er—Mellish, this is a very old pal of mine from British Columbia—Buck Whipcord."

"Oh!" ejaculated Mellish.

"Shake!" exclaimed Buck, extending his gnarled fist, and unconsciously the cad of the Fourth took the outstretched hand in his own. Next moment his face became contorted with anguish as Buck gripped that limp hand and wrung it a trifle too energetically.

"Wow!" howled Mellish. "Leggo! You're crushing my hand!"

Buck released the junior's hand and grinned.

"Guess you don't know what a handshake is, bo," he remarked. "Reckon you want to git some healthy air into yore lungs and some useful flesh on yore bones. 'Scuse my plain talkin', but you look durned weedy for a younker."

Mellish nursed his damaged hand and scowled. He didn't like this outspoken pal of Wildrake's and his looks plainly showed it.

"I—I—I've got to get along and see Racke," he said lamely, making for the door.

Buck laughed heartily when he was gone, then he perched himself on the edge of the table and took stock of the room.

"Comfy quarters you've got here, sonny," he drawled. "But you Britishers ain't too fond of air, I kin see. Won't do, Kit. Ye was brought up on God's good air, and this durned room is as stuffy as the compartment I started to travel in from Wayland. Reckon they was a bit surprised to see me on top of thet train."

Wildrake blushed and crossed to the window and opened it wide. To do him justice, Kit was as fond of fresh air as anyone in St. Jim's, but living with Mellish and Trimble, two weedy slackers who preferred a stuffy study to fresh air, he sometimes found it difficult to live up to his own ideas on the subject.

"Thet's better!" drawled Buck, as a gust of sharp, cold air refreshed the room. "I kin breathe now!"

"Nunks said that you had a job to do for him down this way," said Kit. "And—"

Buck grinned.

"Sure!" he exclaimed. "Ye see, Kit, the old man's buying a place in these parts—leastways, he's got his eyes on a shanty down at Murranhurst, and he sort o' wants me to trot over for it for him."

"Murranhurst!" exclaimed Kit. "Lemme see, that's about fifteen miles from the school—on the coast?"

"Right on the target!" assented Buck. "The ole feller kinder reckoned that you would hit the trail with me to inspect this shanty. He's sort o' hankerin' to settle down in England for a while."

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Kit. "And you're staying with him, too, Buck?"

"Just as long as the ole man wants me to," said Buck; but there was a wistful look in his eyes, for he was thinking of the ranch and the cattle in British Columbia, which he loved more than anything else on earth, with perhaps the exception of the "ole man" and Kit.

"And when are you going to look over this place?" asked Kit, a trifle excited now at the good news.

"Figured it out that we'd hop 'long there to-morrow," drawled Buck. "Ole man fixed up with an automobile lay-out to send a car along here to pick us up."

"Oh, ripping!" said Wildrake; and then he remembered that Buck had said that he was "sharp-set." "I'll just trot round to the tuckshop and lay in some supplies for tea. Make yourself comfortable in the armchair, Buck. Sha'n't be a jiffy."

He drew up the armchair before the fire, and Buck

plumped his long limbs into it. Then Kit cut off to the tuckshop.

Buck sank deeper in the armchair, and pulled out a little cotton bag from his shirt pocket. From the same receptacle he produced a packet of cigarette papers, one of which he tore off. Then, with an ease born of long practice, he emptied some of the coarse leaf tobacco from the cotton bag into the paper, and speedily rolled it into the required shape. The time he took to perform this very difficult task was no longer than the average man takes to light his cigarette. A moment later the cigarette was well aglow, and a pungent aroma of tobacco smoke began to cloud the atmosphere of the room.

"Played, the 'Friars'!"

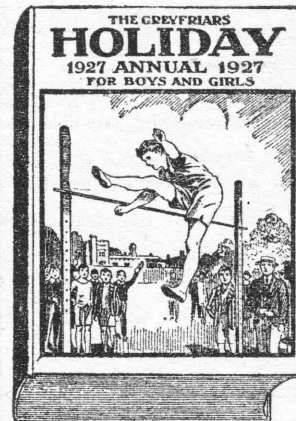
"Played, St. Jim's!"

Buck stirred in his chair as those two shouts floated in at the open window; but they conveyed nothing to him. He did not know that the St. Jim's junior eleven had been engaged in a gruelling tussle with their old rivals from Greyfriars on the footer field, or that the match had been drawn.

Buck began to doze, for he hadn't slept for twenty-four hours, and he was sound asleep when the St. Jim's footballers came along the Fourth Form passage fifteen minutes later.

Tom Merry was in the midst of Blake & Co. of Study No. 6, with Manners and Monty Lowther on either side of him. The footballers without exception were looking wrathly. The game with Harry Wharton & Co. had been drawn, for Lawrence of the New House had let his side down badly. Three chances in front of an open goal had come his way, and three times Lawrence had "muffed."

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them. So the last match of the term had ended in what was perhaps the most unsatisfactory result of any game—a draw. Tom Merry & Co. were sportsmen in the true sense of the word. They had applauded the Greyfriars efforts ungrudgingly, but the fact remained that had Wildrake turned up for the game the match would have gone in favour of St. Jim's.

Grundy & Co. had lost no time in telling Tom Merry what they thought of him for allowing a man to let the side down like that, and the general "grouse" had been passed on. And now, prompted by the wrath of his chums, the junior captain was looking for Wildrake—the cause of all the trouble.

"The rotter!" growled Blake. "He deserves a record licking for playing up like that!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I considah—"

"Oh, don't you start your chin again!" snapped Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

Study No. 6 and the Terrible Three tramped on down the passage.

"Perhaps the silly ass has some explanation," muttered Tom Merry. "It isn't like Wildrake to let us down without good cause."

Blake sniffed.

"There can be no explanation," he remarked. "Wildrake was down to play—he should have played. If you're going to listen to explanations, Tom Merry, you're a fool—"

"Rag the rotter first," exclaimed Manners, "and we'll listen to the explanations afterwards."

"If any!" said Monty Lowther sceptically.

The juniors tramped on to Study No. 2 bent on vengeance. Jack Blake kicked open the door. The juniors crowded in. The sharp, stinging odour of the tobacco smoke caught their nostrils at once, and they jumped to the not unnatural conclusion that Wildrake had been smoking. Mellish and Trimble, the other occupants of the study, had been passed in the passage, so it was not likely that either of them was responsible for the still smouldering cigarette that could be seen in the fireplace. And the big armchair, its back turned towards the door, allowed the glimpse of a head that showed just above the top of it.

"The dingy rotter!" snorted Blake.

"No wonder he couldn't turn up for the footer!" said Herries. "Smoking! This is something new for Wildrake." "And now slacking!" hooted Manners. "A lot he cares about the game with Greyfriars!"

"Tip the blessed chair over!" suggested Digby.

"Good egg!"

The juniors surged forward, and seven pairs of hands grasped the old armchair and tilted it over.

Crash!

"Hurrroooooooh!"

A bellowing roar came from beneath the overturned chair, and the juniors, for the first time, caught sight of the unusual clothes Buck Whipcord sported. Next minute the chair was tossed aside, and Buck himself scrambled to his feet, his face red and wrathful.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!"

"Bai Jove!"

"What in the name o' thunder—" began Buck; and instinctively his hands went to his hips.

Tom Merry gasped. Who the stranger was he hadn't the faintest idea, but of one thing he was certain—he wasn't Kit Wildrake.

"I—I—we—we're awfully sorry—"

"By hokey!" exclaimed Buck. "If you blamed buys think there's somethin' funny in tipping a galoot out o' dream-land, I'll durned soon show you somethin' a whole heap funnier!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy came to the front. He screwed his monocle in his eye, and his features expressed their best apologetic expression.

Buck blinked and rubbed his eyes as the elegant swell of St. Jim's stood before him.

"Pway allow me, my deah sir, to express the deep wegwets of myself and fwriends for—ahem—tweatin' you so inconsiderately."

"Great snakes!" muttered Buck, eyeing Gussy with great interest.

"You see, deah boy—I mean, you see, we—we thought it was that wottah Wildwake—"

"Ye-es, that's it," chimed in Tom Merry. "So we—we—we—"

Buck's red face suddenly softened, and he laughed heartily.

"Guess you buys were looking for Kit, eh?" he chuckled. "Waal, Kit'll be obliged that I sort o' filled his shoes for the panto 'cos Kit and me's old pals!"

"We're fwightfully sowwy"

"Aw, shucks!" drawled Buck. "I kin stand it. Guess I've made a few mistakes in me life. Shall we shake on it and call the deal square?"

"You're a sport, sir!" smiled Arthur Augustus. "I shall be most happy to shake you by the hand. I—Yawoooooh!"

All unthinkingly the swell of St. Jim's had extended a limp hand in greeting. Buck's fingers closed on it like a vice, and D'Arcy nearly jumped a couple of feet off the floor.

"Wow!" he roared. "I mean, you're cwackin' my fngahs!"

"Sure, I was forgettin' meself!" laughed Buck; and he relinquished Gussy's hand. Then he shook hands with the rest of the juniors; but they profited by Arthur Augustus' mistake, for they took good care to keep their hands in readiness for that vice-like grip.

"Now we're all fwends, eh?" boomed Buck, who had taken a liking to the raiding party.

The juniors nodded. There was something that appealed to them in that rugged, mahogany face, with the twinkling grey eyes.

"Here we are! Oh!"

Kit Wildrake burst into the study, his arms loaded with buck. But he stopped and stared as he saw the room full of juniors.

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"Here's the rotter!" muttered Blake. "I mean—ahem!—here's Wildrake!"

Buck explained what had happened during Kit's absence, and Kit remembered that some sort of explanation was needed to put himself right with Tom Merry & Co. The junior captain listened to Kit's explanation with knitted brows; but the frown died away by the time he had concluded.

"So you see I couldn't do anything to help matters," said Kit. "The game had started—and Lawrence was in my place."

"Oh, that's all right," grinned Tom Merry, relieved to find that there was a reasonable explanation of Kit's absence from the match that afternoon. "You were the victim of circumstances. I'm—we're sorry that we jumped to a hasty conclusion," he added.

"And now you chaps had better stay to tea," said Kit, with a bright smile. "I've got a heap of stuff here from Mrs. Taggles. Sausages, pork-pies, ham and tongue, and—"

"We'll stay!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We've got nothing in our cupboard except a sardine that came out of the ark."

"Yaas, wathah!"

It was a happy ending to the original intention of the raiding party. The sausages were soon frizzling in the frying-pan, the kettle was singing its pleasant song on the hob, and the juniors were all trying to make themselves useful. Chairs and crockery were borrowed up and down the Fourth Form passage, and at last Kit, looking up from the fire, with crimson face, announced that tea was ready.

"You buys sure make me feel a younker agin," drawled Buck, as he drew his chair up to the table. "I'm thunderin' glad to meet yer!"

And Tom Merry & Co. who had taken a great liking to this rough, honest Westerner returned the compliment, and fell to.

CHAPTER 5.

Knox's Little Bloomer!

"YOU buys mind if I smoke?"

Buck Whipcord leaned back in his chair and asked that question cheerily.

"Not a bit, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Aw, shucks to the 'mister," drawled Buck. "That's mebbe all right for yore scholastic bosses, but it don't cut no ice wi' me. I'm Buck to all me friends."

"Bwavo!"

The juniors liked Kit's old pal more than ever. It had been a very pleasant tea, and Buck had regaled the juniors with thrilling accounts of life on the Boot Leg Ranch. He pulled out his cotton pouch and rolled his cigarette in the twinkling of an eye. Then he lit up.

The juniors coughed a little as the coarse fumes assailed their sensitive nostrils, but they bore it bravely. Soon the study was full of smoke fumes although the window was open.

Gerald Knox, the unpopular prefect of the Sixth, who was taking an airing in the quad, chanced to look up at the open window. Then he started as he saw the curling wreaths of smoke coming from it.

"Young rascals!" he snapped. "Smoking, by thunder!"

Knox knew the scent of tobacco at once, for it was a habit of his to indulge in the fragrant weed himself in the seclusion of his study—a proceeding that doubtless would have earned him the sack if it came to the ears of those in authority.

"Caught them redhanded!" he muttered, his eyes gleaming.

The unpopular prefect was always at war with the juniors of the Fourth and Shell, and he took a malicious delight in catching them out in any little pursuit that was contrary to the rules of the school. And smoking was strictly prohibited at St. Jim's.

He stood beneath the window and discovered that the smoking was going on in Study No. 2. Then he started for the School House steps with energetic strides.

"Waal, I guess I'd like to take a squint over this school," said Buck, smiling at Kit.

"I'll show you round like a shot," said Wildrake, jumping to his feet. "You chaps will come along, too?" he added, turning to Tom Merry & Co.

"We'll join you later," said Tom Merry tactfully. "Expect you've got a lot to talk over."

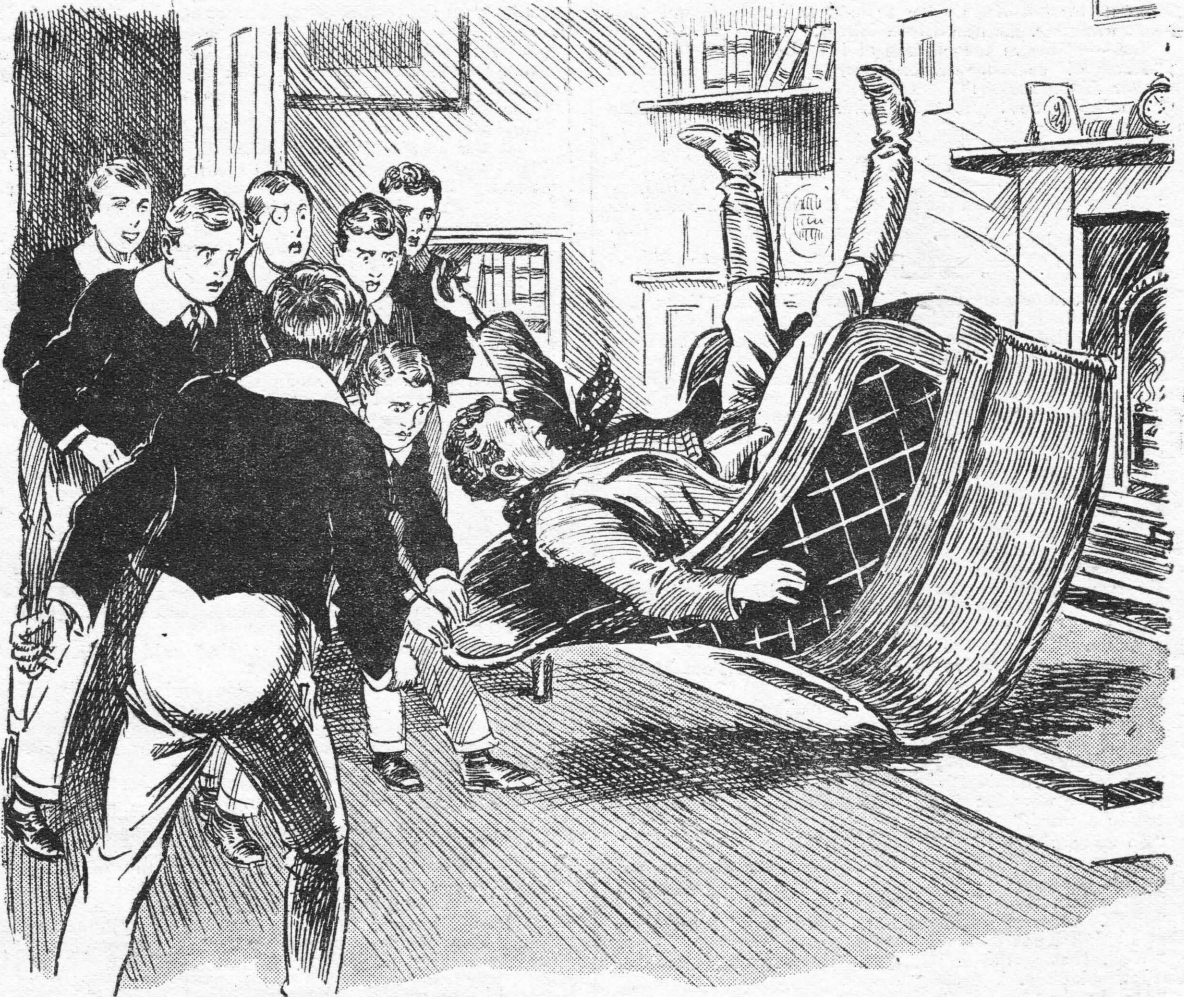
"We'll clear up the crocks," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Right-ho, then!"

Buck tossed his half-smoked cigarette into the grate, and with a wave of the hand to Tom Merry & Co., he followed Kit Wildrake out of the study.

"Phew!" exclaimed Tom Merry, when he had gone. "He's a real good sort, but those smokes of his nearly made me ill."



"Tip the blessed chair over!" suggested Digby. "Good egg!" The juniors surged forward, and seven pairs of hands grasped the old armchair and tilted it over. "Hurooooooh!" Buck Whipcord came out of his sleep with a bellowing roar, and Tom Merry & Co. jumped back in amazement. "Oh, my giddy aunt!" "It isn't Wildrake!" "Oh crumbs!" (See Chapter 4.)

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Grab a newspaper, you chaps, and wave it about," suggested Blake. "That'll clear the air a bit."

Manners and Lowther and Blake picked up a sheet of newspaper apiece and began to flourish it.

Crash!

The study door was suddenly flung open, and Gerald Knox, a malignant grin on his face, appeared on the threshold. The grin deepened when he saw who the occupants of the study were. Never in his wildest dreams had he hoped to catch out Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. smoking.

"So I've caught you!"

"You've what?" asked Tom Merry.

"I've caught you young sweeps in the act, eh?" sneered Knox. "I've had my doubts about you chaps for a long time now—"

"We've had our doubts about you ever since we set eyes on you!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That hearty burst of laughter seemed to take Knox aback. Really these juniors did not seem to be the slightest bit apprehensive at being "caught in the act." But after due consideration Knox put that down to bluff.

"I don't want any cheek!" he exclaimed.

"Well, you've got plenty!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" hooted the prefect wrathfully. "I've caught you in the act of smoking—"

"Oh!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. jumped. Knox saw the action and placed a wrong construction on it. His eyes glittered.

"You know that smoking is forbidden at the school, Tom Merry?" he snapped.

"Of course I do!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

Knox wagged a severe forefinger at the junior captain.

"Then I must say that I'm surprised to find you, Merry, a captain of the junior school, setting such a bad example," he said, with a sneer. "And you make your case worse by transgressing the rules of the school in a study which is not your own."

"I—"

"Silence!" rapped the prefect sternly. "I think it's playing it rather low down to use another fellow's study to smoke in."

"Well, you ought to know whether it's low down or not!" said the irrepressible Lowther meaningly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. could afford to laugh. They saw now that Knox had jumped to the conclusion that they had been guilty of smoking, and knowing Knox so well and his "deep regard" for them, they decided, by covert winks between each other, to let him ramble on.

"None of your cheek, Lowther!" hissed Knox. "You'll be trying next to tell me that you haven't been smoking, I suppose?"

"Oh, we shouldn't go to that trouble," grinned Monty. "It would be a waste of time."

Knox grinned.

"So you realise that," he said unpleasantly. "Good for you!"

He crossed to the fireplace and picked up two half-smoked cigarettes from it. Then he turned on the juniors.

"You will follow me to Mr. Railton!" he commanded.

"Oh!"

Tom Merry & Co. exchanged glances. They were quite prepared to pull Knox's leg as long as he liked, but they didn't want Mr. Railton drawn into it.

"But—" began the captain of the Shell.

"Enough!" exclaimed Knox harshly. "You will follow me to your Housemaster!"

"You silly owl!" roared Blake. "We haven't been smoking!"

Knox sneered.

"I've heard that tale before. Follow me!"

"But we haven't—"

"Follow me!" hooted the prefect, and he turned out of the study.

"Oh, my sainted aunt!"

"Bai Jove! The cwass ass!"

"The awful idiot!"

Those exclamations reached the ears of Gerald Knox, but he put them down to "cheek." Tom Merry & Co. were nearly convulsed with laughter. Knox had commanded them to follow him to Mr. Railton, and it was their duty to obey a prefect's order. But it was up to the juniors to save Knox from making a fool of himself, much as they disliked him.

"I'm waiting!" snapped Knox from the doorway.

"But, you awful idiot, we haven't been smoking!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You see—"

"I won't hear another word!" said the prefect.

"Oh, let him rip!" chuckled Monty Lowther resignedly.

"He's asking for it!"

Undoubtedly Knox was asking for it, but in his malicious haste to bring the delinquents before their Housemaster, common sense forsook him.

He tramped off up the passage, and with loud chuckles Tom Merry & Co. followed at his heels.

"By gad!" drawled Cardew, as he came level with the procession. "What's the giddy game, dear men?"

"Knox says that we've been smoking," said Tom Merry.

"Oh gad!"

"Caught us in the act, you know," chuckled Monty Lowther. "But if he had turned up a few seconds earlier he would have spotted the right culprit."

"But didn't you explain?" asked Cardew.

"We tried to," said Blake, "but the silly ass was so cocksure that we were the giddy transgressors that he wouldn't listen to a word."

"So we're giving him his head!" grinned Digby.

"Oh, my hat!" chuckled Cardew. "Old Railton will chew his head off!"

"Serve him right!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I must say that I think Knox deserves to be taken down a peg!"

"Well, that settles it, Gussy, if you say so," remarked Cardew solemnly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors tramped on. Knox tapped at the door of Mr. Railton's study and a pleasant voice bade him enter.

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Railton rose from his chair in astonishment as Knox strode into the study and beckoned to Tom Merry & Co. to follow him.

"I have a very serious complaint to make against these juniors," said Knox.

"Indeed!" gasped Mr. Railton.

"I found them smoking in another junior's study," continued the prefect, relishing his task.

"Wha-a-at?"

"And these two half-smoked cigarettes were in the fire-grate," said Knox, producing Buck's homemade "smokes."

Mr. Railton looked amazed.

"This is a very serious charge to make, Knox," he said. "Are you positive that there is no mistake? These boys bear exemplary characters—"

"There is no mistake, sir," said Knox. "I caught them in the act."

The Housemaster turned a very grim countenance on Tom Merry & Co.

"You have heard what Knox has said," he remarked. "I must say that I am deeply shocked and pained to find that boys in whom I reposed the greatest trust have taken to this pernicious habit."

"I think Knox has made a little mistake," said Tom Merry, acting as spokesman. "You see, sir, we were not smoking!"

Knox glared.

"Don't you believe them, sir!" he exclaimed. "I saw the smoke coming from the study window while I was in the quad, and a moment or so later I found these juniors in Study No. 2, waving newspapers about, presumably to clear the air."

"Were you waving newspapers about?" asked Mr. Railton.

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"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry truthfully. "But—"

"You see, sir," said Knox triumphantly, "they admit their guilt!"

"One moment, Knox," said Mr. Railton sharply. "There appears to be some mistake. You say that you actually caught these boys in the act?"

"Yes, sir!"

"But Merry, who is a truthful boy, has just informed me that the boys were not smoking."

"He's a lying young sweep!" exclaimed Knox.

"Kindly moderate your language," said Mr. Railton severely.

The prefect bit his lip.

"Now, Merry, will you kindly give me an explanation of this—hem—affair!"

"Certainly, sir," said Tom. "You see, Kit Wildrake asked us to tea with a very old friend of his who has come to England from British Columbia—"

Knox began to look alarmed.

"Go on, my boy!"

"And after tea, Kit—I mean Wildrake's friend—lit up a cigarette," explained Tom Merry.

Knox recoiled as if he had been stung, and his face paled.

"Go on!"

"And just before Knox came into the study, sir, Wildrake went out to show his friend over the school. The air was a bit smoky, for Wildrake's pal—he's a Westerner—was smoking some pretty strong tobacco. So we waved the newspapers about to clear the air."

Mr. Railton turned a sharp glance on Knox. That unhappy individual was wishing that the earth would open and swallow him. He realised all too late what a ghastly mistake he had made.

"We tried to explain to Knox, sir," said Blake. "But he wouldn't listen to us!"

"So I perceive," said Mr. Railton dryly. "I am quite satisfied with your explanation, boys. You may go."

Tom Merry & Co. made for the doorway, and Knox was following them when a curt command from Mr. Railton bade him stay behind.

"You have been guilty of a very grave error in bringing those juniors to me before making a thorough investigation of the matter, Knox," said the Housemaster sternly. "I must say I am surprised at you, sir. It would appear that your personal feelings overcame your sense of justice."

"I—I—I—" stammered the unhappy Knox.

"This is not the first time, Knox," continued Mr. Railton, "that I have noticed this petty tyranny over junior boys. It must stop at once, otherwise I shall be compelled to place the matter before Dr. Holmes and request him to dismiss you from your post of prefect. You may go!"

And Gerald Knox, with feelings too deep for words, crawled out of the study.

CHAPTER 6.

The Man of the Moment!

BOOM! Boom!

St. Jim's lay still and silent under the stars.

Two o'clock boomed out from the clock in the old tower, its sonorous notes stirring the sleep into which Buck Whipcord had fallen. Buck was unused to clocks that voiced their messages on the gong, and the echoing notes brought him to full wakefulness.

He sat up in bed, and his grey eyes pierced the gloom of the visitors' room. Kit Wildrake had had no difficulty in persuading the Head to allow Buck to stay the night under the roof of St. Jim's.

"Gee!" muttered Buck. "What an unholy noise to go to bed with. Give me British Columbia every time. Reckon we kin do without those plaguey noises on our ranch. Who in the name of thunder wants to know the time when he's asleep!"

He growled and settled himself again on the pillows. But he did not sleep. His surroundings were so different from what he had been accustomed to that sleep was a matter of great difficulty, especially with a deep-toned clock that boomed out with every passing hour.

The light from the moon shone in at the window, casting weird and flickering shadows on the walls. Idly Buck watched these shadows.

"Gee!"

The exclamation came from him in a tense whisper, and he sat bolt upright in bed. For these shadows that had interested him had suddenly evolved into the forms of two men. There was no doubt about it. Buck had not lived in the open all his life not to know what tricks shadows played, or how true a story they could tell to one who understood them.

And they were suspicious shadows which, taking into

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nose." "That's nothing," said the Englishman. "I was once sitting on the edge of a boat leaning against the fog when it suddenly lifted, and I fell into the water!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Harry Martin, 1, Victoria Road, Jarvis Brook, Sussex.

AMIDST THE FLAMES!

"Yes," observed a boastful business man to his actor friend, "your profession may be a very lofty one in an artistic sense, but that of a successful merchant is much better. Look at me! At the early age of forty-five I retired on my fortune, and was presented by my fellow merchants with an illuminated address! Can you boast of anything like that? Have you had an illuminated address?" "I have," replied the actor, "once." "When?" asked the merchant. "Why," replied the actor, "when my lodgings caught fire!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Miss Gwendoline M. Hogg, 3, Herondale Road, Mossley Hill, Liverpool.

account the angle of the moon as its rays shone upon St. Jim's, told Buck that the men responsible for them were only a few feet away.

Silently Buck slipped from his bed and crossed to the window. Almost at right angles were the leads of the box-room. And it was from the leads that the shadows were thrown.

"What's this little game?"

Unused as he was to the customs of St. Jim's, Buck realised that two men on the box-room leads at that hour in the morning were suspicious characters. Another glance at them confirmed his suspicions, for they wore masks.

"Cat burglars!" muttered Buck. "Reckon I've been pinin' to meet one o' them scallywags face to face, and here I've got two o' the beauties!"

He slipped back to his bed and felt for his belt and holsters. It was the work of a moment to strap them on. Then, stealthy as a shadow himself, Buck moved to the door. He was about to open it when he heard the slight patter of feet. Instantly he drew flat against the wall.

The pattering feet passed.

"They're sure some slick guys if they've managed that box-room window," he muttered. "But they haven't reckoned with old Buck."

He opened the door of the visitors' room and passed on to the landing, hardly making a sound.

A dim light below told him that the intruders were at the bottom of the staircase. Keeping well against the wall, Buck descended, his right hand resting lightly on the pistol in his belt.

A muttering of voices reached his ears.

"This way, Bill. The plan says the 'Ead's study is at the end of this passage."

Buck chuckled silently.

"So it's the Head's study, is it? What sort o' crib does he keep hangin' round for the light-fingered gentry?"

The flickering light below suddenly faded away, and Buck knew that the intruders had turned the bend in the passage. He hastened down the staircase just in time to see the dimmed lamp cast its light on the door he himself had

Do you know a good story, chums? Of course you do! Would you like a ripping Tuck Hamper? What-ho! Then send your joke along, as these other chaps have done. All efforts should be addressed: Special "Tuck Hamper Competition" No. 12, Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C.4.

TOO THICK!

An Englishman and an American were arguing as to which country had the thickest fogs. "Well," said the American, "when we have a fog you cannot see your finger half an inch in front of your

KIND OF HIM!

An old woman went up to a fish-hawker's barrow and looked at his stock with longing eyes. When the hawker asked threepence for a scaleful of selected pieces she hesitated. "Have 'em for tuppence, mum?" growled the hawker. "No, it's too much," said the woman dolefully. "Have 'em at a penny, then?" Still the old woman hesitated. There was a look of pity mixed with disgust on the hawker's face, and, turning to the woman, he said: "Here, missus, I'll turn me back while you sneak 'em!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to G. Rimmer, 96, Platt Street, Moss Side, Manchester.

NERVE!

"Sit up straight now, boys!" said the teacher to her infants. Little Tommy Jones never moved. "Tommy," said the teacher, "what was the last order I gave the class?" "Sit up," said the little one. "Well, why didn't you do it, then?" demanded the teacher. "Please, miss, I cannot sit up," said Tommy. "I can only sit down!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Arthur J. Henderson, 23, Causeway, Sheriff Hill, Gateshead, Co. Durham.

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passed through a few hours earlier when Wildrake had introduced him to Dr. Holmes.

"The crib!" muttered Buck. "Now things'll begin to hum!"

He heard the door of the study being forced, heard it swing open on its hinges. The door closed again.

Buck sped along the passage like a hare, scarcely making a sound. He reached the door and quietly turned the handle. Then he peeped in. The two masked men had lost no time. One of them was kneeling before the large safe; his companion was holding a small lamp, the light from which directed operations.

On the floor was a fold-all containing various burglarious implements, and beside it was an automatic pistol.

The burglars worked in silence. The man manipulating the implements set about his job like an old hand at the game, and in less than five minutes the great steel door was swinging open.

Buck watched in silent admiration. But he awoke to realities when the contents of the safe were hauled out.

He pushed open the door and walked in without a sound. "Say, pardners," he drawled, switching on the light, "I guess I'm real sorry to intrude!"

The men swung round, startled oaths falling from their lips. They stared with wide-open eyes at the figure of Buck, clad in a suit of borrowed pyjamas, with the broad leather belt and the holsters supported on his hips.

Then one of them acted.

He snatched up the automatic from the floor and took aim. Even so, Buck was quicker on the draw.

Crack, crack!

It was a double discharge as the two revolvers spoke. A bullet whizzed past Buck and buried itself in the plaster wall, and one of the cracksmen toppled over with a bullet in his arm. The other sprang to the window and leaped through it in the twinkling of an eye, to the accompaniment of breaking glass. True, Buck could have winged him as he went, but the Westerner had a horror of shooting a man in the back. He chuckled grimly. Then he stooped, and, picking hold of the wounded cracksmen, he dumped him

unceremoniously in a cupboard, slammed the door home, and turned the key in the lock.

"I'll be back pronto!" he muttered.

With the words he raced to the window and looked out. The light from the moon showed him the figure of the second cracksmen running across the quad. Another moment and Buck had jumped from the broken window on to the gravel below, and was racing in pursuit.

The fugitive put on a spurt and reached the school wall about twenty yards in front of Buck, but he found that wall more than he could manage in a hurry. He had secured a hold on the top of it at last, however, and was pulling himself up, when pounding footsteps told him that Buck was at hand.

Buck was.

"Git down, you poor guy!" he drawled. "Guess I could have winged you minutes ago! Git down!"

But the cracksmen appeared reluctant to obey the summons. He lashed out with his boot. Had the blow caught Buck it would have stretched him senseless, but it missed by the fraction of an inch.

"You greaser!" rasped Buck. "Don't you know when to quit? D'you think I couldn't plug you like a sieve?"

"Let me go!"

"Let you go!" said Buck. "Say, d'you think I'm doing this night shift for nuthin'? Come down, you white-livered dawg!"

He seized hold of the man's ankle and gave it a sudden wrench. There was a terrified howl, and the cracksmen dropped in a heap at Buck's feet.

"Now you bes' come 'long o' me and hev a word with that pal o' yours!"

He gripped the man by the collar and literally lifted him to his feet.

"Quick march!" he commanded. "An' no funny tricks! I sha'n't be chicken-hearted 'bout shootin' you in the back a second time!"

The cracksmen sullenly obeyed. Buck marched him across the quad and along to the School House steps. A blaze of light appeared at most of the windows at St. Jim's, for the two shots had roused the school.

Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. had hurried down at the first sounds of alarm, and Wildrake had noticed, with a certain amount of anxiety, that Buck's bed-room door was open and his bed empty.

The Head, clad in a dressing-gown, was already on the scene. His venerable old face was a picture of anxiety.

"Bless my soul!" he gasped. "Whatever has happened?"

Mr. Railton shrugged his shoulders in bewilderment. "I heard shots and the sound of breaking glass," he said.

"But—"

"Say, will some kind feller open this blamed door?"

The bellowing voice of Buck Whipcord floated in at the broken window and cut short Mr. Railton's words.

"Buck!" yelled Kit Wildrake.

Immediately there was a surge of juniors to the massive doors of the School House. In a moment or two they were swung open.

"Oh, my hat!"

Buck marched in with his prisoner, and a murmur of astonishment went up.

"Gangway, there!" ordered Buck. "This 'ere guy wants plenty of air. He's sure startled out of his wits!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors made way, and Buck passed on to the Head's study.

"Ah!" ejaculated the Head, blinking in astonishment at the masked cracksmen. "What has happened, Mr. Whipcord?"

"Nuthin' to write home about, pardner," drawled Buck. "I jest spoil these cat-burglars' week's wages, thet's all. You know, I've been thet pinin' to be interdooced to a cat-burglar that I couldn't keep out of the picture."

"Bless my soul!"

The juniors and a goodly sprinkling of seniors crowded into the Head's study. Tom Merry pointed to a strip of plaster that was hanging from the wall just beside the door.

"That's where one of the shots went," he opined.

"I had better telephone for the police," said Mr. Railton. Buck held up his hand.

"Yer might tellphone that podgy feller Blump, or Blimp, or Grump—" he began.

"P.-c. Crump," said Kit Wildrake.

"Ah, thet's it!" said Buck, with a grin. "Jest tell him thet I've two more arrests fer him, and I'll be obliged."

The juniors laughed, for Kit had told them of Buck's meeting with the village constable that afternoon.

"Two arrests?" murmured Mr. Railton. "But we've only got one man!"

Buck let out an ejaculation.

"Gee! I was clean fergettin' the other scallywag. I shoved him in a cupboard to keep him out of mischief."

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"Bless my soul!" The Head made a hurried movement towards the cupboard. The key was turned in the lock and the door was swung open. There, even as Buck had said, was the second cracksmen.

They pulled him out, and he groaned deeply and frequently.

"The man's wounded!" gasped Mr. Railton.

"Oh, guess that's only a pin-prick," said Buck. "I only winged him in the fleshy part o' the arm. But he meant murder when he loosed off on me! Don't you waste any sympathy on thet feller. I tell you he'll be eating his porridge to-morrow with the best 'o 'em."

It seemed a callous statement; but an inspection of the wound showed it to be a superficial one. The man was more scared than hurt.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart!" said Dr. Holmes cordially, as he took Buck's gnarled fist in his. "You have made light of this affair, but your timely intervention has saved me more than you can perhaps imagine. There are bonds and securities in that safe."

"Aw, cut it short!" said Buck, with a wave of the hand. "I jest did what you would have done fer me and nuthin' more."

"Ahem!" Dr. Holmes eyed the revolvers, took another glance at the two masked burglars, and, being a peaceful man by nature, wondered whether he would have done the same.

Then he turned to the boys.

"You had better get back to your beds before you catch cold, my boys. Kildare, kindly see that the lights are put out."

In a noisy, talkative throng, the juniors were ushered back to their dormitories; but it was a long time before sleep visited them again that night.

They heard a car arrive, which indicated that the police had come to take away their two prisoners; although whether P.-c. Crump was among them was not known.

When Buck strode into the Fourth Form dormitory a rousing cheer greeted him, and Kildare, who heard the row, wisely gave the Fourth Form dormitory a miss.

In fact, it was Buck who switched out the light, and his pleasant good-night was answered by every junior in the Fourth.



Buck stepped forward and made a lightning-like dash on the left and right wrists of P.-c. Crump as he was doing? spluttered Crump. "Helping you?"

CHAPTER 7.

Trimble Butts In!

"I SAY, Kit, old chap!"

Kit Wildrake quickened his footsteps.

Baggy Trimble panted after him, his fat little legs going like clockwork.

"I say, old chap!"

"Oh, buzz off!" snapped Wildrake.

It was the following afternoon, and Kit was hurrying

down to the gates to see if the car Nunks had ordered the previous day had arrived.

"I say, old chap!" persisted Trimble. "I'll come in the car, you know."

Really, it was surprising how much Trimble knew of the movements and arrangements of fellows in his Form.

"You jolly well won't!" retorted Kit, quickening his stride. "How the thump did you know a car was coming, anyway?"

The fat Fourth-Former grinned.

"You see—"

"I see a podgy, fat rotter, and his face annoys me!"



...ve with his deft fingers. Click! The handcuffs snapped home—
George respectively. "Hi!" gasped the cabman. "Wot you
yore dooty, pardner!" chuckled Buck with a wink at Wildrake.
(See Chapter 3.)

said Kit Wildrake, coming to a halt. "And when a thing annoys me, I do that!"

Bump!

Before he knew what was happening, Baggy Trimble found himself sitting on the cold, hard, unsympathetic floor of the Fourth Form passage.

"Whoooooop!"

Wildrake passed on, leaving Trimble roaring.

"Yah! Rotter!" shouted the fat junior after him. "Beast! I'm not jolly well going to be left out!"

Wildrake jumped the School House steps and swung away to the gates. It was time for the car to be there. Even as he reached Taggles' lodge there was the purr of a motor, and a big, open touring-car came to a standstill.

Kit ran forward.

"Wildrake?"

"That's the name, sir," said the chauffeur, touching his cap. "Gentleman booked the car yesterday at Wayland."

"Right!" said Kit, with a smile. "I shall be ready in five minutes."

"Very good, sir!"

Wildrake trotted back to the School House. Trimble slid from behind a buttress and watched him go. The fat Fourth-Former had heard about the car as he heard of most things, and Trimble was determined to be one of the party invited for the afternoon. There was certain to be a feed at the end of it, he reflected, and a feed was an irresistible magnet where Trimble was concerned.

"Mean beast!" he muttered, as he rolled down to the gates. "Just like Wildrake to leave his study-mate out of it! But I'll show him!"

Meantime, Kit was looking for Tom Merry & Co. A glimpse of the car had told him that it would, at a pinch, seat eight persons. And as there was no footer match for the afternoon, it seemed a ripping opportunity to give some of his friends a run out in the country, combining business with pleasure, so to speak.

Buck was all for the idea when Kit had explained it to him, his only doubt being the size of the car. But Nunks, doubtless, had the idea in view that Kit would want to take some friends on that run to Murranhurst, and he had accordingly played up trumps by hiring a large tourer.

"Hallo, old scout!" said Tom Merry, as Kit poked his head round the door of Study No. 10 in the Shell passage.

"Where's Buck?"

"He's in the study, waiting for me," said Kit. "Would you fellows care for a run in a car this afternoon?"

"What-ho!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Rather!" chimed in Monty Lowther. "Good job Manners isn't here, or he'd want to change his mind about developing his mouldy old negatives!"

"Well, if he's busy messing about with negatives and things, it will save me the job of asking him!" grinned Kit. "You see, there's only room for about eight of us—a tight squeeze at that—and I thought of asking Study No. 6 along."

"Hallo, hallo! Who's talking about Study No. 6?"

Jack Blake put a cheery face round the door of the study. Kit explained matters briefly. Jack Blake grinned.

"You can count on Study No. 6 coming along," he said.

"We were just wondering what to do with the afternoon. I'll trot round and get the chaps together."

"At the gates in three minutes' time!" sang out Kit as Blake departed.

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther reached for their caps and coats, whilst Kit Wildrake went off to meet Buck.

In the prescribed three minutes the party had assembled at the gates. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had jumped at the idea of spending the afternoon running about the country in a car, and he had informed his chums that it was necessary for a fellow to turn out suitably attired. But Blake & Co. knew their Gussy of old. If he were allowed to run through his wardrobe, it would be hours before he put in an appearance. Drastic measures were needed, and drastic measures were forthcoming. With Blake dragging on one arm, Digby on the other, and George Herries acting as rear guard, so to speak, Study No. 6 found themselves at the gates in the prescribed three minutes. Once there, Arthur Augustus was set free.

"You sillay asses!" he shrieked. "Look at my clobber!"

"Shut up, Gussy!" said Blake, with a grin. "We've done you a good turn, really. You wouldn't have been ready for a couple of hours if you had started to change that fancy waistcoat!"

"Weally, Blake," said Arthur Augustus frigidly, "this waistcoat is awful! A fellow can't go about lookin' like a wag-man!"

"Well, take it off and turn it inside-out!" suggested Herries brightly.

"Don't be widic, Hewwies!"

"Well, what's the matter with your overcoat?" said Monty Lowther. "I suppose you're not going to carry it over your arm all the way?"

"Bai Jove, Lowthah, I wegard that as a bwainy suggestion of yours!" said the swell of St. Jim's.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus slipped into his overcoat, jerked at his tie, and announced that he was "weady."

"All aboard!" sang out Kit Wildrake.

The juniors clambered into the car, and Buck made himself comfortable in the back seat between Kit and Tom Merry.

"We're going to Murranhurst first," said Kit, "to look over a house on the coast. Then we'll have tea, and make a circular tour back to the school. Ready?"

"Ay, ay, skipper!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Right-ho, driver!"

The big car swung off, and the juniors settled down to a pleasant drive through the autumn countryside. But

they had not gone more than a couple of hundred yards from the school gates when there was a thud in the road behind them and a terrific howl:

"Yarooooooh!"

The car came to a standstill, and the juniors craned their necks over the back of the car. Then they roared.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sprawling in the centre of the road in a dishevelled heap was Baggy Trimble.

The fat junior looked the picture of woe.

"Wow!" he roared. "My—my—my back's broken!"

"It's a wonder the road isn't broken," said Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It was obvious to the juniors that Trimble had somehow or other been on the car when it had left St. Jim's. And as he hadn't been in the well of the car the only possible place where he could have been was the luggage grid at the back. A bump in the road had done the rest, for the fat Fourth-Former had bounced off like a ball.

"Doesn't he look a picture!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baggy Trimble scrambled painfully to his feet and rolled up to the car.

"Beasts!" he roared. "Thought you would leave me behind, didn't you?"

"It seems that we did!" grinned Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He's a pushing young guy," grunted Buck Whipcord, who had never cottoned on to the fat junior. "Doesn't he know when he's not wanted?"

"Oh, he's got a hide as thick as an elephant's," said Tom Merry.

"Waal, I reckon he made enough row when he hit it jest now," remarked Buck. "Hi, Grimble—"

"Trimble," corrected the fat junior.

"You sure want to come 'long o' us?"

Baggy Trimble smirked.

"Of course I do," he said. "I must say I think it's rather mean of Wildrake to leave out his old pal."

"Buzz off, Trimble!" hooted Blake.

"I'm not buzzing off!" roared Trimble. "I'm coming along with this party. I know you're going to have tea at Murranhurst."

"So you know that, you fat clam, do you?" jerked out Buck. "Waal, I guess I haven't much time fer eavesdroppers meself, but if ye've made up yore mind to come, you kin come."

The juniors looked surprised. Really there was no room in the car for a fat chap like Trimble. But Buck had no intention of having Baggy Trimble in the car. He was bent on giving him a Western lesson.

"Make room, you fellows," smirked Trimble. "I'll sit next to my old pal Buck. You shove along, Tom Merry."

"Well, of all the nerve—" began the captain of the Shell.

"Jest leave this guy to me," said Buck, fumbling for something at his waist. Next moment a lengthy coil of rope came into view.

Tom Merry & Co. eyed it with interest, and Kit Wildrake smiled.

"Now, Grimble, or Blimble," said Buck, "you've invited yerself, I reckon. You kin see fer yerself, too, that there's no room for you in the car. But if you sure hanker after that feed at Murranhurst ye'd best be prepared to step lively. Drive on!" he called out over his shoulder to the chauffeur. "Dead slow."

"But I say—"

The car broke into motion, and the surprised Trimble was left about twenty feet behind before he knew what was happening. Then suddenly something whizzed through the air.

"Yow!"

A circle of thin rope shot over the fat Fourth-Former's head and shoulders, as Buck, standing up in the car, flung his lasso.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble's face was a picture as he felt the noose tighten round his shoulders. Then the rope tautened with a jerk, and Trimble found his feet meeting the roadway as if he were running on a race track.

"Stick it, Trimble!" roared the juniors, as the fat Fourth-Former panted along in the wake of the car.

"Wow! Stop the car, you rotters!"

"A little faster!" ordered Buck in the ear of the driver.

The chauffeur, who had caught the spirit of the thing, accelerated a trifle. Baggy Trimble simply had to keep moving. His face was streaming with perspiration already, and he was wheezing and puffing like a grampus.

"Stop the car!" he shrieked.

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"Save yore breth, sonny!" drawled Buck. "Ye've invited yoreself, and we're doin' the best fer you, I reckon."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were in hysterics now at the unaccustomed sight of Baggy Trimble taking exercise.

"A little faster, driver!"

"Very good, sir!"

The rope tautened again, and Trimble had to increase his speed or else be dragged along the road like a sack. He panted on.

"Wow! You rotters! Stop!"

"Keep it up, my pippin!"

"Yah! I'm dying!" moaned Trimble.

Another hundred yards was covered, perhaps the fastest hundred yards the fat Fourth-Former had ever run in his life. He had no breath to talk now, he needed all he had to keep him going. His fat little legs were going like clock-work, and the perspiration rolled down his podgy face in streams.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry, wiping his eyes. "This beats the band!"

"A little faster, driver," said Buck, with one eye on the fat junior at the end of his lasso. "A final sprint!"

The chauffeur nodded, and the car speeded up. To Trimble it seemed as if he were travelling at fifty miles an hour. In reality, however, it was about ten. But he could go on no longer. His steps were already beginning to lag and the tautness of the rope testified that he was being half dragged along.

"Waal," drawled Buck contemptuously, "I reckon that fat clam has had enough by the look o' him. It's a tidy walk home for him, I guess."

As he spoke Buck plucked a knife from his pocket and opened it with his teeth. Next moment the blade of the knife whizzed across the taut rope.

Sssssss!

There was a slight hissing as the keen edge bit through the rope, and then a snap as the final strand parted.

Crash!

Trimble, running blindly on, had not witnessed Buck's action, but he knew something had happened, for the tautened rope suddenly came back to him, so to speak, and Trimble, catching his feet in it, sat down with a bump and a roar.

"Yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wow! Yow! Grough! My back's broken!" wailed the fat junior.

But no one in the car seemed unduly upset at that piece of news, for Tom Merry & Co. roared with laughter until the tears came to their eyes.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!" roared Trimble, sitting up in the roadway and gasping like a newly landed fish. "Beasts! Wow! Rotters! Groooooh!"

And that was the last view Tom Merry & Co. had of him that afternoon, for a moment or so later the car swept round a bend in the road, and the run to Murranhurst was continued—without the fascinating society of Baggy Trimble!

CHAPTER 8.

The Legend of Drere Manor!

"HERE we are!"

The car hummed through the narrow High Street of Murranhurst, and finally came to a stop outside the dingy premises of the local house agent.

It had been a very invigorating run through the country, and the juniors had enjoyed it to the full.

Kit Wildrake and Buck jumped down from the car.

"Guess we won't keep you boys long," said Buck. "I've jest got to shake this agent johnny by the hand and get a permit to view."

"Oh, don't worry about us," said Tom Merry. "We're quite comfortable."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kit and Buck disappeared through the door of the office. A broad-shouldered man, who was evidently the clerk, attended to them.

"Guess I want to view Drere Manor, pardner, with a party o' friends," said Buck. "If it's the place I'm lookin' for we'll sure call it a deal."

The clerk looked startled at the mention of Drere Manor, but he recovered his composure on the moment and screwed up his face in an apologetic grin.

"Mr. Redknap—he's my employer—is down at Drere Manor at this very moment," he said. "At least, he left the office a quarter of an hour ago with a prospective purchaser of the property."

"A prospective purchaser, eh?" rumbled Buck, with



A circle of thin rope shot over Baggy Trimble's head and shoulders as Buck, standing up in the car, flung his lasso. "Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors. "Yow!" gasped Trimble, as he found his feet meeting the roadway as if he were running on a race track. "Wow! Stop the car, you rotters!" "Save yore breath, sonny!" drawled Buck. "Ye've invited yoreself and we're doin' the best fer you, I reckon!" (See Chapter 7.)

knitted brows. "Waal, we'll get along after that guy pronto." He turned to Kit. "The ole man's durned keen fer some reason or other to git this Drere Manor, so it's up ter me to git a move on. We'll make thet car hum some and catch this galoot Redknapp up."

Kit nodded, and explained their intention to the clerk. He bowed them out of the premises, and then went back behind his desk, a peculiar expression on his sharp features.

"Rum-looking cove!" ejaculated Buck, when he and Kit had explained to Tom Merry & Co., and reseated themselves in the car.

"Just what I was thinking," said Kit.

The driver was given orders to proceed. The car swept along the road to the cliff, and the roar of the sea could be heard.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly, as the car came to a standstill under a grinding of brakes. "We've come to a cul-de-sac."

It was true enough. The car had followed a blind road from which there was no outlet, except by the way it had come in. The chauffeur reversed, and the car was backed out of that dangerous turning until it came to a forked road.

An old woodcutter, bowed of shoulders and typical of the ancients in that part of the world, stared at the car as it came towards him as if it were some strange animal.

Buck hailed him.

"Say, stranger, kin you direct me to Drere Manor?"

The woodcutter placed his bundle of branches on the bank and came towards the St. Jim's party.

"Did ye say Drere Manor?"

"You're sure right, pardner," smiled Buck.

"Doan't 'e go there!" said the woodcutter, with a furtive glance about him.

"Eh? Why not?"

"The place be haunted this two hundred year an' more!"

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Kit. "This sounds interesting."

Buck Whipcord laughed heartily.

"Are ye tellin' me that spooks are thrown in wi' thet place, stranger?"

"Eh, but it's no jest!" said the woodcutter, shaking his grizzled old head. "I wouldn't go nigh nor by the place if ye paid me!"

"Oh, great Scott!"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "This is fwightfully intewestin'!"

The woodcutter looked at the juniors with a mournful eye.

"Tain't good for youngsters to be about Drere Manor," he said. "'Tis said by the folk about these parts that Captain 'Awk's haunted the place since he—"

"Who the thump is Captain Hawk?" said Kit.

"Ay, young master!" said the woodcutter. "He was afore your great-grandfather's time, I'm thinking, when piracy on the 'igh seas was a 'andsome living for a man with a ruthless heart."

"Piracy!" muttered Kit. "Was this Captain Hawk a pirate?"

"Ay, he was; one o' the worst this country ever knew!" said the old woodcutter. "The story they tell in these parts is that Captain 'Awk grew tired of piracy and wanted to become respectable, so he settled down at Drere Manor after he had fired and scuttled his ship with all his crew aboard her."

"The scoundrel!"

"He were that. But the bo'sun escaped, so the legend says, and, knowing o' the treasure Captain 'Awk had hidden in the manor, he returned and taxed him with it. There was a set-to on the top of the battlements, just o'erlooking the thousand steps, and both bo'sun and Captain 'Awk fell to the bottom of the cliffs, locked in each other's arms."

"Well, that's thrilling enough!" exclaimed Kit.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Wish they put that stuff into the history books instead of some of the trash they do!" granted Monty Lowther. "I'd take a prize for history then."

Some of the juniors laughed, but the seriousness of the old man's tone had a quieting effect on most of them.

"That's 'ow the legend started," said the ancient. "My gran'father told me 'isself when I was a boy, and I've seen the ghost mesself more'n once."

Buck Whipcord whistled.

"Lead me to this shanty!" he muttered. "I'm sure dyin' to git my maws on that spook!"

The woodcutter looked up at him and shook a wavering forefinger in the big fellow's face.

"Doan' 'e be so rash. The last owner of that property, Montague Hawk, perished at Drere Manor seven years ago this Christmas comin'. Folks say that the captain was seen on the battlements that night. An' next morning, when the servant went to wake his master, he was nowhere to be seen. But they found 'is body at the foot o' the thousand steps a few hours later, an' the mark of Captain 'Awk was on his 'ead."

"Mark?" queried Kit. "What mark?"

"Why, ole Captain 'Awk lost his left hand in a fight with Spaniards, and he wore a steel 'ook. An' each o' 'is victims bore a small circle on his forehead where the hook had left its mark."

"Great snakes!" whooped Buck. "This is sure the goods! Ghost, steel hook, mark of Captin Hawk, pirate! I fancy I know now why the ole man was durned keen to buy this place. Come on, boys, we must git along, pronto!"

"Ye go at your own peril!" said the old woodcutter seriously. "Leastways, I've warned you!"

"Where's the place?" asked Kit Wildrake impatiently.

The old woodcutter stretched a trembling arm towards the sea.

"Ye can walk it from 'ere in five minutes," he said. "But if you go by car it'll take you a quarter of an hour."

"Then we'll go cross-country," said Buck.

"The manor lies behind that belt of trees," said the woodcutter. "Ye can't mistake it. It's perched right atop o' the cliff, an' there's a 'undred steps from the house down to the foreshore. If ye make straight for them trees and pass through 'em you'll come out on the private road that leads to the place."

Buck thanked the old fellow for the trouble he had taken, and pressed half-a-crown in his palm. Then the party clambered from the car and set off for the belt of trees. All of the juniors were anxious to see the place now, and they discussed the legend of Drere Manor as they walked.

Buck was wildly sceptical.

"Spooks be thundered!" he snorted. "Guess that sort o' yarn cuts no ice wi' me! Still, I won't deny that I'm interested."

The belt of trees was reached, and the party were soon through it. A few more yards, and then they found themselves on a natural road, at the end of which were two massive iron gates. Beyond these, rising against the horizon, was a quaint old manor, perched right on top of the cliffs. And even from where they were the juniors could see something of the hundred steps of which the old woodcutter had made mention.

"Drere Manor!" muttered Tom Merry. "It's aptly named!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Gives me the creeps to look at it!"

The party proceeded in silence. Somehow the look of Drere Manor had a damping effect on their spirits. The big gates were reached at last, and the party passed through them.

Ghost or no ghost, it certainly seemed that the place had not been inhabited for a lengthy period, for the gravel drive was so overrun with weeds as almost to obliterate it, and the bushes on either side of the drive were sadly in need of pruning.

The roar of the sea came plainly to the ears of the juniors as they trod that derelict path, and Tom Merry unconsciously found himself shivering. He pulled his coat about him.

"Here we are, boys," said Buck boisterously, as the party reached the old oak door at the end of the drive. "Strong enough to stand a siege," he added, his eyes running over the sharpened metal studs that dotted it in profusion.

He rang the bell. Its booming note echoed and re-echoed strangely about the old place.

Then came the sound of footsteps and a creaking of a bolt. The door was opened.

A man of middle age stood on the threshold, and he eyed the party curiously.

"What do you want?"

Buck came to the front.

"Reckon I'm on the look-out for Mr. Redknap——"

"I am he," said the man at the door.

"Then shake!" exclaimed Buck. "My monica's Whipcord, Buck Whipcord, an' I'm actin' for Malcolm Wildrake."

A smile floated across the features of the house agent.

"Ah, I remember the name! Mr. Wildrake was inquiring about this property."

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"Ye're right," said Buck. "An' I've come 'long to view."

Mr. Redknap did not seem overpleased at that statement, for some reason or other, and he eyed the juniors with disapproval.

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am showing a prospective purchaser of the property over the premises now," he said, with a forced smile.

"Waal, I don't mind waitin'," said Buck. "Show the guy over, an' then I'll have a squint at it."

"Just as you wish," said the agent. "Perhaps you and your friends would fill in the time by looking over the grounds?"

"That's a brainy notion!" said Buck.

He slipped his arm through Kit's, and the party moved off through the grounds. The agent watched them for a moment or so, and then shut the door.

"Hefty-sized place," remarked Tom Merry, as the party moved off.

"Stands in a couple o' acres," Buck informed him. "But let's get a squint at these hundred steps."

The juniors reached the east side of the manor, which faced the sea. A wonderful sight greeted them. The cliff upon which the manor was built must have been eighty feet high, and from one part of the stone building commenced a broad stairway, carved in the rock itself, that wound its way down to the foreshore below.

"Makes me feel giddy to look down those steps," said Herries.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, it's a nasty drop!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

For some five minutes the juniors stood there looking down to the base of those solid cliffs. On either side of the small stretch of sand at the foot of the stairway the cliffs rose solid, majestic, and awe-inspiring, making a natural sheltered cove.

"I like the steps better than I like the house," said Monty Lowther. "It's a gloomy old place, isn't it?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Just the place old Manners would rave about if he were here," he said, with a grin. "He'd go crazy over these steps and the battlemented roof."

"And possibly break his neck trying to photograph the hundred steps on one negative."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors' laugh echoed eerily in the place as the wind caught it and swept it hither and thither against the sides of the cliffs. Then from somewhere below came a sudden squawking sound.

Monty Lowther jumped.

"What was that?"

"Seagulls," said Kit Wildrake, with a smile. "I expect there are caves at the foot of those steps, and if the place hasn't been used for a number of years you can bet your sweet life that the seagulls have made it their home."

"Let's get round to the other side of the house," suggested Digby. "I've seen enough of these giddy steps!"

"Giddy in more than one sense of the word!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

The party retraced their steps to the south side of the house, and were soon lost in admiration of the fine old building.

"If the inside o' the place is anythin' as good as the outside," said Buck Whipcord, "I reckon the ole man'll take to the place like a shot!"

Kit nodded, but neither he nor Buck had taken into consideration the fact that an interested party was being shown over the place at that moment.

CHAPTER 9.

Mr. Zolberg Clinches the Deal!

"WELL, Mr. Zolberg, you have a rival in the field!"

Mr. Redknap smiled at his client.

"You don't say?" said Mr. Zolberg, in a rich American voice. "Has he got the dollars?"

"I should imagine so," said the estate agent.

"Was that the guy who pealed the bell jest now?" asked the American, running a calculating eye over the rich furnishings of the oak-panelled library.

"No; his agent."

"Hum!"

The American was thoughtful. He was a typical member of his race, well set up, although inclined to obesity. Fifty-five years had passed him by, but his upright carriage indicated a younger man. His iron-grey hair was tidy and lent a certain point to the general set of determination and confidence that were the predominating features in his face. This was the sort of client that Mr. Redknap delighted to honour, for rich Americans, so he had read, were easy to satisfy.

"What d'you say is being asked for this li'e place?" asked Zolberg, sounding the oak-panelled walls, doubtless with the idea of seeing that they were genuine.

"Three thousand nine hundred pounds, sir!"

"That's a lot of money!"

Mr. Redknapp rubbed his hands expressively.

"Not to a rich man like yourself, sir," he made answer.

The American pulled out a couple of cigars from his pocket and handed the agent one.

"I said that was sure a lot of money," he repeated.

The agent contemplated the cigar, the ceiling, and his client's face in turn. Then he smiled suavely.

"Well, I suppose it is, sir."

"You suppose!" snapped up the American. "Have you got three thousand nine hundred pounds in your roll?"

The agent turned horrified eyes ceilingwards.

"Me, sir? Good lor', no!"

"Then I repeat, my good feller, that it is a lot of money!" said Zolberg.

"Yes, sir; of course!"

"Still, we won't haggle about that jest now," said Zolberg, pacing up and down the thick pile carpet. "I'm interested in this place, and if it suits me, I'll buy it if it cost me a million dollars!"

The agent smiled the kind of smile that was expected to follow a confidence of that sort and moved to the door.

The American, chewing and puffing alternately at his cigar, followed.

Each of the rooms on the ground floor were visited, and in each room Zolberg grunted non-committally.

Then the pair of them tramped the fine old oak staircase, which alone was worth very nearly the purchase price of the place as an antique, and the six rooms on the first floor were inspected. It was obvious that the interior of the place had been allowed to dilapidate, for the furnishings, although of good value and in good taste, were still thick in dust.

"Hum!"

The first floor being negotiated, the agent invited his client to ascend the next flight of stairs. Zolberg noted his hesitancy in following, but said nothing.

The second floor was inspected, and the same non-committal grunt escaped between the American's lips and his cigar.

"Do you want to see the next floor?" asked the agent, with a sickly smile.

The American glared at him.

"Of course I do! D'you think Silas P. Zolberg buys without seein' what he's gettin'?"

"After you, sir!" said the agent, with a sweep of the arm, indicating the next flight of stairs.

The American chewed his cigar viciously, and eyed Mr. Redknapp through narrower lips.

"Why, man," he hooted, "ye're shaking like a jelly! What's wrong with you?"

"It's my heart," said the agent, with a furtive glance round. "It's—"

"That confounded rot about the ghost!" snorted Zolberg, with a scornful laugh. "Do you think I don't know about it?"

The agent straightened up.

"Really, sir—"

The American waved a large size in hands, from the little finger of which glittered a diamond of rare worth, in front of the agent's face.

"I know you're scared about this place, Redknapp," he said. "D'you think Silas P. Zolberg, King o' the Waste Silk Trade, don't know all about his goods when he sets out to buy. My private inquiry agent put me wise to this place by cable—by cable, sir"—as if to impress upon the unfortunate Redknapp's mind that a cable cost a heap of money—and he's learnt from the village folk round here that the durned place is haunted, and that you were afraid to go higher than the second floor when you showed any feller over the premises!"

"Oh!" gasped the agent. "Your man found out that, did he?"

"Yep! That's what I pay him for. And I'll tell you this, Redknapp," added the American. "I commissioned my man to look round every place in England that was alleged to be haunted."

The estate agent thought he was dealing with a madman, but he refrained from making any comment. His chief desire was to get out of the manor as quickly as possible.

"D-did you, really?"

The American chewed away fiercely at his cigar.

"I guess I did, Redknapp. 'Cause why? 'Cause Silas P. Zolberg fancies his chances living in a real live English house with a ghost thrown in! 'Cause the said Silas P. don't care a rap of the fingers for the best ghost ever made! Now you know!"

(Continued overleaf.)



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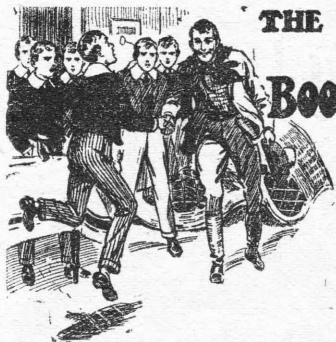
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(Continued
from
page
19.)

Mr. Rednap forced a feeble grin, but he refused to budge from his position at the foot of the stairs.

"You needn't bother to come up these stairs," said Zolberg. "I'll go myself. I'd like to see the ghost that would scare Silas P. Zolberg."

"I'll wait for you in the library below, sir," said Rednap. The American trod the next staircase laboriously, for he was a trifle out of breath. But he reached the landing at last, and muttered something uncomplimentary about the darkness that reigned there.

The landing was in deep shadow at any time of the day, and now, with the early dusk setting in it was gloomier than ever. Instinctively Zolberg felt for the electric light switch. He found it after a few seconds' fumbling, and blinked in the unaccustomed glare.

It was a large landing, almost as large as the hall on the ground floor. Three huge oil paintings, six feet square, graced the three walls, and at first sight of them Silas P. Zolberg nearly jumped out of his skin. Each of the paintings was a portrait of some bygone owner of the house, it was to be presumed, for a strong likeness could be observed in the features of all three. But it was the dress and pose of one that took the American aback, for it showed a big, fierce-looking fellow, in old-time seafaring costume, with a bloodstained cutlass in his right hand, and where his left hand would have been was a sharp-pointed steel hook.

"Gee! That's some painting!" said the American, taking a deep breath. "Took me all of a sudden. S'pose that's Captain Hawk, the pirate!"

He looked long at the picture, quite unperturbed by thoughts of the legend attached to Captain Hawk, and then he moved off into the rooms adjoining the landing. His visit of inspection over, he switched out the light and descended the stairs.

Mr. Rednap looked quite relieved when he saw his client.

"Why, man," exclaimed Zolberg, "you look durned surprised to see me!"

"I'm very pleased to see you," said the agent.

"You're thinking of the feller you once showed over the premises who's now paying for his bad nerves in a lunatic asylum, I fancy."

The agent looked astonished.

"How did you know that, sir?"

"My private inquiry agent earns his money," smiled Mr. Zolberg. "Savvy?"

Apparently Zolberg's agent was a painstaking fellow, for Rednap's fear of the place had started from the day, two

years ago, when he had shown a prospective purchaser over the property. The agent was still haunted by the terrible scream that reached him as he, in the library, attended to some papers affecting the purchase. The client on that occasion had jumped the stairs as if a thousand demons were at his heels, and from that day to this had spent his time in an asylum.

"Well, I like this property," said Zolberg, "and I'm willing to pay your price."

Rednap rubbed his hands, only too pleased to think that the place was off his hands at last, and, doubtless, thinking of his handsome commission.

The American, still chewing at the end of his cigar, sat down at the library table, and drew a cheque-book from his pocket.

The amount was filled in and duly signed, and Mr. Rednap pocketed the cheque with a great show of pleasure.

Silas P. Zolberg got to his feet.

"I think I'll stay here for the night," he confided to the agent. "It's a long journey to town, and my family'll be down here to-morrow if I send 'em a wire saying I've got this place. Might just as well stay here as anywhere else."

The agent shrugged his shoulders. Now that the cheque for the property reposed in his pocket he cared little what the American gentleman did. One thing he was certain of himself was that he had no intention of offering to keep Silas P. Zolberg company for the night.

"I hope you'll be comfortable, sir," he said, with a nervous smile.

"Oh, you leave that to me!" smiled the American genially. "We know how to look after ourselves in my country. Good-afternoon!"

"Good-afternoon!" replied the agent, and he hurried from the house as if it were the plague, quite forgetful of the fact that another prospective purchaser, in the shape of Buck Whipcord, was hanging around the grounds waiting for the tip to come in.

CHAPTER 10.

The New Tenant!

"WELL, I'm jiggered!"

That exclamation escaped Tom Merry's lips as he looked out from the shrubbery in the grounds of Drere Manor, and saw the estate agent striding along the weed-covered drive.

"What's up, Tom?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Why, that rotter's clearing off!" said the junior captain of St. Jim's, bringing Lowther's vision in a line with his own.

"So it seems," muttered Monty. "He's forgotten little us."

The news was passed back to Buck Whipcord, who was examining a fine old piece of stone carving in a miniature lake a few yards away.

"He's quit, has he!" roared Buck. "By thunder—"

He broke off as a light flashed on in the library of the house.

"Ye've made a mistake, Tom," he said, with a grin. "See, a light's just been turned on in the house!"

"Well, I expect the tenant chap's done that," replied Tom. "The agent was on his own when I saw him."

"Perhaps the chap he was showing over the place has bought it," suggested Kit.

Buck gave a snort of wrath.

"Bought it!" he exclaimed. "I'm buyin' this place for the ole man!"

"But if the chap before us liked it and gave his cheque for it, what then?" asked Kit.

"Admit thet thet's a bit o' a quandary. Still, I'll durned soon make sure. Jest cool yore heels here a bit whiles I give a jerk to that goldurned bell!"

He strode off, and rang a violent summons on the bell at the front door.

The door opened a few moments later, and Silas P. Zolberg peered out.

"What d'you want?"

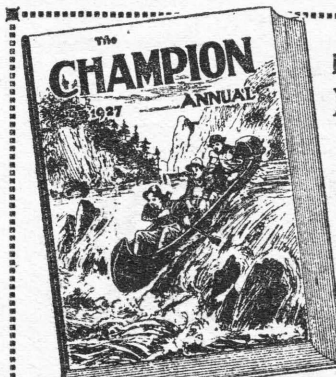
"Reckon I want to set my eyes on the durned agent guy who told me to wait in the grounds. One o' my pals tells me thet he's just shemozzled!"

"You mean Mr. Rednap?" asked Zolberg, eyeing Buck unfavourably.

"Who else in the name o' thunder d'you think I mean?" "Waal," drawled Zolberg, "you'll find him in his estate office down Murranhurst village. You won't see him hyer any more, 'cause I just purchased this property from him!"

Buck growled. For some reason or other Malcolm Wildrake was mighty keen to take Drere Manor, but Buck realised that this American with the heavy diamond ring on his finger had got there before him.

"Waal, I wish you joy of it, pardner," said Buck, with a



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smile. "I was durned keen to grip this place meself! S'long!"

And he walked back to the boys and told them what had happened.

"Sorry I've wasted your time," said Buck, in conclusion.

"No waste of time," said Tom Merry, as spokesman.

"We've enjoyed it no end, haven't we, chaps!"

"Rather!"

"Reckon it's mighty near time we shifted that tea you spoke of, Kit," said Buck, as the party retraced their footsteps along the drive.

Kit Wildrake nodded.

"Just what I was thinking."

They passed through the old iron gates of the manor, Kit stopping to take a last look at the place. Then he started.

Something, some figure, ghost-like and vapoury, seemed to be outlined for a moment against the sky, on a level with the battlements!

"Come here!" shouted Kit. "Look, you chaps!"

The juniors, with Buck in the lead, rushed back.

"Huly gee!" roared Buck, as he followed Kit's extended finger.

"A ghost? Where? D'you mean that blurred shadow?"

"It's not a shadow," panted Kit, his eyes gleaming.

"Look, it's moving!"

"Blamed if I can see anything!" growled Buck, and Tom Merry & Co., although they strained their eyes, saw nothing save the gathering shadows of dusk.

Buck dragged a six-shooter from his holster.

"I dunno whether a fellow is entitled to shoot a few slugs at 'nother guy's ghost," he growled.

"But if anythin' creeps 'long the roof agin it'll be mighty sorry by the time I've done a li'lle targit practice."

"Don't be a fool, Buck!" said Kit.

Buck lowered his gun.

In silence the party stared at the battlemented roof until their eyes began to water. But there was no sign of a presence there.

Buck broke into a soft chuckle.

"Reckon you was seein' things, sonny," he said, placing a kindly hand on Kit's shoulder.

"There ain't no ghost! There ain't no such durned things as ghosts."

"An optical delusion," ventured Tom Merry, with a glance at Kit's strained face.

"Sure!" agreed Buck.

"Let's get back," said Blake.

Kit Wildrake said nothing. His eyes were not in the habit of playing tricks with him. And yet it appeared that he was the only one of the party who had seen anything out of the ordinary on the roof of the manor.

"Come on, sonny!"

Buck and the juniors started off. Kit hesitated a moment. His eyes once again went to the roof. But nothing unusual met his gaze and he began mentally to chide himself for "seeing things."

"Kit!" It was Tom Merry's voice.

"Coming, Tom!"

Wildrake turned on his heel and hastened after the party. He tried to dismiss the whole matter from his mind. But it would recur for all that, with disquieting results, for Kit hardly ate anything at the sumptuous spread prepared for the St. Jim's party at the village inn a quarter of an hour later.

.....

Silas P. Zolberg paced up and down the well-appointed library of Drere Manor muttering to himself of the improvements he intended to make with his newly-acquired property.

"There's one thing I must get put right straightaway," he reflected, pausing in his perambulations to look out of the long window that faced the sea. "And that's those confounded hundred steps. Who in the name of Washington is going to climb a hundred steps every time he wants to take a near squint of the sea?"

His chin was thrust out aggressively as he peered out of the window at the offending steps.

"Guess I'll put in a dandy all-weather lift," he muttered.

"That'll do the trick."

The contemplation of installing the lift seemed to give him great pleasure, for he allowed his cigar to go out. Then he made a move to the small suitcase that reposed on one of the chairs. Opening it, he pulled out a fresh box of cigars, a flask of spirit, and a revolver.

He inspected the weapon with great care, seeing that all the chambers were loaded, and then placed it in his hip pocket.

"Nothing like a friend when you're in a strange place," he said grimly.

.....

The fire, to which he had put a match directly the agent had gone, was crackling merrily on the hearth. A comfortable and enticing armchair looked lonely on its own, and Silas P. Zolberg felt lonely somehow standing up. Besides, he was a trifle tired. He moved across to the chair and sank into it. His head nodded, and finally drooped on to his chest. Zolberg began to doze.

He couldn't have been asleep for more than five minutes when something awoke him. He started up in his chair, every nerve a-quiver.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

It was an eerie laugh that rose from a low note in the vocal register to a shrill, maniacal crescendo. Where it came from Silas P. Zolberg hadn't the foggiest notion, for, although portions of it were of different volume, the laugh as a whole was distant.

"What in the name of thunder's that!" muttered Zolberg, standing upright, one hand seeking the comforting butt of his revolver.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

A shiver ran down the American's spine, despite his bravely uttered words in contempt of ghosts and the legend of Drere Manor.

Thud, thud!

The sound of softly-moving feet, deliberate in their placings, came to his ears, and again that nerve-racking laugh.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

Silas P. Zolberg could stand it no longer. He was no coward, even if his hand did tremble at that moment. But dusk was fast settling over the countryside; the wind was rising, and it made weird and eerie music as it was flung against the cliffs. These things combined tended to make Silas P. a coward, but he fought down the impulse, and as that maniacal laugh rang out once more he darted to the doorway with an imprecation falling from his lips.

Thud, thud!

The sound of moving feet came from an upper floor, and then the laugh rang out again, seeming to entice this courageous tenant of Drere Manor up the stairs.

Silas took the first landing three at a time. His revolver was held just above his hip-line ready for any ghost that might materialise.

He switched on the light on the landing and stood listening, his nerves tense, his eyes watchful as a cat's.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

The laugh emanated from a floor higher up, it seemed. The next staircase was taken three stairs at a time, and Silas P. Zolberg was breathless almost when he reached the landing.

Nothing greeted his ears and eyes on that floor, and he leaned back against the wall, pumping in breath.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

The laugh was louder this time.

Crack!

As Silas gripped hold of his revolver his straining fingers involuntarily released the trigger. The shock of that explosion almost sent him rushing down the stairs, a victim of nerves; but he conquered the impulse and steadied himself.

"Silas, my boy," he told himself. "You're not going to quit for a ghost. Not likely! Up you go, man!"

He moved across the landing, keeping in the shelter of the wall, and his narrowed eyes searched the carpeted steps that constituted the third floor approach. The light from the landing only half illumined this staircase, and he cursed the electrician who had fitted the place so badly.

But he moved up the stairs gingerly, it must be said, the revolver held ready to dispatch its messengers of death. One step, two steps, three steps—

He had reached that stage where the light and darkness intermingled on the stairway. He proceeded more slowly.

"Ah!" The exclamation was squeezed from him as he found his feet on the top step. Another one and he would be on the landing.

He took the step, his right hand feeling for the switch. To his growing agitation he could not find it, although he could have sworn that it was there when he had travelled those stairs before. And then, from somewhere near at hand, sufficiently near to send every hair on his head bristling upright, came that nerve-racking laugh:

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

"By heavens! I'll—" muttered Silas Zolberg. "I'll see this thing through! I'll—"

His words trailed off, and his eyes became riveted on the picture of the buccaneer. It seemed to be all aglow with a strange phantom light, enticing, beckoning—beckoning with that steel hook.

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Silas' hand, with gun in it, came up slowly. It seemed to the American that power of will was leaving him. He could see, he could feel; he could move—but how slowly he moved! Direct, energetic action was denied him; the ghostly figure of the buccaneer held him paralysed. And the hook—

A shriek of terror left Zolberg's lips as that flashing hook came down towards him. A last second effort to control his failing senses reanimated him; but not for long did it last. The revolver screeched its message through the air. Zolberg heard that; but still that ferocious phantom with the cutlass and the hook pursued him. The hook was upraised ready to strike. As through a haze, which all his mental efforts could not disperse, the American saw it; watched its descent inch by inch tantalisingly slow. Then—

With a shrill cry the scoffer of the legend of Drere Manor pitched to the floor. Something tore at his forehead; he remembered that in his last conscious moments. Then all was a blank.

Silas P. Zolberg came to about five minutes later, although to his tortured mind it seemed that an age had passed from the time he had first heard that laugh. He was sprawled out at the foot of the stairs of the landing below. He told himself in his first waking moments that he must have rolled there. There was a painful ache in his head. His hand went up to it.

The hook!

Realisation came home to him in a flash. He tore his hand away from his head and face, and it came away moist and sticky.

estate agent's premises. According to the story he had heard from the waitress, that's where the last tenant of the manor had gone.

The information was right, for when Buck burst in upon Mr. Redknap he found the man he had last seen in the manor seated in the chair. His face was deathly white, and what drew Buck's attention most was that much talked of mark of the Hawk. There it was—at least, there was a clumsy circle of torn flesh just about skin-deep—scored in the American's forehead.

"What's happened, pardner?" asked Buck.

Silas P. Zolberg covered his face with his hands.

"Don't ask me!" he said. "Don't ask me!"

It was then that Buck noticed the colour of the man's hair. When last he had seen it, it was just iron-grey. Now it was snow-white.

"Phew!" whistled Buck. "Some ghost to do that!"

His reflections were broken by the arrival of the local doctor. He made a speedy examination of the American, paying especial attention to the head, where, Silas would have it, the dreaded hook of Captain Hawk had struck him down.

"No sign of a blow of any sort on the head!" announced the doctor gravely.

"But I tell you I felt it," said the American. "I still feel it. My head! My head!"

"It's nerves that you're suffering from," said Dr. Munroe, in far from convincing tones, however. "Nervous reaction!"

Silas P. Zolberg jumped up from his chair.

"Nerves be hanged!" he stormed, in a fit of anger. "And you with them! Is this nerves, too?" he added, and pointed to the mark on his forehead.

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Silas P. Zolberg was no coward, but not for all the wealth in the kingdom would he have ventured up that staircase again.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

That nerve-shattering laugh sent him scuttling downstairs six steps at a time, and it was a wonder he didn't break his neck in the process. Straight through the old oak hall he flew, as if all the demons in the underworld were on his heels; feverishly he wrenched at the big bolts on the door and then tore it open. Then he was out in the air—the air! He gulped down great gulps of it.

"Ho, ho!"

One laugh more was enough to send him scuttling down the drive like the very wind. He did not stop to look back once those great iron gates were passed. Drere Manor would know him no more. He raced without a stop to the village.

The Murranhurst folk, who were abroad just then, stared in amazement as a white-haired, middle-aged man, with a crimson, circular mark on his forehead, flew past them like the wind and sought the premises of Redknap, the Estate Agent.

"The mark of the Hawk!"

The cry went round amongst the villagers who had seen that wild figure of Silas P. Zolberg in a tense whisper. The ghost of Drere Manor had walked again. In hushed voices they told it to each other, and thus it reached the Fisherman's Rest, where, in a private room, the St. Jim's party were just finishing their tea.

"What do you say?" demanded Buck, in great excitement, as he overheard the buxom waitress telling the story to the kitchen hand. "What's this about Drere Manor?"

She explained to him the gossip that had and was going the round.

Buck turned on Tom Merry & Co.

"Jest sit here for a minute," he said. "I'm goin' straight fer that estate agent's shanty right pronto, and test this goldurned story of ghost-walking meself."

The juniors watched him go. Buck was greatly excited. He pushed his way out of the inn and literally ran for the

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"That may have been caused in many different ways!" said the medico gravely. "You are surely not asking me to believe that a ghost left that mark on you?"

"I'm not asking you to believe anything," said Zolberg. "But I know! I know! Give me back my cheque, Redknap!" he added, in another burst of rage. "I wouldn't live in that place if you paid me double the money!"

Reluctantly, very reluctantly, Redknap handed back the cheque.

The American tore it in pieces and scattered them in the fire. Then he rose to his feet, and wearily took himself off. It was the last Murranhurst ever saw of Silas P. Zolberg.

"Waal," drawled Buck, as the office door closed on Redknap's late client. "It appears thet I've jest blown in quite handylike."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this," said Buck. "I was goin' to give you a piece o' my mind fer leaving me an' the buys down at Drere Manor without a word about anyone having bought the place—"

The agent started violently as recollection of his thoughtlessness came home to him.

"But," continued Buck, "I've decided now to give you a cheque. How much is Drere Manor going for?"

"Drere Manor?" gasped the astonished agent. "Drere Manor? After what you have just heard and seen?"

"The't's what I said," drawled Buck coolly.

"Three thousand five hundred to you, sir!" gasped Mr. Redknap.

"The't's a trade!" snapped Buck.

And forthwith he sat down, pulled out a blank cheque and scrawled in that amount above Malcolm Wildrake's signature.

"And'll not be coming back fer the cheque like thet other tenant of yours," said Buck, as he paused at the doorway.

Redknap was too surprised for the moment to make any reply to that. He heard Buck stamp off; he looked at the cheque, and then he jerked his head vigorously.



"Blamed if I kin see any ghost!" growled Buck, dragging a six-shooter from its holster. The juniors watched the battlements with staring eyes. "I dunno whether a fellow is entitled to shoot a few slugs at 'nother guy's ghost," drawled Buck. "But if anythin' creeps 'long that roof agin it'll be mighty sorry by the time I've done a li'l target practice!" "Don't be a fool, Buck!" panted Kit Wildrake. (See Chapter 10.)

"And I wouldn't say that he isn't right," he muttered. Buck was back at the inn with Tom Merry & Co. in less than three minutes. Without beating about the bush, he told them what he had done.

"You're going to live there after what's happened to that American?" asked Herries, for the story had spread and it had reached the ears of Tom Merry & Co.

"Sure thing!" grinned Buck. And Kit Wildrake felt a strange uneasiness plucking at him. "In fact," added Buck, tapping his guns, "I'm going to camp there to-night."

"You're not!" Kit Wildrake's tone was more anxious than Buck had ever known it.

"Rest easy, sonny," said Buck kindly. "I am. An' you kin bet yore bottom dollar thet no ghost leaves its mark on me! Mebbe I'll leave my mark on the ghost!"

Kit tried to swerve him from his purpose, but Buck was adamant. He had set his mind on staying at Drere Manor, and stay he would.

It was a very subdued party that took farewell of Buck Whipcord a few moments later, although the tall Westerner was as breezy and lighthearted as ever. Tom Merry & Co. felt somewhat like rats leaving a sinking ship in thus leaving Buck to face the night at Drere Manor alone. But what else could they do?

Kit was for breaking all school rules there and then and staying on at the manor with Buck, but his old chum wouldn't hear of such a thing. In fact, he took Kit bodily in his arms and dumped him in the touring-car.

"I'll let you know if anythin' startlin' happens, Kit, sonny," he said. "But don't you worry 'bout me."

He shook hands with Tom Merry & Co., and the car drew off. The last the St. Jim's juniors saw of Buck Whipcord that day was his tall figure in the shadow of a hedge as he made his way back to Drere Manor.

The drive home to St. Jim's was done in rather a strained silence, and the route was made as short as possible. All the juniors were thinking of the story of Drere Manor; were thinking of the American who had remained in possession of the place about half an hour, in which time his hair had turned snow white; were thinking, too, of buccaneer ghosts and Buck Whipcord all on his own.

Kit Wildrake broke the silence as the car swept through the gates of St. Jim's.

"I expect Nunks will want me to stay at the manor over the Christmas vacation," he said thoughtfully.

"That'll be rare fun," said Tom Merry. "You'll be able to lay the blessed ghost."

"If any," chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Kit Wildrake broke the silence as the car swept through "And I expect Nunks will let me bring my pals along," he said. "If you fellows have not fixed up for the holidays, and you'd care to come—"

"What-ho!" chorused the juniors.

"Then it's a go," said Kit, with a laugh. "It's rather premature, I know, to throw invites, but I'm practically certain, from what Nunks said on the phone, that he wants me to stay with him this Christmas. And Nunks wouldn't object if I took the whole blessed school along."

"Good old Nunks!" said Tom Merry.

"All I hope is that Buck doesn't shoot that ghost before we come along," said Blake.

"Same here!"

The juniors were themselves again now they were in the shelter of St. Jim's. Not one of them believed in the supernatural, and ghosts held no terrors for them.

But back in the seclusion of his study that evening Kit Wildrake's thoughts turned to Buck Whipcord and Drere Manor. He wondered what Buck was doing. Had Wildrake possessed second sight he would have seen Buck Whipcord seated in the deep armchair in the library, a glowing cigarette between his lips and a couple of cocked six-shooters on his knees.

Buck was quite happy. He was prepared for the ghost of Drere Manor if he came; in fact, he was prepared for an army of ghosts.

But Wildrake remembered the phantom figure he had seen for himself on the battlements; remembered, too, the story of the American and the fate that had befallen him, and was strangely troubled.

THE END.

(Buck Whipcord and the chums of St. Jim's are in for some thrilling adventures at Drere Manor! Be sure you read: THE GHOST OF DRERE MANOR! By Martin Clifford, in next week's Grand Christmas Number.)

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A CHIEF OF THE APACHE NATION! That's the honour the Redskins want to confer on young Tom Holt, but Tom is not too keen to accept it, for it means that he will have to leave a new-found friend who is all the world to him—and her name's Sadie!



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A Clue!

THE report of a ten-inch Colt in a room is like a clap of thunder. The air filled with smoke, and the attention of the people, being fixed on the platform, it was very difficult to know where the shot came from. Women screamed, men jerked out their guns, and for a few moments the hall was a confused mass of horror-stricken people, as bewildered, fierce and dangerous as a herd of stampeding cattle. But, the few who kept their heads were the hard-bitten Western men, and they took swift action. Above the startled cries of the women the men heard Colonel Chapin's voice:

"Lock the doors, boys! Watch every window! Hold up any man who tries to leave the hall."

And even while the words were spoken, Kit Brent and two others forged swiftly through the press, ranged up to Mick Mander's couch and made a grim ring round it.

In the meantime three people reached Tom almost at the same moment—White Cat, the colonel, and Sadie. They found him white as a sheet, but alive, and already on his knees.

"Help me up," he said sharply. "I want to get to Hunks. He must not kill that man."

The urgency of his voice and his excitement brooked no delay, and the colonel and White Cat lifted him bodily in their arms, ladies' chair fashion, and bore him to where Snyder lay struggling on the ground. It was only just in time. Hunks had him pinned, and in the right place. He was now on the top of the man, his teeth fixed in the back of the neck, and the whole weight of him thrown on the shoulders. His enemy could do nothing except to struggle madly to throw the dog off, and with Hunks recovered now from the shock of his fall, his bulldog's jaw locked in the flesh, his weight at least one hundred and twenty pounds, and every ounce of that in use to hold the man down, it was impossible. The question was whether even Tom, being now feeble from his wound, could get the dog away. He spoke to him; Hunks heard, but paid no attention, except to cock one ear and wag his tail, clearly indicating that this time he was going his own sweet way. Tom spoke again more sharply, and though the effort gave him terrible pain, and he had not the strength of a kitten, he stretched out his hand towards Hunks' neck. It was a very poor effort, and instead of gripping the pup by the throat his fingers only slithered feebly over his nose. Then he lurched forward and fell in a dead faint against the struggling body of Jan Snyder.

The colonel and White Cat had him in their arms in a moment, and White Cat spoke to Hunks.

"See! Your master is dying. Come to him! Huh!"

Whether the pup understood the words, or the sight of Tom's weakness aroused him cannot be told; but what no force could have accomplished, love and anxiety did at once. He loosed his enemy, plunged after the colonel, who had laid Tom gently on the floor, and before Dr. Silverston, who was now upon the spot, could prevent it, licked Tom's face all over, though Snyder's blood was dripping from his lips.

Cartel J. Silverston, physician, as he styled himself, was
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a person of doubtful reputation, from a moral point of view; but he was a skilled practitioner, and what he did not know about bullet wounds was not worth consideration. On the rough platform of the railway shed, with just a blanket underneath him, Tom was stripped and examined as thoroughly and rapidly as if he had been at Bart's or Guy's at home.

A crowd of silent people watched the operation. Nearest of all were Sadie and White Cat, their shoulders touching; the girl's white face, the boy's hard red one side by side. Colonel Chapin, preoccupied as he was by anxiety for Tom, noticed this, and a haunting premonition of danger to come entered his mind. It was dismissed in a moment, but it came back in after days.

Tom was unconscious, mercifully, while the wound was being probed. The bullet had entered beneath the right shoulder, passed through the side, and come out under the arm-pit. Heart and lungs had escaped, but bleeding had supervened, for a small artery was severed; and but for the medical skill being at hand Tom must have died within half an hour. The doctor, however, stopped the flow of blood in time. He administered a strong dose of brandy to his patient and then turned to Colonel Chapin.

"No odds either way at present, colonel. I can't say how much trouble there may be inside. Inflammation is likely to come on, and if he is not nursed good and seen to every way there ain't a chance for him. But no vital organ is touched, and he's clean made—never saw in my life a healthier body. Take him to Calumet, but see there are feather beds beneath him, and no jolting. When I have fixed up this cur"—indicating Jan Snyder—"I'll be round there most as soon as you."

He had turned away, then noticing the sea of faces round him, he grimly smiled.

"Want my tip, boys, for the event? Well—Tom's leading; but death is a mighty powerful second. All things being equal," he spoke very slowly, pausing after each word, and cynically enjoying the attention he created, "I reckon death will—win."

Then with a light salute to the colonel he hurried to Snyder.

The crowd dissolved. Some watched sympathetically, and gave what help they could in the preparations for Tom's removal. A few watched the examination of Snyder, who, though in great pain and weak from loss of blood, was in no danger; but the majority went off to attend to another matter—the detection of the person who had fired the shot.

Colonel Chapin's orders had been thoroughly carried out. Every window and door was covered on the instant by rifles or revolvers. If any man had tried to make an exit he would have been shot at sight.

Meanwhile, preliminary investigation, conducted by Kit Brent over Mick Mander, whom he at once suspected, yielded no results, Mick declaring with some reason, that as Tom was on his way to save Snyder it would have been against his own interest to shoot him. No weapon was found in his hand, and none could be discovered upon the couch. Kit thereupon, with Old Billie beside him, was about to make a report to Colonel Chapin, when he felt a touch upon his arm, and found an Apache standing at his elbow. The Indian had something in his hand which he silently gave to Kit; it was a revolver wrapped up in a piece of red flannel. Kit seized the weapon and smelt the muzzle; it had been lately discharged. He twirled the chambers round. In one there was an empty cartridge case still warm.

"Where did you find it?" he asked the Indian. The man grunted, and, turning, beckoned Kit to follow him. Several men had gathered round now, and a grim party marched after the Apache. No one spoke, but they all had their firearms in their hands. They were taken to the back of the hall. Here in the centre of a group of Indians was a white man lying on the ground bound with a lariat. He was the cowboy who had attempted to rope White Cat the day before, and urged the crowd to hang him out of hand.

"Thank Heaven you've come!" he spluttered, when Kit arrived. His face was grey as paper, his breath coming in convulsive gasps. "These beasts would have killed me in another minute. Make 'em laid me up."

At a sign from Kit the cowboys raised the man, the Indians standing quietly by; but when one cowboy would have cut the thongs which bound the prisoner, Kit stopped him.

"Safe bind, safe find," he said grimly. "What are you trussed this way for, Seth Crump?"

The man made a grimace. He was shaking all over, and did not meet Kit's eyes.

"Ask me another!" he cried. "I was jest a-reachin' for a window 'cos one of them varmints seemed like jumpin' out, when the whole crowd had me every way, choked me nigh silly, and you see—"

He groaned and dropped his head forward. Kit observed him narrowly.

"Where's your gun?" "Why, here!" was the moaning answer; and there it was in his holster.

Kit turned upon the Apaches. "What's this game mean?"

None of them could speak English, but the man who had brought Kit the revolver, placing one finger upon it, pointed at Seth Crump's hand.

"He means Seth were carryin' it," Billie explained. The old pug had said nothing so far, but his eyes had been very busy.

"I were not!" Seth cried, as if he had been struck. "Know nothin' of the durned thing!"

"He lie!" said a deep voice behind Kit. "I will find out all, and tell you!"

Indian Gratitude!

IT was Black Hawk. Unobserved by the cowboys, he had followed them, and now stood quietly by, his eyes moving swiftly from his warriors to the pinioned man, taking in every detail of the situation.

A protest came from some of the boys. "We don't want any Redskin tongue-wag!" one of them shouted, with an oath. But Kit Brent's teeth shut with a click.

"Dry up!" he snapped. "We want the fac's! And we'll have 'em! Get to it, Black Hawk! What's happened?"

"Huh!" grunted Black Hawk. "Your Chief-man Colonel Chapin, say no man go from hall. My warriors see this man put a hand up there"—pointing to a small window just behind. "They watch him close and know he have a bag and mean to throw it out. They catch him—so!" lifting his arm. "He make fight! They take him and hold fast. In bag find that"—pointing to the pistol. "He try to run, strike blows, and kick. They tie him, while one take bag to you. That all—huh!"

He folded his arms across his breast as he finished, and stood quite still.

The crowd breathed hard, but no one spoke. Then Kit stepped swiftly forward, and stuck his pistol-muzzle under Seth Crump's chin.

"Whose pistol's that? Truth—or I pull!" The wretched cowboy jerked back his head as far as it

would go, while the cold steel seemed to bore its way into his wind-pipe. He looked desperately round, but not a man stirred to aid him.

"Mick's—it's Mick's!" he gasped. The men glanced at one another.

"How'll I know?" thundered the cowboy. "Your word won't hang a rat!"

"That cloth is part of his blanket," Seth muttered sullenly. "He cut it with my knife. We fixed it all up before the fight began. He swore that he'd get Tom."

Kit turned round. "You hear, boys? Anything to ask him?" They shook their heads.

"Then we'll see Mick, and leave Seth here. Black Hawk, keep your bucks off him. We'll see justice done. You know that now."

The chief inclined his head. "I know," he made answer. "This man speak true, me think."

The party tramped back to the couch where Mick Mander lay. He was in earnest colloquy with Pim Bolland.

"Can't do it," the storekeeper replied to some question put to him. "The colonel's boys is round. They watch me every step. You must remain."

Then the cowboys reached them, and the conversation stopped.

Kit spoke no word. He made a sign to Billie, who took Mick suddenly in his mighty arms and lifted him clean off the couch, while Kit pulled the blanket away and spread it. There at one end a piece had been cut out. The cowboy now drew out the stuff in which the revolver had been concealed. It fitted exactly.

Kit looked slowly round, until his eyes rested upon the man with a silver badge upon his shirt.

"Sheriff," he said gruffly, "you will arrest Mick Mander for the attempted murder of Tom Holt. Judge, kindly try the case, just as we are. We have a witness and the proof, so it won't take long. Three of you boys fetch Seth Crump."

The trial was held, and the witness did not fail. Mick Mander protested innocence; stormed and cursed them all, and then confessed. Sentence was passed in less than half an hour.

"It's just as well," Kit said dryly to Old Billie, as they moved out into the sunshine and saw round the grim gibbet a crowd gathering, as the sheriff's officers got busy with the pulley and the noose, "that we 'lowed Mander to have this thing put up so sick. He paid for it, you know, and now he'll use it. That's right, too. Say, judge, get on that cart, will ye, and tell the women to clear out. This ain't goin' to be any kind of a fit sight for them."

Tom pulled through. It was a near thing, for fever came, as the doctor prophesied, and his life was in great danger. But his excellent constitution, and the unremitting care he received at Calumet, saved him. Within a reasonable time he was sound as a bell.

During his illness the Apache party, after receiving full compensation for all losses, and having, in fact, made a very good thing out of the whole business, went back to their reservations, with one exception.

White Cat would not leave Tom. His love and devotion was so manifestly sincere that even Colonel Chapin, who had taken a curious dislike to the boy dating from the moment when he sat shoulder to shoulder with Sadie, could make no objection, and by the time Tom was convalescent he was allowed to come and go much as he liked.

It was towards the end of this time that he came one day, silently as was his wont, to the chair where Tom was sitting.

"Tom," he said, "the council of our nation have made you chief. They come here to greet you. Shall you be ready?"

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE!

A stranger in New Mexico, TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen, in company with his faithful terrier, Hunks, joins up with a wandering tribe of Apache Indians. BLACK HAWK, their chief, who cherishes a hope of wiping out the "whites," offers to take Tom on the trail and show him how to become a successful rancher, his motive being to collect certain information before a successful raid can be made on the white settlements. Knowing nothing of the sinister motive underlying all this, Tom acquits himself well, and becomes the fast friend of WHITE CAT, Black Hawk's son. Arriving in Servia, Tom falls foul of MICK MANDER, a bullying desperado, by publicly declaring his friendship for the Redskins amongst whom he has been living. This enrages Mick Mander's cronies, and when Black Hawk's tribe arrive they drive a "rogue" bull into the midst of their market-place. The bull does great damage until it is pinned by the snout by Hunks. Tom intercepts and is about to separate the two animals when Mander, who has been watching his opportunity, attempts to kill Tom. Before the scoundrel can pull the trigger, however, White Cat knives him.

Arrested and charged with attempted murder, the Apache holds out that he stuck Mick to save Tom Holt. Realising that the cowboys' bitter hatred of the Indians will prejudice White Cat's chance of acquittal, Tom seeks the aid of Colonel Chapin—a big power in those parts. Accompanied by the colonel and his daughter, Sadie, to whom he is very much attached, Tom arrives at the courthouse. White Cat's life is hanging in the balance when Tom makes a sporting offer to the judge to give five hundred dollars to any jurymen who dare lay a finger on the prisoner with Hunks beside him. This sporting offer appeals to the primitive Westerners, for it depends solely on the behaviour of Hunks whether his friend, White Cat, goes free or swings at the end of a gibbet. The selected jurymen makes his charge. Realising what is wanted of him, Hunks at once leaps to the attack, and after a fierce fight gains the mastery by burying his teeth in the fleshy part of the man's neck. Fearful of the consequences, Tom makes a bound to drag Hunks off, but before he can reach his objective the report of a revolver is heard, and the young Britisher falls headlong, shot through the back.

(Now read on.)



Kit stepped swiftly forward and stuck his pistol-muzzle under Seth Crump's chin. "Whose pistol is that? Truth—or I pull!" The wretched cowboy jerked back his head as far as it would go, while the cold steel seemed to bore its way into his windpipe. "Mick's—it's Mick's!" he gasped. (See page 25.)

There was a certain abruptness in the way the boy spoke which struck Tom.

"It will be a great honour——" he began. But White Cat put up his hand.

"Not that. A chief must live with the nation for three—six moons after he is elected. Will you come south with us? We want you most bad."

Tom turned round sharply.

"I can't. I am going to work for Colonel Chapin."

"Huh!" White Cat grunted. "That all right. But he not want you all time. The nation starve in winter. White Government give little food. If you come you maybe save the squaws and paposes from the hunger. My father send the message. Will you come?"

Tom rose from his chair much agitated. He was not quite strong yet.

"I will think about it. But can I really do any good? I am only a boy, you know, after all!"

"Not boy at all!" said Wild Cat proudly, drawing himself up and turning round, for Sadie had just come into the room. "You save my life. Men respect you, white and red. You are White Eagle now, a great chief of the Apache Nation!"

Straight Talking!

WHITE CAT was not able to get any promise from Tom to spend the winter with the Apache nation in the reservations. Tom said he was bound in honour to remain with Colonel Chapin unless he were released from a contract he had made to learn cattle-ranching at Calumet. He undertook, however, to talk the matter over with the colonel and see what could be done. He would pay a visit to Black Hawk the next day.

Tom did not tell White Cat that there was something very much closer in his relations with his future master than a matter of employment. During the long weeks of illness, followed by slow though steady convalescence, the wealthy American, who mourned an only son, and the English boy who was fatherless, had grown to care for each other in a way that is rare with people of such different ages, upbringing, and points of view.

Colonel Chapin had always been rich, and though he had

entered heart and soul into Western life because of an immense interest in stock-breeding, love of the open air, and a physique which knew no weariness, he was essentially a man of business. Money-making was his object in life; everything except solicitude for his daughter was subordinated to that. He lived plainly, worked enormously hard, and used all the dollars he made to accumulate more dollars.

If he had not lost his son he would have been like the majority of American stockmen of large means—absorbed in the development of the great new country where he lived, hundreds of acres of which he was buying from the Government, and less fortunate neighbours, every week. Nothing else at all would have interested him except horse-breeding and sport.

But that son, Sam, had been the idol of his life. He had no other. His late wife, a weakly, fashionable, selfish type of person, had never sympathised in the least with her husband's love of the prairie and the West. The boy had been given the best education in the East, but he was his father's inseparable companion at all other times. They were comrades, as well as father and son. At Sam's death, which was very sudden, Joseph Chapin was for a time a maimed man, and though Sadie's affection, her spirit and pluck, and love for all things that he loved, kept him from growing hard and bitter, yet his life was emptied of half its joy and purpose. He worked harder than ever; he made the child his companion as much as he could, and no one but Sadie herself knew what her father suffered.

Then came Tom. There was something about him which reminded the colonel of his son. Sam Chapin had an adventurous spirit, a generous nature, and love for all things human. He had not, as a matter of fact, a strong character. Sadie possessing the will of the family; but Colonel Chapin believed his son would have done just what Tom did when he saved Sadie and championed the Apaches, and the lad's appeal that first evening went home at once to the empty heart of the lonely man.

The incidents of the trial had strengthened the bond between them, and by the time Tom was upon his feet Chapin had found a second son. Tom, for his part, marvelled at his own good luck in finding such a home. At first, in his weakness, he let himself go, just happily drinking in the love which was around him, the comfort, and the know-

ledge, which came very quickly—for the colonel was not reticent when his feelings were aroused—that, in a material sense, and every other, his fortune was made.

As time went on the whole thing grew deeper, for he began to care for the colonel as he had never cared for his own father—who had been a good, but not a lovable man. Tom saw how much he was now to Chapin, and Sadie—well, Sadie was Sadie! She was like nobody else, and became dearer every day, though he did not tell her so. By the time White Cat delivered his message they were just one family, and Tom's fate seemed cast for life.

White Cat's appeal fell upon Tom like a bolt from the blue. He had discussed the Indian problem with the colonel again and again. It was the one subject upon which they could not agree. Not that Tom had ever said much; he was a person who could not express himself when he felt most deeply, though he held his own when the colonel, largely for fun, would make invidious comparisons between the British Monarchy and the Republican Government of the United States, or find fault with Tom's favourite statesmen or heroes.

But he was tongue-tied, however, when Chapin delivered a lecture upon the hopeless, innate, and permanent inferiority of the red man to the white. Now and then he would blaze out when the colonel became more than usually cutting, and would clinch his arguments with examples of fine conduct and devotion of the Apaches he had known personally, upon which Chapin, seeing he had hurt the boy, would change the subject.

Tom, as a rule, made no reply at all. He brooded over it, though, and often argued the whole problem out with Hunks, an occupation he found very soothing, as Hunks could never contradict. In the end, as people of strong feelings always are, he remained of the same opinion still, and believed in his Apaches more than ever.

Tom tackled the colonel that night when Sadie had gone to bed. He knew it was not safe to do so in her presence, for the child's busy brain was full of plans for the winter, and any hint that they might come to nothing would have caused an explosion. But as things turned out, it made very little difference. The colonel's jaw stiffened to granite when Tom told him the news. He made no comment at all for at least five minutes, but slowly smoked his cigar and stared out of the window with a cold, bleak face. Then all he said was:

"You have no contract with me. Go—if you wish."

(Does this mean the end of Tom's friendship with the Chapins? Does it mean farewell to Sadie, to whom Tom is so attached? These questions are answered in next week's grand instalment, chums. Order your copy of the GEM'S Grand Christmas Number NOW!)

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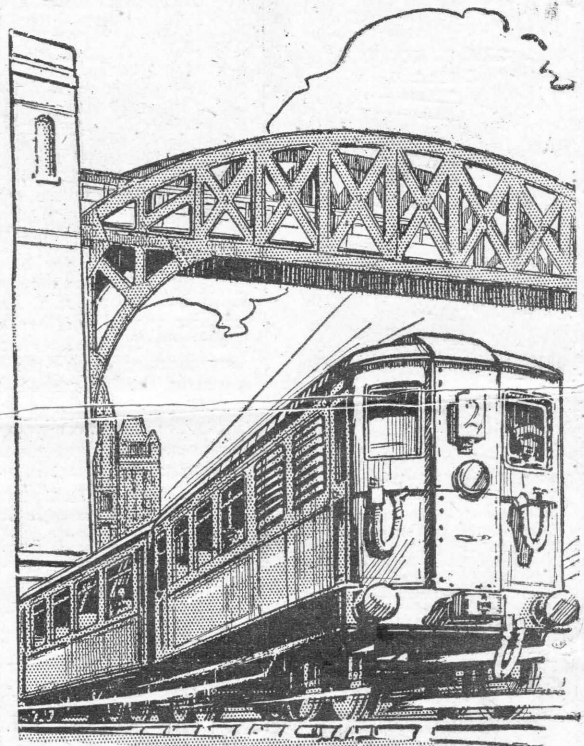
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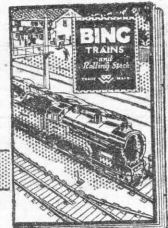


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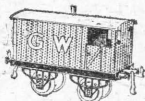


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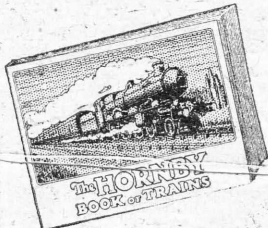
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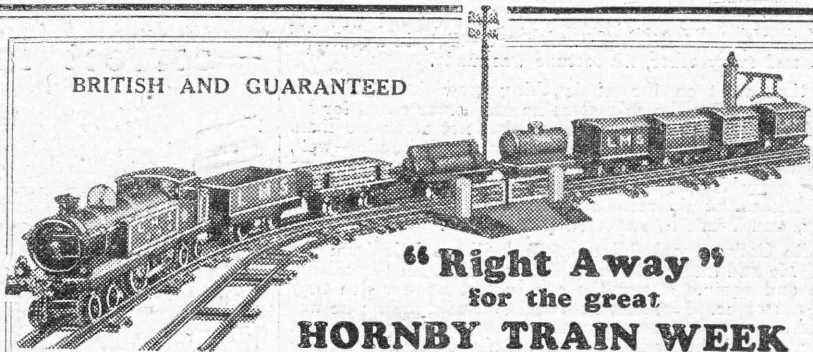
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