

"THE HOUSE ON THE MOUNTAINS!"

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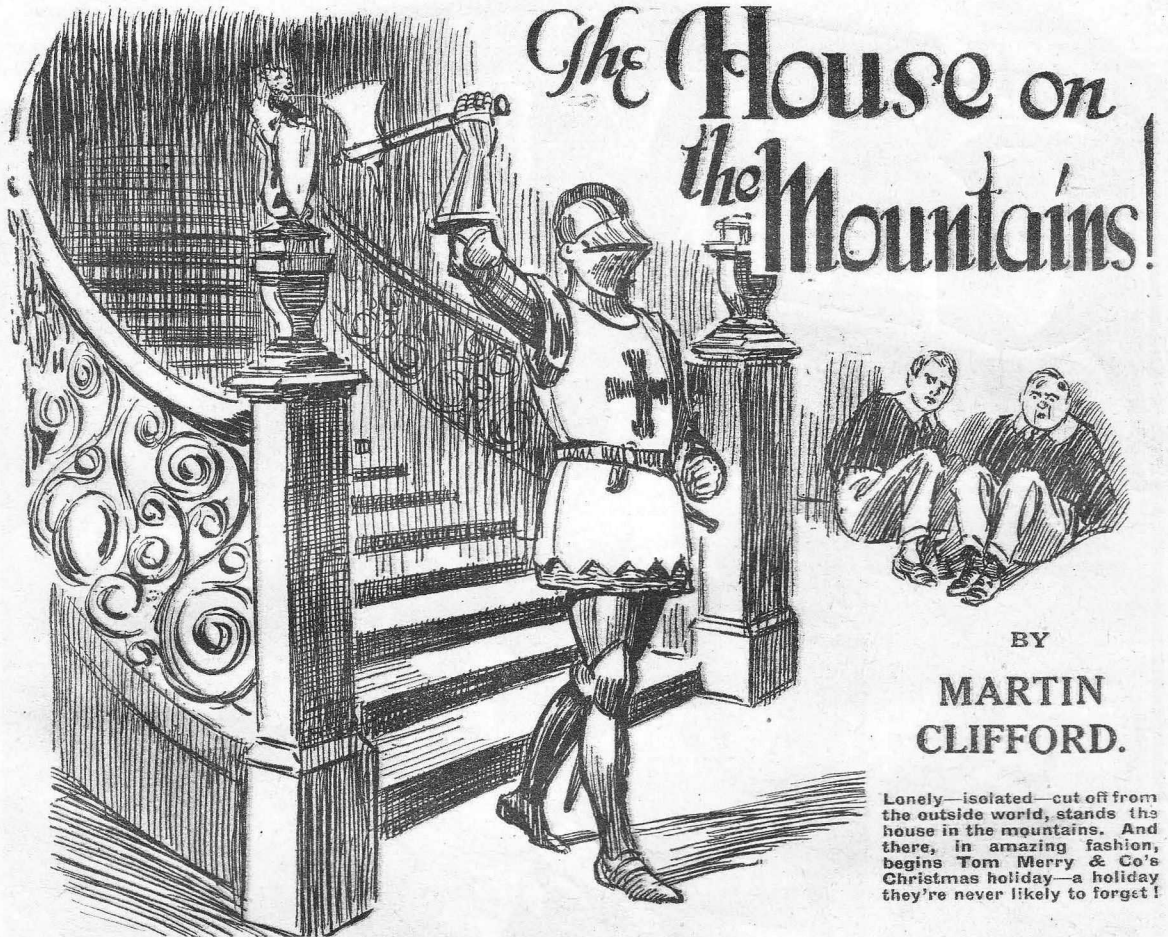
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SPEND THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS WITH TOM MERRY & CO.—



BY
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD.**

Lonely—isolated—cut off from the outside world, stands the house in the mountains. And there, in amazing fashion, begins Tom Merry & Co's Christmas holiday—a holiday they're never likely to forget!

CHAPTER 1.
A Startling Discovery!

THERE'S Llanfellyn Towers!"

Jack Blake, the leader of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, flung out a pointing hand.

Blake, with his three chums of the Fourth, Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, were driving along the snowy road in a big closed car, at the wheel of which sat Eric Kildare, the captain of the famous Sussex school.

On either side of the road rose the snow-clad slopes of the wild Welsh mountains. A little way behind them, a second car was following, driven by Sir Napier Wynter, Kildare's uncle. In the second car were Tom Merry & Co. and Talbot of the Shell, and Baggy Trimble of the Fourth.

St. Jim's had broken-up for the Christmas vacation, and the juniors had come to Wales at the invitation of Kildare's uncle, to spend Christmas at Llanfellyn Towers, Sir Napier's home.

Driving slowly over the treacherous snow, the foremost of the two cars had turned a corner of the winding mountain road. Ahead of them, standing in a sheltered hollow among the great hills, a big house had come into view.

"Bai Jove! Heah we are at last, deah boys!" nodded Arthur Augustus, staring eagerly ahead.

"Yes, that's the Towers," muttered Eric Kildare, his eyes fixed on the distant house with a queerly anxious look in his handsome face.

There was good reason for Kildare's anxiety!

Sir Napier Wynter, his uncle, had only just returned from Rioguan, a turbulent South American republic. In that lawless country, Sir Napier had been instrumental in putting down a revolution against President Garcia, the head of the Rioguan Government.

Though the revolution had been crushed, the identity of several of the instigators of the rebellion was still a mystery. Sir Napier had brought to England a paper which contained their names, written in code that as yet he had been

unable to solve. As soon as he had succeeded in solving it, he intended to inform the Rioguan Government of the names of the traitors contained in it—and their treachery would then meet its just reward.

But the agents of El Lobo—the Wolf—as the chief of the revolutionaries was called, had followed Sir Napier to England in a desperate attempt to regain possession of the fateful paper before Kildare's uncle had succeeded in solving its secrets.

Already the band of scoundrelly South Americans, who possessed at least one English accomplice, had shown their hand! For safety's sake, Sir Napier had sent the fateful paper to Llanfellyn Towers, with instructions to his old butler that it was to be hidden behind a secret panel which the old man had discovered in the ancient mansion.

But the Rioguanians had discovered the baronet's plans. By a cunning, yet simple ruse, they had succeeded in delaying Sir Napier and the St. Jim's party from reaching Llanfellyn Towers on the night before, so that they could themselves be the first to reach the house; there it had been their intention to ransack the place in search of the coveted paper.

How far they had succeeded in their object, the St. Jim's party did not yet know. But with two cars hired from the Welsh village where they had breakfasted, after a night lost in the mountains, they were now on their way to Llanfellyn Towers—wondering grimly what they would find when they arrived there.

A telephone call from the village, which was a good many miles from the house, had failed to get through.

"My hat!" breathed Herries, with gleaming eyes, as the car ran on over the snow towards the distant mansion, "if the rotters are there when we turn up, there'll be a pretty good old scrap!"

"Yaas, wathah, bai Jove!" nodded the swell of St. Jim's grimly. "I would like to get my hands on that scoundrel who called himself Garcia!"

"Hear, hear!" muttered Digby.

Kildare smiled grimly.

Garcia, as he called himself, was a young South American

—AMIDST THE MOUNTAINS & GET THE THRILLS OF THE YEAR!

who passed himself off for some time as the son of the President of Rioguary. But he had been discovered to be a traitor and an impostor, in league with Sir Napier's enemies. His real name was Charcas, as they now knew.

The road wound on, deep in glittering snow, climbing higher in long twisting stretches towards the lonely old house.

Blake glanced back.

The car containing Sir Napier, Tom Merry & Co., Talbot, and Baggy Trimble, was following only twenty yards behind. If, when they arrived at Llanfellyn Towers, they

marks were almost obliterated by recently fallen snow, it was clear that a car had been to the house—and had driven away again.

"Their car, for a cert!" breathed Talbot.

"And they've gone away again!" muttered Manners.

There was a gasp of evident relief from the interior of the second car. Baggy Trimble of the Fourth had not yet descended into the road. Baggy was feeling—and looking—distinctly nervous at the prospect of coming face to face with the gang of revolutionaries, now that they had arrived at Llanfellyn Towers!

But now that it looked as though the scoundrels had gone away again, Baggy gave a gasp of relief.

"Oh, good!" he muttered to himself, and climbed out of the car promptly.

"Half a minute, though," put in Kildare quietly. "There are two sets of car-tracks there, right enough. But suppose it means, not that one car has come and gone, but that two cars have arrived here—and are still at the house?"

"Bai Jove!"

"My hat—that's possible!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Oh lor'!"

There was a gasp of consternation from Baggy Trimble. The Falstaff of the Fourth dived back into the car again with amazing alacrity.

"The sooner we find out what's happened, the better," said Sir Napier grimly. "Come on."

His hand went to a pocket of his heavy overcoat, and it came out holding something that glittered dully in the wintry sunlight—a snub-nosed automatic.

"I took the precaution of bringing this with me," said the baronet coolly.

"I—I say!"

Baggy Trimble's voice squeaked nervously from inside the car. The sight of the blue-black automatic in Sir Napier's hand had increased Baggy's fears tenfold. He coughed.

"Hem! I—I don't think I'll come with you to the house!" gasped Baggy. "I—I—I think someone ought to stay here to see which way they go, if they come bolting down



found the gang of Rioguanian revolutionaries in possession, the scoundrels would certainly find that they were "up against it." Though most of the party now on its way to the house were only schoolboys, the chums of the Shell and Fourth were wanting in neither pluck nor muscle! Their enemies were likely to find them a stiff proposition if they came to grips.

A sudden twist in the road brought them in view of the great gates. Kildare drove in at the gateway and brought the car to a standstill in the drive, and jumped out. Blake & Co. followed him. The second car ran up and stopped. Tom Merry, Manners, Monty Lowther, and Talbot climbed swiftly out, followed by the tall figure of Sir Napier Wynter.

"Better not drive up to the house, I suppose?" muttered Kildare. "If the scoundrels are there, we don't want to warn them of our arrival."

"You're right, Eric," nodded his uncle grimly. "We had best carry on on foot. If they are here—though I doubt it—"

There was a sudden exclamation from Tom Merry.

The captain of the Shell was pointing up the drive.

Two sets of car-tracks could be seen there. Though the

the drive and get away, you know! Though, of course, I'd do my best to stop them," added Baggy hastily. "I—ahem—I fancy the villains would find it pretty difficult to get past me—"

"You mean, your figure would block the gateway, old chap?" queried Monty Lowther, with a chuckle.

"Oh, really, Lowther—"

The juniors grinned. The idea of Baggy trying to stop the scoundrels from escaping if they came bolting down the drive, struck them as funny.

But Trimble would not be much use to the party up at the house—in fact, he would be more likely to be a hindrance.

"Right-ho, Trimble," nodded Kildare, "you wait here!"

"Come along," said Sir Napier quietly. "Let's get along."

Sir Napier turned and strode along the drive, Kildare at his side. The eight juniors followed them—leaving Baggy blinking round nervously into the tall trees that flanked the drive, as though half afraid that their enemies might be hiding there, ready to pounce out on him the moment he was alone.

Llanfellyn Towers stood in the heart of a big estate of more than twenty acres, and the drive led the party a long way through snowbound meadows and plantations before at last the house itself came into full view beyond a belt of trees.

"Here we are!" breathed Blake.

They all halted, staring ahead at the great house in the open space before them.

"Nobody about," muttered Manners.

There was no sign of life anywhere. But in the glittering snow before the great front door could be seen the marks of where a car had turned.

"They've gone!" ejaculated Kildare, pointing. "Look—there was only one car, after all—and they drove away in it!"

"My hat!" breathed Herries. "If they've gone, do you think it means they've found that paper, sir?"

"Not necessarily," answered Sir Napier grimly. "The scoundrels would know that we should arrive soon; and if they had failed to locate the hiding-place of that paper, they would probably clear off without it, rather than run the risk of being trapped here. They would not know that we should arrive without a posse of police—they wouldn't know, probably, that the nearest policeman is ten miles away!"

Slipping the automatic into his pocket, Kildare's uncle hurried forward across the snow, with the others following. He ran up the steps to the front door, produced a key, and swung the door open.

He stepped into the lofty hall. Kildare followed his uncle in, and the eight juniors crowded over the threshold after them. They heard Sir Napier give a startled gasp.

"Gweat Scott!" breathed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The hall was in chaos. Furniture was overturned, pictures had been taken down and left lying on the floor, a suit of armour that had evidently stood in a recess by the old fireplace had been dragged out and was lying sprawled against the fender. It was quite clear that the hall had been ransacked with feverish haste—clear, too, that every room in the house had been ransacked, judging from the glimpses of confusion seen through the open doors of the rooms that gave on to the hall.

In their search during the night for the precious paper that meant so much to them, the agents of the Wolf had apparently left no inch of Llanfellyn Towers unexamined.

But it was not the sight of the chaos the scoundrels had left that had brought the startled cry from the lips of Sir Napier Wynter.

He was staring across to the foot of the wide stairs that ran down into the hall.

The juniors, too, were staring at the bottom stair with tense faces.

The figure of an old man was lying there. It was evidently Broom, the butler. An ugly mark on his forehead showed how the old servant had been struck down.

There was no sign of breathing. Old Broom's face was as white as death as he lay there on the bottom stair with closed eyes—a motionless, silent form.

CHAPTER 2.

The Return of the Enemy!

"GOOD heavens!" breathed Kildare.

In a moment the captain of St. Jim's was kneeling by the senseless man.

It was quite clear that the blow that had felled the old manservant had been a terrible one. It was lucky, at least, that Broom was not dead.

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"The scoundrels!" ejaculated Sir Napier, stooping over the senseless figure, as Kildare raised the unconscious man a little. "I suppose he tried to put up some defence—and they struck him down!"

"Poor old chap!" breathed Blake.

The faces of the juniors were as grim as Kildare's and Sir Napier's as they gathered round the senseless figure.

"No wonder he couldn't answer the telephone when we tried to phone through this morning," said Kildare, with a glance at his uncle. The captain's eyes were gleaming.

"We'll have to get a doctor—"

"Yes." Sir Napier nodded. "Some of you youngsters help carry Broom upstairs, will you, while I telephone."

Tom Merry and Talbot helped Kildare to bear the senseless figure up the broad staircase, while Sir Napier hurried to the telephone.

It did not take him long to get in touch with the nearest doctor. But since the medical man lived seven miles from Llanfellyn Towers—seven miles of snow-choked roads among the mountains—it would be a considerable time before he would arrive on the scene.

The old butler was put to bed, and Kildare bathed and bandaged his wound, helped by Tom Merry and Talbot. As they were finishing the task, Manners appeared at the door.

"There's one good thing, anyway," said Manners grimly. "The hounds never found that secret paper!"

"How do you know?" cried Tom Merry eagerly.

"We've found the women servants locked up in a room downstairs," explained Manners. "They've had the fright of their lives, and they're leaving the house at once—won't stay any longer, after this! But from what they've told Sir Napier, it's clear that the scoundrels buzzed off without that paper. They didn't go till an hour or so after dawn, when two others arrived here—evidently Charcas and that English scoundrel, Jackson, who got us lost in the mountains last night. When they drove away, the women heard them wrangling, and from what they said, they knew the scoundrels hadn't found what they wanted—"

"Thank goodness for that!" muttered Kildare.

"But why did they clear off before they'd found it?" queried Talbot, with a puzzled frown.

"Afraid we might turn up with the police at any moment, as Sir Napier guessed," explained Manners quietly.

Broom, the butler, was breathing heavily in his senseless state. There was no sign of returning consciousness.

A sound at the door caused the four within the room to glance round. Sir Napier had appeared there, an anxious frown upon his face.

"How is the poor chap?" he asked.

"Still unconscious, sir," muttered Tom Merry.

"He's had a bad knock-out," said Sir Napier, in a troubled voice. "I'll be glad when the doctor arrives. In the meantime, till he recovers his senses, we're in a bit of a fix ourselves with regard to that hidden paper. As you know, I am as ignorant as anyone of the whereabouts of the secret panel behind which Broom has hidden it! He is the only person in the world who knows where that paper is—and he can't tell us!"

"Phew!" breathed Talbot. "I hadn't thought of that."

"That's awkward," agreed Kildare, frowning. "The sooner that blessed paper is decoded, and sent to Riogway, the better! Until it is, those scoundrels won't rest without another attempt to get hold of it and destroy it—"

"That is just what I am afraid of," nodded Sir Napier grimly. "Let's hope poor Broom recovers his senses soon, and we can get the paper and set to work to unravel its secret!"

Leaving Talbot sitting with the injured man, the others went downstairs.

That the three women servants, who had been engaged only a few days before by Broom, under Sir Napier's letter of instruction, were determined in their resolve to leave the house there and then was soon evident. The three white-faced women appeared in the hall with their luggage within ten minutes. Clearly their terrifying night in the locked room, while the house had been ransacked by the gang of scoundrels, had left them utterly unnerved.

Sir Napier did not try to persuade them to stay. To do so would clearly have been useless. By that time the two cars, and Baggy Trimble, had been brought up to the house, and in one of them Kildare drove the servants away to their homes in the nearest village, while Sir Napier and the St. Jim's juniors set to work to put things straight in the ransacked rooms.

Kildare returned to the house at about the same time that the doctor arrived.

The medical man shook his head gravely after his swift examination of the unconscious man upstairs. It might be a long while before Broom recovered consciousness, he told them. In the meanwhile, there was nothing they could do beyond what they had already done.

The departure of the medical man was followed by the arrival at the house of a red-faced policeman.

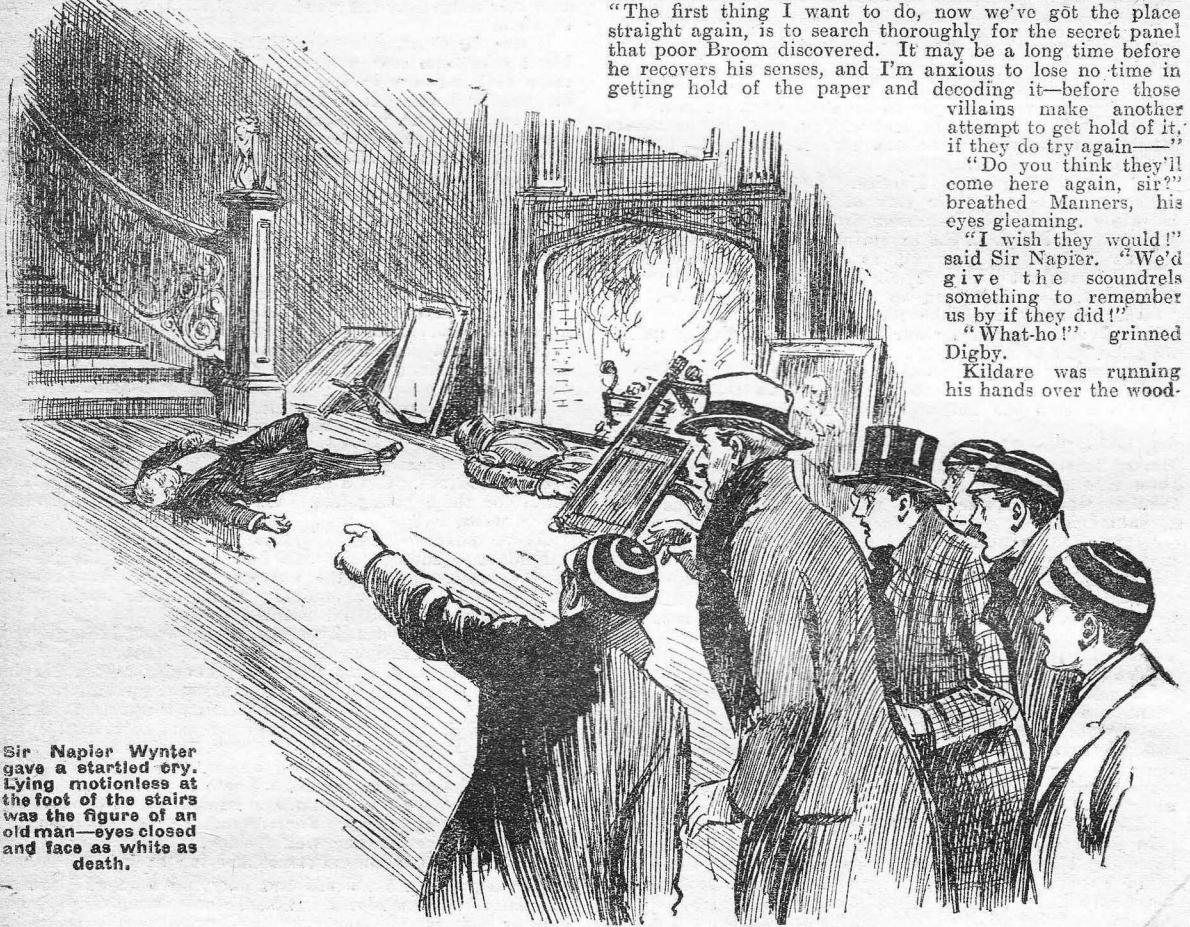
Sir Napier had telephoned to the police from the village where they had breakfasted, and the officer of the law had come to investigate. He jotted down copious notes, with an air of great importance.

"I don't think the scoundrels will dare to visit this house again, sir," he remarked finally. "Take it from me, they've cleared off, that's what they've done!"

"If Charcas & Co. knew there was only one policeman for miles round, and knew what a fathead he is, they wouldn't have cleared off at all, if you ask me," muttered Monty Lowther, as the juniors watched the man in blue cycle stolidly away down the snowy drive.

"Yaas, the man is a feahful ass!" sniffed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Tom Merry shrugged his shoulders and shut the front door as the policeman vanished at the point where the drive disappeared into the trees.



Sir Napier Wynter gave a startled cry. Lying motionless at the foot of the stairs was the figure of an old man—eyes closed and face as white as death.

Llanfellyn Towers. They moved off towards the library, leaving Baggy venting his feelings on the empty air!

Sir Napier was in the library with Eric Kildare. The two of them were closely examining the old panelling of the room. Sir Napier glanced round at the juniors' entry, and smiled rather wryly.

"I'm afraid I owe you youngsters an apology," he said abruptly. "I had certainly no idea, when I invited you all to spend Christmas with me, that we should be landed in this affair!"

"Oh, that's all right, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry quickly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"If it wasn't for poor old Broom getting knocked-out, it would be jolly good fun," put in Blake.

"Hear, hear!" grinned Herries.

"As soon as possible I shall get another staff of servants here, of course," said Sir Napier. "In the meantime, I am afraid we shall have to fend for ourselves!" He frowned.

"The first thing I want to do, now we've got the place straight again, is to search thoroughly for the secret panel that poor Broom discovered. It may be a long time before he recovers his senses, and I'm anxious to lose no time in getting hold of the paper and decoding it—before those

villains make another attempt to get hold of it, if they do try again—"

"Do you think they'll come here again, sir?" breathed Manners, his eyes gleaming.

"I wish they would!" said Sir Napier. "We'd give the scoundrels something to remember us by if they did!"

"What-ho!" grinned Digby.

Kildare was running his hands over the wood-

"I say, you chaps!" Baggy Trimble came rolling into the hall from the kitchen quarters. There was a trace of crumbs on Baggy's waistcoat, and it was evident that the Falstaff of the Fourth had been visiting the larder. "I say, it's rotten being left without any servants, you know—"

"Can't be helped," said Tom Merry shortly.

"We shall have to get our own grub!" grunted Baggy peevishly.

"Seems to me you've been doing that already!" growled Blake.

"Oh, really, Blake—"

"Br-r-r!"

"Look here," went on Baggy, in a complaining tone, "I think Sir Napier jolly well ought to get hold of some more servants somewhere! I'm used to lots of servants at Trimble Hall, you see—"

"Ring off, Baggy!"

"Oh, really, Manners! It's rotten to ask chaps to spend Christmas with you, then land 'em in a mess like this! I wouldn't say a word against Kildare's uncle, of course, but I think something ought to be done! I think—"

But Baggy did not finish telling them what he thought. The other juniors had not patience enough to listen to Baggy's grumbles over the unexpected state of things at

panelling, pressing his fingers here and there in search of a secret spring. Herries and Digby followed suit on the opposite wall, and under Sir Napier's direction a thorough search was soon in progress throughout the big, rambling house.

Even Baggy Trimble helped.

As dinner-time approached, Manners and Monty Lowther went off to the kitchen as self-elected cooks, and by one o'clock they served up an appetising meal in the big dining-room—a meal at which even Baggy could not grumble! Fortunately, the larder had been well stocked with food in readiness for Sir Napier's Christmas house-party a few days before.

It was quite a cheery party that gathered round the table to do justice to that repast.

But for the fact that the old manservant was still lying unconscious in the house, there would have been nothing to damp their spirits at all as far as Tom Merry & Co. and Talbot and Blake & Co. were concerned—and even that fact was no reason why they should be gloomy all the time. Moping would do no one any good.

The juniors, at any rate, had come to feel that the South Americans, after their failure of the night before, would

be unlikely to return to the house again—though Baggy was still decidedly nervous at that possibility.

"I fancy the wottahs will leave us in peace now, deah boys, aifah all," observed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, adjusting his gleaming monocle to glance round the table. "Don't you think so, sir?"

"Let us hope so, D'Arcy," answered Sir Napier quietly. He glanced smilingly at Manners and Lowther. "I certainly lift my hat to you youngsters as cooks! This beef is done splendidly!"

"Rather!" grinned Blake.

"I say," put in Baggy eagerly, "you chaps must let me help you with the cooking, you know. I'm a dab at cooking!"

"I don't think!" chuckled Lowther, who had the key of the larder in his pocket. "You can keep clear of the grub department, Baggy! Once you started sampling the cooking, there'd be no blessed cooking left!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Lowther——"

Sir Napier laughed.

"Anyway," he observed, "I hope that you youngsters will not be called upon to do the cook's job much longer. I'll phone up Cardiff and arrange for maids to be sent along. In a day or two we ought to be fixed up all right. Till the maids do arrive it's evident we can look after ourselves all right, anyway—and the new staff is sure to be here in time for Christmas Day!"

"Good egg!" grinned Herries.

The beginning of their stay at Llanfellyn Towers was certainly amazingly different from anything they had anticipated. But with the exception of Baggy the St. Jim's juniors looked upon it all as good fun—grim though it might turn out to be. Their being left without servants for a while, and having to look after themselves, was "rather a rag," as Blake remarked when the meal was finished, and he and Arthur Augustus and Digby undertook the task of washing-up.

But there was a shock waiting for them.

Sir Napier had gone to the library to telephone; he came out into the hall again with a queer look on his face.

Kildare, Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther, Talbot, and Baggy Trimble were gathered round the big fire that had been lighted in the hall. Herries was upstairs taking a turn at sitting in the room where the unconscious manservant lay.

"Uncle!" exclaimed Kildare sharply. "What's the matter?"

Sir Napier Wynter smiled a grim smile.

"I can't get through to the exchange on the telephone," he answered quietly. "The line is dead. I feel sure that it has been cut."

"Great pip!" breathed Tom Merry.

"You mean——" began Kildare, staring at his uncle.

"I mean, Eric, that I am feeling pretty sure that our enemies are at work again already—that they have cut the wire because they mean to visit us here soon, and are making sure that we cannot telephone for assistance!"

Sir Napier Wynter broke off abruptly, his head turned as though listening.

"Listen!" he muttered. "What's that?"

In deathly silence Kildare and the juniors by the fire listened. Through the partly-open window near them they could hear a sound that brought a startled look to the faces of all.

Faint and far-off though it still was, borne to them on the still, cold air, there came the sound of a motor-car. It was drawing nearer, for the sound grew more distinct as they listened with straining ears.

There was a gasp of alarm from Baggy Trimble.

"My hat!" breathed Talbot. "There's a car coming up from the gates all right——"

"Yes," nodded Sir Napier, with gleaming eyes. "It can only be that gang of South American ruffians—back again already."

CHAPTER 3.

The Wolf!

KILDARE strode swiftly to the window and stared out.

From among the trees that stood not far from the house, across the dazzling white stretches of snow-clad lawns, the hum of the approaching car's engine could be heard very plainly now.

That it was the revolutionaries returning none of those in the hall had a shadow of doubt.

Probably the foreigners had come to realise that in these lonely mountains they had little to fear from the police. With the telephone-wire cut the occupants of Llanfellyn

Towers were as cut off from the world as though hundreds of miles from anywhere.

Sir Napier took from his hip-pocket the snub-nosed automatic that he had been carrying since his arrival at the lonely old house.

"Warn the others!" he snapped.

Lowther darted off to the kitchen, to return with Blake, Digby, and the swell of St. Jim's—still with their sleeves rolled up from their dish-washing.

"Bai Jove, is it t'wue that the scoundwels have come back?" gasped Arthur Augustus excitedly.

Even as he spoke there was a sharp ejaculation from Eric Kildare.

A motor-car had appeared among the trees, turning towards the house.

Though it was still a couple of hundred yards or so from the window of the hall Sir Napier, Kildare, and the excited juniors could make out plainly enough the fact that the oncoming car was crowded with men. And the face of the man at the wheel was familiar enough to most of them.

It was the short, thin-faced little scoundrel with glittering black eyes who had attacked Sir Napier Wynter in the train on their way to Wales from St. Jim's, and who had escaped by leaping from the train into a snow-drift. And seated beside him was none other than Charcas, the handsome young South American who had passed as the son of the President of Rioguary during his brief stay at St. Jim's.

There was a yelp of terror from Baggy Trimble.

His face the colour of putty, the fat junior turned and bolted up the stairs.

Sir Napier flung open the window.

"Stop where you are!" he shouted sternly, in a voice that must have been heard plainly by the men in the car.

And the next moment Kildare's uncle had levelled his automatic and fired.

He had not aimed at the occupants of the car—it was simply a warning shot across the bows, so to speak. It was certainly effective!

The man at the wheel brought the car to an abrupt standstill—so abrupt that the car skidded round a yard or more in the snow.

"Quick!" breathed Sir Napier. "Eric, you know where the gun-room is. Get a Winchester—quick! And sporting-rifles for these youngsters. We'll give these scoundrels a warm welcome."

As he spoke he tossed his keys to Kildare.

Kildare nodded grimly and hurried off with the juniors at his heels. Outside the car was turning. It vanished back into the trees as quickly as its driver could swing it round, and Sir Napier laughed softly.

"That shot was a nasty surprise for 'em!" he muttered.

It was clear enough that the revolutionaries had not expected resistance with firearms. Though, as Sir Napier knew, they were all armed themselves, they had been so taken aback by that warning bullet that they had evidently considered discretion to be the better part of valour.

Risking a return bullet, Sir Napier peered out of the window, his automatic raised and ready. He heard the engine of the car stop somewhere among the trees.

A minute went by. But there was no sign of movement by the top of the drive. For the moment, at any rate, the scoundrels were keeping well hidden.

Kildare and the juniors came hurrying back into the hall.

The captain of St. Jim's was carrying a long, gleaming Winchester. Tom Merry & Co., Talbot, Blake, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were also armed with business-like-looking rifles. Sir Napier was a big-game hunter, and the gun-room at Llanfellyn Towers was stocked with a magnificent collection of weapons.

It looked as though they were going to prove more than useful now.

"Good lads!" exclaimed the baronet, with a grim smile.

"Found ammunition? Good! Eric, you'd better go into the library. Take a couple of these youngsters with you. Stay here with me, will you, Tom? The rest of you go to the dining-room windows. Don't shoot unless I shout—and then don't shoot to hit. We don't want their blood on our hands, villains though they are! But we'll drive them away for good, with a little luck."

"Good egg!" grinned Blake.

Kildare hurried to the library with Manners and Lowther.

Talbot, Blake, Digby, and the swell of St. Jim's ran into the dining-room. The windows of both the dining-room and the library overlooked the front of the house, and the scoundrels hiding in the trees would find themselves up against a good deal more than they were likely to have bargained for if they attempted to rush the house.

"This looks like bein' watah excitin', deah boys!" remarked Arthur Augustus, peering out of one of the tall windows. "I should like a pot at that wottah Charcas, don't

you know—not to kill the boundah, of course—just to make him jump.”

And the swell of St. Jim’s chuckled with grim satisfaction at the thought, and grasped his rifle in a businesslike way.

In the hall Tom Merry, his rifle in his hands, stood silently beside Sir Napier, watching the snow-laden trees by the head of the drive.

The eyes of the captain of the Shell were gleaming.

Tom Merry was an expert shot. He was one of the fellows who possessed his Marksman’s Badge, in the Eagle Patrol of Scouts at St. Jim’s. He felt quite at home with the glistening sporting-rifle ready in his hands. If it really came to grim work—if, in self-defence, the St. Jim’s party were compelled to fire actually at their enemies, despite Sir Napier’s present instructions—the agents of El Lobo would find that Tom Merry, and the others, too, knew how to shoot!

“Here they come!” breathed Sir Napier.

Out from the shadow of the snow-laden branches of the trees beyond the wide lawn half a dozen figures had appeared, running towards the house.

Several of them Tom Merry recognised. Charcas was one, the man who had attacked Sir Napier in the train was another. In addition, the men whom he and his chums had seen near Rylcombe were there. And in the centre of the little group could be seen the Englishman, Jackson.

Sir Napier raised his automatic.

“Let ’em have it, lads!” he cried.

His voice rang out grimly, and was answered a moment later by a rattle of firing from the dining-room and the library.

Tom Merry and Sir Napier fired together—firing, like the others, above the heads of the advancing men.

The effect was instantaneous.

The scoundrels crossing the lawn were utterly staggered at the volley of shots that had greeted their appearance. They had evidently been ready to risk one firearm against them—but nearly a dozen shots was something they had not reckoned for.

They turned and bolted back into the trees like lightning, and vanished.

Sir Napier chuckled.

“They didn’t like the look of things, after all,” he murmured laconically.

Tom Merry grinned.

“I fancy they didn’t,” he agreed cheerfully.

Running footsteps sounded on the stairs. Herries, his face amazed and startled, came into view.

Herries, upstairs in the room where old Broom lay, had been taken utterly by surprise when the volley of shots had sounded from the windows below. Tom caught sight of him and swiftly explained.

“My giddy aunt!” breathed Herries.

There was a sudden exclamation from Sir Napier Wynter.

A tall figure had appeared from the trees on the far side of the lawn—a figure carrying a handkerchief fastened to a stick—a white flag!

The man bearing the flag of truce came striding towards the house.

He was a broad-shouldered, splendidly-built man, with a swarthy face and an aquiline nose. A rough black beard hid his chin, his black eyes were fierce and ruthless. With great strides he marched over the snow towards the window from which Sir Napier, Tom Merry, and Herries were staring.

“Good heavens!”

The words broke from Sir Napier with strange intensity.

Tom Merry glanced at the baronet quickly. It seemed queer to the captain of the Shell that Kildare’s uncle should be so amazed that the scoundrels should have sent one of their number forward to parley under a flag of truce. But the next moment Tom understood.

Sir Napier’s eyes were riveted on the approaching figure of the man with the black beard.

“I never dreamt it,” he breathed. “He—in England!”

He gripped Tom’s arm.

“That man is El Lobo—the leader of the revolutionaries! It is the Wolf himself!”

CHAPTER 4.

The Wolf’s Ultimatum!

“THE Wolf?”

Tom echoed the words with a startled gasp.

That El Lobo himself, Sir Napier’s arch-enemy, was in England was a thing of which none of them had even dreamed.

“My giddy aunt!” breathed Herries, staring at the man approaching across the snow, utter amazement in his face.

Instinctively Sir Napier had raised his automatic. But he lowered it again at once. The man, villain though he was, had come forward under a flag of truce. That flag had to be respected.

The swarthy scoundrel halted on the edge of the snow-covered lawn, immediately opposite the big window at which Sir Napier, Tom Merry, and Herries stood. His black eyes flashed, as he lowered the stick to which the white handkerchief was fastened, and swept off his big black hat with a low, mocking bow.

“Good-day, Senor Wynter.”

He spoke in English, with a marked foreign accent. His voice was deep, and held a menacing ring.

“So you are in England, eh?” returned Sir Napier coolly.

“Rioguay still too hot to hold you, I suppose?”

The man’s eyes glittered. His lips twisted into a villainous smile.

“At present, yes!” he snarled. “But,” he went on, in a voice that was very soft, “soon, senor, I hope to return there—as President.”

Sir Napier laughed. Again the man’s eyes flashed evilly.

“You laugh, eh? One day you do not laugh, it may be. In the meanwhile, there is a certain paper—”

“What of it?” smiled Sir Napier coolly.

“I want that paper.”

“I thought you did,” nodded the baronet laconically.

“And I shall get it.”

“You think so?”

The lips of the South American twisted into a sinister smile.

“Senor, if you are a wise man you will give me that paper now. It is important for me to have it. I do not mind admitting to you—for I suppose you know it—that if the code is solved, and the true names upon that paper are sent to Rioguay, my plans for a second, and this time a successful revolution will be badly upset. So you will quite understand, senor that I am determined to get that paper in my possession at any cost. It will be wisest for you not to force me into taking drastic steps. If you hand to me that paper now—”

Sir Napier broke in with a scornful laugh.

It was answer enough! The face of the huge scoundrel standing in the snow darkened. His eyes went savage.

“So,” he said, “you refuse?”

“Yes, I refuse.”

“You will be sorry,” snarled the South American.

Again Sir Napier laughed.

He was not going to admit to this man that he himself did not at the moment know any more than his enemy where the fateful paper was hidden. He shook his head.

“No, senor,” he said quietly. “I am not surrendering that paper. And I warn you that if you try what you call drastic steps it will be the worse for you. You have already discovered that we are not unarmed—”

The man made an angry, impatient gesture.

“You fool!” he cried. “What can you do? We know that they are only boys. Carajo, what can boys do against me and my friends? You will not stand a chance if we attack this house in earnest. A handful of boys—pah!”

He snapped his big fingers contemptuously.

“Bai Jove!”

Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, Blake, and Digby had appeared in the hall, their rifles in their hands, in time to hear the South American’s contemptuous words. The swell of St. Jim’s snorted indignantly as he adjusted his gleaming monocle and surveyed the giant figure in the garden through the open window.

“Bai Jove! The cheekay wottah!”

Arthur Augustus leaned out of the window, and glared at the scoundrel with great indignation.

“You cheekay boundah!” he ejaculated, surveying the big South American with aristocratic hauteur. “Pah! to you, bai Jove! I wefuse to be weferrd to in that contemptuous mannah! You will discovah that Bwifish boys are a match for all the South American wevolutionawies in Wioguay, bai Jove! I considah—”

Tom Merry, Blake, Herries, and Digby chuckled. They could not help it. The sight of Arthur Augustus leaning out of the window with his hand to his eyeglass and lecturing the astonished scoundrel outside, struck them as being decidedly funny—despite the real gravity of the situation.

“Weally, you chaps, this is no laughin’ mattah!” insisted the swell of St. Jim’s. “I wefuse to have ‘pah’ said to me in that contemptuous mannah—”

“Go outside and give the rotter a ‘feahful thwashin’!” grinned Blake.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Pway do not be an ass, Blake! I considah—”

“Good old Gussy!” chuckled Tom Merry. “That’s the spirit, anyway!”

The man with the black beard had been listening in evident astonishment. He snapped his fingers again with an impatient gesture.

“Pah!” he exclaimed.

“Bai Jove! The cheekay wottah!” gasped Arthur Augustus. “He said it again! I considah—”

"You are fools!" snarled the Rioguayan. "You refuse to give me that paper I demand?"

"Yes!" snapped Sir Napier.

"Then we shall attack the house!" thundered the Wolf. An evil smile appeared on his swarthy face. "You did not know that we have had a spy watching the house all day? He has cut the telephone wire, and we know that there are no police for many miles—you are helpless, caught like rats in a trap!"

"Bai Jove! I wufese to be wuferred to as a wat—"

"You will be sorry you have defied El Lobo!" snarled the huge South American. "Senor Wynter, you are a big fool!"

"Thanks!" smiled Sir Napier. "And consider yourself lucky that we are honourable enough to respect your flag of truce. You relied upon that, I notice. It would be easy enough for us to shoot you down now, in cold blood, if we cared to do it."

An uneasy look flashed for a moment over the man's face. Then a sneering smile appeared. He knew well enough that Sir Napier would not do that.

With a shrug of his massive shoulders, the man turned and strode back towards the trees.

"What a howwible wuffian!" sniffed Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, he is a ruffian all right," nodded Sir Napier grimly. "But we've got to look out for trouble now. He means to get hold of that paper at any cost!"

CHAPTER 5.

Besieged!

KILDARE had appeared from the library with Manners and Lowther, and Talbot had joined them from the dining-room. Sir Napier turned swiftly to his nephew.

"Quick!" he rapped out. "We've got to close all the shutters downstairs—not a moment to waste, either!"

Even as he spoke, Sir Napier was turning towards the front door. He shot home the big bolts with a crash.

Tom Merry hastily closed the open window, and dragged the shutters across. As he did so, he saw the big figure of the chief revolutionary vanish among the trees.

The Terror of the Frozen North!



The First of a New Series of

Detective-Thrillers

Featuring Ferrers Locke
and Jack Drake starts in

The POPULAR

THIS WEEK!

Blake and Herries darted into the library and closed the window there, and fastened the heavy shutters. As they did so, they heard the sound of a shot, and from the dining-room across the hall there came the crash of broken glass and an excited shout.

"Great pip!" breathed Herries. "What's that?"

With the shutters securely fastened, they raced back into the hall. Talbot was emerging from the dining-room smiling rather queerly.

"They beggars nearly got me!" he said quietly. "Shot at the window as I was closing the shutters."

From room to room the juniors hurried, bolting the windows and securing the big wooden shutters, and locking the outer doors. Then, led by Sir Napier, they raced up the stairs.

It was from the windows of the upper rooms that Sir Napier intended them to repel the attack upon the house, if that were possible.

On the landing he rapped out his orders.

The juniors rapidly scattered to take up the strategic positions that he assigned them.

As they all realised, the attack would be made most likely from the front and west sides of the house, for on those sides the trees grew comparatively near the house, and afforded plenty of cover for the attackers. At the back and on the east side, the land sloped away in flat lawns and meadows, making it impossible for their enemies to approach from that quarter without exposing themselves helplessly for a long while before they could hope to reach the house.

Nevertheless, it was necessary to have someone on guard there, lest the attackers should discover that those sides of the house were unwatched. Sir Napier sent Manners off to the top room of the tower that stood at the south-east corner of the old mansion.

The rest were divided up among the four big bed-rooms that overlooked the front of the house and the west wing. Baggy, who had been found quaking with terror on the landing, was sent to the room at the back where old Broom still lay unconscious, with instructions to inform Sir Napier at once if the old manservant recovered his senses.

Baggy scuttled off, white-faced and trembling.

From the front of the house he could already hear the sound of firing.

"Oh, lor!" gasped Baggy. "I—I wish I'd never come to this rotten place!"

The firing he had heard had come from the long bed-room overlooking the front door.

Kildare, Tom Merry, Monty Lowther, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were there, crouching by the three tall windows.

They had taken up their positions there, under Sir Napier's instructions—to find that the attackers were already emerging from the trees.

A sharp volley of rifle-fire had driven their enemies back into cover very promptly. But from the trees had come answering shots. Kildare, kneeling by the sill of one of the end windows, felt a bullet sing in through the narrow opening of the lower sash, dangerously near his head. It embedded itself in the wall behind him, and the captain of St. Jim's smiled grimly.

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther were at the big centre window, with the swell of St. Jim's at the third window, his eyeglass jammed tightly in his eye, a long gleaming Winchester levelled through the narrow opening.

A thin trail of smoke was curling from the barrel.

"I say, deah boys!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus eagerly. "I wathah fancy I winged one of the wuffians, as he bolted back into the tweeks! I saw him dwop his automatic, don't you know—"

"Good man!" grunted Tom Merry.

"Keep down!" muttered Kildare. "And shoot for their legs. We've got to shoot to hit now, even if we don't want to kill. It's their fault if they get hurt—"

"What-ho!" grinned Monty Lowther.

Even as he spoke there was a crash of falling glass.

Tom Merry and Lowther jumped back swiftly from the big window as a bullet came smashing through it, pouring a cascade of broken glass on to the floor within the room and on to the narrow balcony outside.

"My hat!" breathed Tom. "Narrow squeak!"

He gave an exclamation as he saw that his chum's hand was cut and bleeding.

"It's nothing," said Monty hastily. "Only a cut—a chunk of glass fell on it."

He pulled out a handkerchief and knotted it round his hand, and peered out into the snow-covered garden.

"No sign of 'em now," he muttered.

For a moment, at any rate, the attackers were keeping well within the shelter of the trees.

There was a sudden rattle of firing from the next room, where Sir Napier was with Blake and Digby. Apparently one of the South Americans had shown himself for a



On the edge of the snow-covered lawn the Wolf halted and swept off his hat, with a low, mocking bow, "Good-day, Senor Wynter! !"

moment on the west side of the house, which one of the windows of their room overlooked.

"This is going to be hot work," muttered Tom Merry.

A door at the end of the room opened into another, smaller bed-room. Talbot was posted there.

"All right, Talbot?" sang out Kildare.

"Fine, thanks!" came the answering shout of Talbot of the Shell through the open door.

"Plenty of ammunition?"

"Heaps," answered Talbot cheerfully.

"Bai Jove! There's one of the boundahs!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus suddenly.

A furtive figure had crept into view, half-hidden by the trunk of a big tree. The man held an automatic in his hand, and as he peered towards the house he raised it carefully.

Crack!

A bullet came whining, and there was a cry from Talbot's room. The next moment the swell of St. Jim's fired, too, and the man leapt back out of sight. Evidently Gussy's bullet had passed very close to him.

But that cry from Talbot had turned Tom Merry's face white. He jumped to his feet.

"Talbot—"

"I'm all right!" shouted Talbot. "That blessed bullet just whizzed past my giddy ear—startled me, that's all!"

"Thank goodness for that!" muttered Kildare.

A minute went by.

A deathly silence had fallen. Of the attackers there was no sign. They had not fired again.

Grim-lipped, with gleaming eyes, the defenders of Llan-fellyn Towers knelt in silence at their posts, peering out into the glittering white garden.

Waiting!

CHAPTER 6.
After Dark!

DUSK was falling. For half an hour nothing had been seen of the Wolf and his followers. No shots had come from the dark belt of trees. Not a sound had broken the unearthly stillness that reigned.

That the attackers were biding their time, waiting till it was dark, was clear.

As soon as it was dark, without a doubt they would attack.

Already the dusk was deepening rapidly. It was pitch black now in the shadow of the snow-laden trees. The white stretches of snow around the house seemed strangely eerie and ghostly to the St. Jim's party, waiting at their posts for the attack they knew would come.

Blake and Digby had been downstairs making tea. The cheerful rattle of crockery heralded their return upstairs at last. In the long room above the porch Tom Merry glanced round, from where he knelt by the window, as the two Fourth-Formers entered the room carrying cups and saucers and a big tea pot.

"Good men!"

"Nothin' like a cup of tea for buckin' a fellow up," agreed Arthur Augustus approvingly. "And we'll need all the wefweshin' we can get before the night's out, deah boys!"

"We certainly shall," nodded Kildare quietly.

It was very dark in the room. Had they lit the lights, their heads would have been outlined plainly to the men outside, making easy marks to be fired at.

Talbot joined them from the small room on the right.

"It's a pity these clouds are rolling up," he said, in a troubled voice, glancing out at the sky. "We want all the moonlight we can get to-night!"

Kildare was at the window, peering out towards the edge of the trees.

"By Jove!" he cried sharply. "Look out! Here they come!"

Even as he spoke, there was the report of a rifle from the room where Sir Napier was on watch. Blake and Digby rushed to rejoin him, and there was a crash as Monty Lowther dropped his tea-cup and darted to the centre window.

Across the white lawn, through the gloom, half a dozen shadowy figures could be seen racing.

Dim though the light was, as he raised his rifle to his shoulder, Tom Merry recognised the great figure of the Wolf. He picked out, too, the lithe, panther-like form of Charcas, and the Englishman, Jackson, and the little evil

figure of the man who had attacked Sir Napier on the train on the previous day.

Spreading out as they came, the six running figures sped towards the house through the faint light reflected from the snow.

At the same time, from the trees behind them came the stabbing spurt of an automatic—another, and another. Three men, at least were hidden in the trees, covering the advance of the others with their weapons.

A bullet whined through the broken centre window of the room where Kildare, Tom Merry, Lowther, and the swell of St. Jim's were kneeling with their rifles at their shoulders. It struck the ceiling at the back of the room, and there was a noisy shower of falling plaster. Another thudded into the masonry beside the window where Kildare was stationed.

Tom Merry pressed the trigger of his Winchester.

He was aiming at the legs of the giant leader of the attackers, and he saw the great scoundrel falter for a moment, then run on. But the light was so faint now that the bullet had only torn through the cloth of the man's trouser leg; startling him for a moment, evidently, but doing no damage.

Tom fired again.

From each window along the front of the house, on the first floor, rifles were cracking in staccato fashion. Spurts of flame stabbed the dark—and answering lurid daggers of light pierced the gloom from the belt of trees opposite. The bullets hummed towards the house with deadly intent, and the crash of breaking glass mingled with the rifle-fire of the defenders.

Around the legs of the running men, as they drew close to the house, spurts of snow showed where the bullets of the St. Jim's party struck. But heavy clouds obscured the moon, and the light in the garden was too faint for any accuracy of aim.

One of the oncoming scoundrels gave a cry, and fell.

But he staggered to his feet the next moment and came running on desperately. Another of the ruffians clapped a hand to his shoulder as he came.

"Got him!" muttered Kildare grimly.

Arthur Augustus crammed another clip into his rifle, and hastily adjusted his monocle.

The running figure of the man who had attacked Sir Napier in the train was approaching the house immediately opposite the window at which the swell of St. Jim's crouched. The man was running fast, carrying something in his hand that looked like an axe, though the light was too dim for Arthur Augustus to be sure.

He levelled the sights and pressed the trigger.

Arthur Augustus was one of the School House crack shots.

There was a wild shout from below. The sinister figure of the man on the lawn went sprawling forward. Arthur Augustus gave a muttered exclamation.

"Bai Jove! Got you, you wottah!"

The fallen man scrambled up and turned, staggering back to the cover of the trees.

A whining bullet struck the stonework of the balcony outside the centre window, sending a little shower of stone splinters spinning into the room past Tom Merry and Lowther. Tom felt a sharp pain at his right temple, and instinctively put a hand to his head.

There was blood on his fingers as he stared at them.

"Tom—"

"All right, Monty," said Tom steadily. "Only a graze." Hastily he bound a handkerchief round his head.

Everything had been happening so quickly that it seemed longer than it really was before the attackers had gained the shelter of the house wall, where the long balcony that ran outside the first floor windows hid them from the defenders.

Had the moon not been obscured by heavy clouds, and had there been sufficient light for the St. Jim's party to take better aim, the band of scoundrels would never have reached the house at all. As it was, only five of the six had gained the shelter of the wall, and of those two at least were hurt.

With the firing abruptly silenced, faint groans could be heard below.

"One of 'em has got lead-poisoning, anyway," muttered Kildare. "That chap who stopped one with his shoulder, I'll bet!"

"What are they up to now, I wonder?" breathed Monty Lowther.

They were not kept long in doubt.

A loud crash rang out below.

"Great pip!" muttered Tom Merry. "That sounds like an axe!"

Another crash—and another, this time at the window of the library. There was the sound of broken glass.

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"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "They've got axes, and they're bweakin' in!"

From below the heavy crashing of the axes on the thick wooden shutters of the hall and the library echoed through the silent house.

CHAPTER 7.

In Grim Straits!

CRASH! Crash!

A splintering sound from somewhere below told the defenders that the head of an axe had bitten into the wood of one of the shutters.

Clearly it would not be long before the men outside had succeeded in smashing their way in through the shutters, thick and strongly built though they were.

Crash! Crash!

The sound echoed through the house menacingly.

It was a startlingly unexpected turn of events. So dim and shadowy had been the figures of the men running across the lawn that the axes they carried had passed unnoticed.

"They must have got them from the empty gardener's cottage in the grounds," breathed Kildare.

A dark figure appeared in the shadowy doorway. It was Sir Napier Wynter, his automatic in his hand.

"Eric—Merry! Quick! Come downstairs with me! We'll stop these fellows yet!"

He turned and hurried along the passage outside towards the stairs. The captain of St. Jim's and Tom Merry followed him swiftly.

At the top of the stairs Sir Napier touched an electric light switch and flooded the hall below with light.

The three raced down into the hall.

The big window there was heavily shuttered, but the woodwork of the shutters was quivering beneath the powerful blows of an axe from outside. Already a long slit in the panels could be seen, and as they came down the stairs the gleaming head of an axe bit through, splitting the shutter for a yard or more with a splintered crack.

Sir Napier raised his automatic and fired.

The bullet drilled a clean hole through the shutter.

There was a sharp exclamation and a curse in Spanish from the other side of the shutter. The axe was wrenched out, and another shattering blow drove in a portion of the shutter. A swarthy face glared in through the jagged gap.

Instinctively Tom raised his rifle.

But the captain of the Shell did not press the trigger. He could not shoot the man! Desperate though their plight was, to take a human life was a thing that Tom Merry could not do, even in self-defence.

He lowered his rifle and snatched up the unburnt end of a lump of flaming wood from the log fire near him. With unerring aim, he flung the blazing brand at the face of the man staring in through the splintered hole in the shutter.

The South American had raised a gleaming automatic to fire in at them. But the next moment the burning end of the flying lump of wood had struck him on the jaw, and with a scream he vanished from sight.

"Quick!" breathed Kildare. "The library—"

He dashed in the direction of that room, and swung open the door.

Already the shutters of the library window were smashed in at the centre, and a man's arm was groping in, trying to find the iron fastenings.

Tom Merry, standing in the doorway, saw the captain of St. Jim's lay down his rifle swiftly and picked up the poker from the fireplace. With a quick spring, Kildare was at the window.

With all his strength, the stalwart skipper brought the poker down across that groping arm. There was a yell of pain from outside, and the arm vanished.

A face appeared, glaring in—the bearded face of the Wolf himself.

"Carajo!"

The snarling lips of the South American were bared from his teeth in an animal-like way.

Tom gave a gasp as he saw a levelled automatic thrust in through the splintered opening, directed full at Eric Kildare.

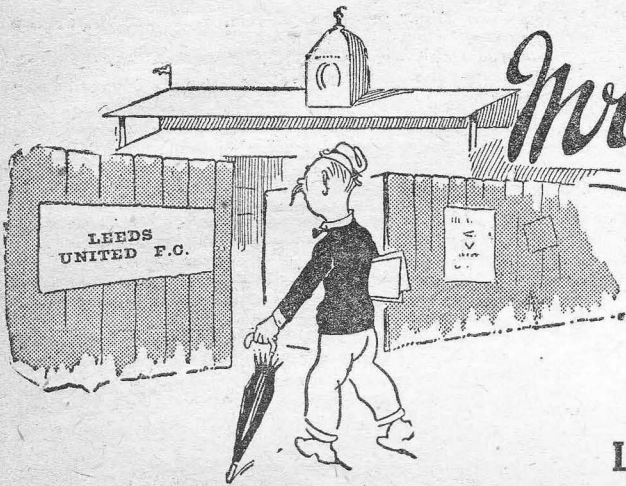
"Look out—"

Even as the warning shout broke from him Tom leapt forward.

His hand closed on the wrist that held the automatic, thrusting it up. There was an echoing report and a spurt of flame in the shadowy room. The bullet sped harmlessly above Kildare's head and burned itself in the plaster of the ceiling. Some of the plaster came showering down.

The next moment the powerful wrist was wrenched from Tom's hand.

(Continued on page 12.)



Mr. Parker POPS IN

TO SEE
LEEDS UNITED.

When Leeds United win the Cup—or perhaps we should say if and when—Tom Jennings must certainly be put up to propose the chief toast of the evening. The trouble is—so I am informed—that when he is interrupted at a club meeting he has a very hard task to keep himself from shouting "Foul, ref!"

The concert party being ended for the time being, I went into the centre-forward factory—I think that is what they call it—to get a few more facts about what the players do in their spare time, if any.

A Good Hand at—Golf!

I RAN up against Tom Townsley, and he told me that his spare-time job was keeping an account of the number of goals the club centre-forwards score. That was just like Tom—he is the champion leg-puller of the club. But actually there are centre-forwards at Leeds who do need somebody to count when they start the net-finding business. They have a lad in the first team now named David Mangnall. In a Northern mid-week league match not so long ago David only scored ten goals. After that exploit they had to put him into the first eleven, of course, because it was not felt wise to heap up discouragement on the young goalkeepers who play in that mid-week league.

After much persuasion, and when he saw that I was not going to "buy" any of his leg-pulling stories, Townsley did become serious enough to want to talk golf to me. It's a funny thing, but golf is one of the things which men don't joke about; they're always deadly serious. After much chat about "birdies" and "eagles" which I didn't understand, but which sounded pretty flighty anyway, Townsley did tell me enough to convince me that he is to all intents and purposes a "scratch" golfer. So I am not going to play him at the wee ball game.

A Pleasant Evening!

NEITHER am I going to take any of the Leeds lads on at the many-ball game known as snooker pool. They are too good at the "potting" business for my liking. And at billiards, on the fine table which is in the recreation-room, there are some adepts, too. Fifty and sixty breaks come from the cue of goalkeeper Johnson, while the full-backs, Roberts and Milburn, are about as good at scoring on the billiard-table as they are in stopping other teams from scoring on the football field.

A word with the manager, Mr. "Dick" Ray, and a shake of the hand of Arthur Campey, the trainer, and off I went. They were putting on another gramophone record, and my head was whirling round already. In any case I couldn't stand Mitchell's parting shot: "Remember to tell them that Leeds leads."

They certainly have the right sort of name and the right sort of spirit in the side. But I can deny, officially, the rumour that when the club wants new players this clause is put in the advertisement: "Only accomplished musicians need apply."

"Nosey."

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They are a talented band of stalwarts at Leeds, as Mr. Parker, our special "footer" representative, discovers when he pays the famous club in the Midlands one of his surprise visits. They can sing, play billiards, golf, and the piano—and GOOD FOOTBALL!

Sold up—Lock, Stock and Barrel!

FOR a few minutes we will listen-in to Leeds United Football Club. For this purpose you needn't worry if your three-valve set is not quite up to the mark. You will be able to hear even with an indifferent set, because Leeds United are the "Big Noise" of this current football season.

Nobody expected them to get to the top of the First Division, but they did that in double-quick time, and though they have since been deposed, as we say on Sundays, the first thing we pick up from Leeds is to the effect that they are going to win the championship of the First Division at the end of the present season.

As the people who are broadcasting can't hear any replies we make, we can, without fear and trembling, say to the good people at Leeds that it is high time they won something. The championship flag has never yet flown over their ground, nor is the name of Leeds United inscribed in letters of gold on the English Cup.

So whatever else we do we won't begrudge this lot from Leeds their hour of glorious life. Rather let us wish them the best of luck, mainly because they deserve it. The club has passed through troublous times, as you know. There was a time just after the War when the old club—called Leeds City—was sold up lock, stock and barrel by order of the powers who rule football with an iron hand.

Fighting Against Luck!

OUT of the dead Leeds City sprang up Leeds United, and there is one man on the staff at the present time who has seen the club through all its ups and downs since it was reformed. This is Ernest Hart, the centre-half who has a little competition of his own on with Willis Edwards as a competitor. They are in healthy rivalry as to which will get the greatest number of caps as England half-backs.

Russell Wainscoat told me this story about the half-backs and their competition, and then said that it was rather a pity that the two lads weren't collecting shoes instead of caps, because then he could pinch a few and sell them! From which you may gather—and quite rightly, too—that Russell is in the boot and shoe trade. So the quicker the lads of Leeds kick their shoes to bits the better he likes it.

I told you that we were going to listen-in to Leeds United. That idea came to me when I called at the ground on a certain morning not long ago. The strains of music were coming from the

dressing-room, and after pushing the door open just a little bit so that I could see what was happening, I stayed there and listened.

Gramophone—and Other Records!

SOME excellent turns were put on one after the other. First we had a few minutes of gramophone records. The instrument obviously belonged to Bob Turnbull, the outside-right. Anyway, Bob was turning the handle—no "pun" meant there—and some very delightful music was coming forth. Bob knows everything there is to know about gramophones—as well as most other musical instruments—and that may be one of the reasons why he is so very good in the "needle" matches.

After the gramophone records came a turn on the ukulele by John White. He was the last big player the club secured from Scotland, and I can tell you that he cost them a bonny penny. But he has been worth all the money, partly because of what he does on the field, and partly for the good cheer which he pours forth to keep the lads alive when they are travelling.

But, as a matter of fact, the impression that I formed when peeping through the partly open door into the Leeds dressing-room was that it was not so much keeping alive that the Leeds players wanted as keeping quiet. They do know how to amuse themselves and no mistake. If merriment is a real help to championship winning, then that flag is as good as flying over the ground at this very moment.

Star Turns!

GEORGE REED, the left half, for instance, may not have earned quite so much fame on the field as his two half-back colleagues who have played for England, but George can beat them all at singing a song. He is a very popular character in Leeds, being in great demand at local concerts.

For a moment or two after Reed had finished his song the whole place turned very serious. Somebody happened to mention some trouble in the industrial world, whereupon Tom Jennings got on to his hind legs and spoke like a real orator until somebody threatened to throw a boot at him if he kept on being so serious.

Still, they have to allow Tom to be serious sometimes, because he must try his speeches "on the dog," to use a popular expression. You see, Tom is a leading member of the Leeds Municipal Club, and gets into the way of making nice speeches.

The House on the Mountains!

(Continued from page 10.)

Kildare snatched up his rifle again and fired out blindly into the dark. The juniors could hear heavy footsteps retreating along by the wall, dying away in the snow.

The captain of St. Jim's wiped the moisture from his forehead and smiled in a twisted way at Tom Merry.

"Thanks, young 'un! He nearly got me."

Tom grinned faintly.

"We've driven the blighters off with a flea in their ears, anyway," he answered.

As at the window of the library the scoundrels outside the hall window had by now beaten a hasty retreat. As Tom Merry and Kildare emerged into the hall Kildare's uncle came hurrying towards them.

"What happened?" he cried. "I heard you fire—"

Kildare briefly explained. Sir Napier smiled grimly.

"Well, I fancy they've discovered we're a fairly tough nut to crack," he muttered.

He glanced frowningly at the splintered shutters. Suddenly he strode to the electric-light switches and snapped out the light, leaving the hall illuminated by the rosy glow of the fire.

"That's safer now—they could see in a bit too clearly before."

He broke off.

From upstairs a sudden crackle of rifle-fire had burst out and died away again almost abruptly. The next moment a cry was heard.

"What's happened?" breathed Tom, staring up the stairs.

"Go and see," said Sir Napier quietly. "I'll stay down here to guard these broken shutters."

In a moment Tom was racing up the stairs, with Kildare beside him.

The cry had come from the room at the north-west corner of the building, where Blake and Digby had been stationed with Sir Napier. Kildare thrust open the door and stared in.

It was dark in the room, but the faint light by the window showed the captain and Tom Merry that Digby was leaning against the wall with a hand to his shoulder.

"Great Scott! What's happened?" cried the captain of St. Jim's anxiously, hurrying into the room with Tom at his heels.

"Nothing much!" gasped Digby. "The blighters bolted for the trees, we fired after them, and one of 'em turned and got into a lucky shot with his automatic. Plunked me in the giddy shoulder."

Digby grinned ruefully.

Blake was standing beside his chum, anxiously examining the wound. But the leader of the Fourth moved aside as Kildare hurried up. The captain peeled off the wounded junior's sleeve with gentle fingers and ripped open the shirt.

"Not touched the bone, thank goodness," he muttered. "Only a flesh wound, young 'un. Lucky for you!"

He turned to Tom Merry.

"You'd better stay here with Blake. I'll see to Digby."

Tom nodded, and the captain led Digby from the room, to attend to his wounded shoulder in the light of a back bedroom, on the safe side of the house.

Though Digby was not badly hurt it was clear that he would not be able to take an active part in further proceedings that night.

There were two windows to the room in which Tom Merry and Blake had been left, one overlooking the front of the house, the other the side. It was across the lawn at the side of the house that the men who had attempted to break their way in through the shutters downstairs had retreated, after being driven off by Sir Napier, Kildare, and the captain of the Shell.

"This is a rum go, isn't it?" muttered Blake, as he and Tom Merry crouched one at each window, their rifles ready for any reappearance on the part of the Rioguyans from the shelter of the trees. "My hat! What a yarn it'll be to tell the chaps of St. Jim's next term!"

Tom nodded silently.

"What a game!" went on Blake. "My giddy aunt! I never guessed we were in for a regular cinema stunt like this when we set off to come here from St. Jim's. It beats the band. Anyone'd think we were in the middle of some giddy revolution in South America."

"That's so," agreed Tom grimly. "Miles from anywhere in these blessed mountains, like we are, these beggars can behave as if they're at home in Rioguy—that's the trouble."

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"Poor old Dig," muttered Blake. "Rotten luck, his stopping one!"

"Lucky it's only a flesh wound!" growled Tom.

"Think they'll attack again?"

"Sure to."

Blake grunted.

They had driven off the first attack in fine style, with only one casualty. But what would happen at Llanfellyn Towers before that exciting night was out was a question that none could answer.

CHAPTER 8.

The Figure in White!

BOOM!
From the clock over the stables on the east side of the house the last note of midnight died away on the cold night air.

Herries yawned.

He was sitting by the window in the tower-room that overlooked the south-east corner of the house, having relieved Manners of that solitary task two hours before. His rifle was across his knees, ready loaded.

Not that Herries anticipated having to use it. Though it was safest to have someone watching that corner of the house, it seemed very improbable that an attack would come from that quarter.

To the south and east gleaming white stretches of snow sloped away from the house for a long distance. There was no cover at all for the attackers. If they advanced over those white meadows they would provide easy marks for the defenders.

A steaming cup of hot coffee stood on the window-sill at Herries' elbow. Digby, though with one arm in a sling, had been making himself thoroughly useful. It was Digby who had succeeded in providing a good meal for the others at supper-time.

Since the first attack had been beaten off the Rioguyans had made two more determined assaults. But in each case they had been driven off—on the second occasion with an unconscious man borne between two of them—a man with a bullet in his chest.

The St. Jim's party had not gone unscathed. A fragment of broken glass, kicked out of a window-frame by a speeding bullet, had gashed Kildare's arm, and a ricochet had bruised Blake's cheek and torn the skin in an ugly way. It seemed a miracle that nothing worse had happened.

Herries sipped his coffee gratefully.

"Good old Dig!" he muttered. "This coffee's fine—"

He broke off, staring down from the little window.

Immediately below were the roofs of the old stables—now converted into garages. The moonlight had broken through the ragged clouds, revealing a white, ghostly shape moving among the old-fashioned jumble of gables of the stabling roofs.

Herries caught his breath.

The figure vanished behind a snow-clad ridge of the roofing, then reappeared again in the moonlight—a white, dim shape, eerie and ghostly, scarcely visible against the snow.

For a moment Herries felt a cold shiver. He knew that Llanfellyn Towers was supposed to be haunted—Sir Napier he told them the story of the ghost Crusader that was said to haunt the ancient mansion at Christmas-time—a spectral knight in chain-mail, bearing a battleaxe, with a crimson cross upon his mailed chest.

So ghostly was the figure gliding along the snow-clad roofs below that for a wild instant it seemed to Herries that it could only be the legendary spectre of Llanfellyn Towers.

Then he shook that fanciful thought from his mind.

Herries did not believe in ghosts—he was far too hard-headed a youngster.

Besides, ghostly though it looked, the figure on the roof of the stables was certainly not clad in chain-mail. It looked more like a white-clad monk, with a shimmering hood drawn over its head.

"What the dickens—"

Herries stared down in startled amazement.

The shadowy white figure was stealing furtively along between two high ridges of the roofing, towards the tower.

And suddenly Herries tumbled to the truth.

One of the attackers was making a daring bid to gain entry to the house! His dark clothes covered in the white sheet, obtained, doubtless, from the deserted gardener's cottage among the trees, the daring scoundrel had realised that he would stand a very good chance of crossing the snow on the east side of the house unseen. He had evidently realised that even if a good watch were being kept on that side of the building, the white sheet that covered him would render him practically invisible against the snow.

Had the moon not appeared just then, without a doubt he would have succeeded in his purpose, too. And, once in the house, by silently opening an outer door on the side

towards the trees, where his companions were waiting, the scoundrel would have enabled the rest to gain the house fairly easily by an unexpected rush. And, with the besiegers once inside the house, the St. Jim's party would be hard put to it to defend themselves.

Herries drew a deep breath. It was evident, too, that the man in the white sheet realised that all the windows on the ground floor were securely shuttered. He had gained the roofs of the stables with the intention of climbing along to one of the first floor windows at the back, and getting into the house that way.

Even as Herries swung up the window, he saw the ghostly figure below swing up on to the balcony of the room below him.

At sound of that up-flung window, the white-clad shape on the snowy balcony halted as if turned to stone. He stared up with glittering eyes, and the next moment the cloth had slipped back from his head, revealing in the bright moonlight a face that Herries knew well.

It was Charcas, the South American who had called himself Garcia at St. Jim's, and had pretended to be the son of the President of Rioguary.

"Garcia!" breathed Herries, instinctively reverting to the

name by which they had always known the handsome scoundrel.

Herries held his rifle in his hands.

The glimmering blue-black barrel was directed full at the motionless figure on the balcony below.

"Yes, you're spotted!" rapped out Herries. "You'd better stand quite still—just where you are!"

The glittering eyes of Charcas stared up at him, filled with vindictive hatred.

"Stick up your hands!" commanded the St. Jim's junior.

With a shrug, Charcas raised his arms, and the white cloth fell from his lithe figure.

"So you're not a giddy ghost, after all, eh?" grinned Herries grimly. "Thought you'd sneak in, then let your precious pals in, eh? But it won't wash this time!"

"So I see!" retorted Charcas coolly, in his soft, purring voice. "But what do you do now, my friend Herries?"

Herries did not answer.

For the moment he scarcely knew what he had better do. In this lonely corner of the big house it was doubtful whether the others would hear him even if he shouted.

But if he moved away from the window Charcas would be

(Continued on next page.)



ASK THE ORACLE!



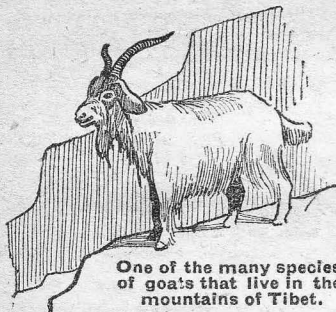
Questions ranging from "Where do flies go in the winter-time?" to "The best way to make a jam-roll" are answered without effort and in fully authentic terms by our wily Old



Wizard. Scottish readers need not send half-crown postal-orders with their questions—the Oracle is only too pleased to supply them with answers free!

Q.—What is a Cashmere goat?

A.—Now, you've come to the right person for goats, L. A., of Notts! My grandfather's gardener had a boy whose pal at school kept goats, and so I know all about 'em. In fact, I was once helped over a stile by one of these amiable creatures. But that wasn't a Cashmere



One of the many species of goats that live in the mountains of Tibet.

one. It was a—well, well! Perhaps I'd better not tell you what kind of goat I called that one. But returning to the question in hand, A Cashmere goat lives in the mysterious country of Tibet, and on the Himalaya Mountains. Its undercoat of downy greyish hair yields the Cashmere wool that is turned into cloth. So you see, this fellow is useful. The one who biffed me wasn't!

Q.—How many raincoats are worn per wet day in London?

A.—Ask me another! But if all the umbrellas were piled up in one heap near the Nelson monument, a good many people would get jolly-well soaked.

Q.—What does a dandy of the sixteenth century look like?

A.—One of my readers is



A dandy of 1530 "takes the air."

interested in modern and ancient costumes, and he has written and asked me to get the Gem artist to draw a dandy of 1530, so that he can add it to his collection. Well, the deed is done. Below you will see what this gentleman of bygone days looked and dressed like. A bit different to our clothes, what? I can imagine the sensation a chap would cause if he went down Oxford Street garbed in similar fashion. He wouldn't get far!

Q.—Are dogs and other mascots allowed aboard warships?

A.—Yes, in reason, P. B., of Dorchester. Many of the mascots of the Fleet have become famous, such as Brindle Boy, the dog of H.M.S. Lion, the two black cats that sailed in the Vendictive to raid Zeebrugge, and poor Jacko, the monkey of the Loyal, which was washed overboard and drowned at sea. At Jutland, H.M.S. Valiant of the Fifth Battle Squadron had on board a pedigree cockerel as mascot, but the blast from a bursting shell flung him down a ventilator shaft, where he stuck all night. However, he fulfilled his duty by crowing lustily for a British victory until rescued on the following morning, and no doubt received an extra whack of rations for keeping his end up!

Q.—What is the difference between twice fifty-three and twice three and fifty?

A.—Fifty. Think it out, chums.

Q.—What is the best correspondence course of memory training?

A.—I never recommend any particular brand of correspondence course, Alfred Wakefield, of Barnsley—at least, not for my readers. Some time ago I did so in the case of our sub-editor, hoping thereby that he might re-

member the half-dollar I lent him several months previously. He got along very well—very well, indeed; in fact, he actually remembered that he had paid me back and recommended that I should try a course so that possibly I might remember, too. The correspondence school sent him a very nice letter, too. They wrote:

"Dear Sir,—We feel deeply gratified by your unsolicited testimonial as to the benefits derived by you from our memory course and thank you for calling personally at our offices to express this satisfaction. Trusting you will recommend to your friends our course which has refreshed and strengthened your own memory. Again thanking you. Yours truly, etc.

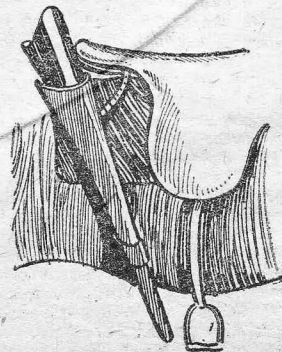
"P.S.—Your walking-stick and gloves, which you inadvertently left behind you in our offices, have been forwarded to you by parcel post."

Q.—Who were the Ottomans?

A.—They were the Turks who captured Constantinople in the year 1453, Reggie P. I don't know what you mean by that second question about the snake that swallowed its own tail and went on swallowing.

Q.—How are carbines carried on horseback?

A.—Certainly a mounted soldier can't always be carrying his carbine under his arm when he is not using it, and neither can he put it behind his ear, as the office-boy puts his spare Woodbine. So attached to the saddle is a stiff leathern socket, called a carbine-thimble, and into this the gun is slipped, just in the manner of a revolver in a holster. Our Gem artist illustrates this "thimble" in the little diagram below.



When not in use a carbine is slipped in a leathern socket called a "thimble."

able to make his escape. And he could not stand there holding up his prisoner with his rifle for the rest of the night.

Then a way out of the difficulty came into his mind.

A water-pipe ran up beside the window at which he stood, passing the balcony below. He knew that the lithe South American youngster would be quite capable of climbing up it.

"You'd better climb up to this room, Charcas," said Herries, with a grin. "Up the pipe! Come on, or you'll get an ounce of lead that'll surprise you!"

As a matter of fact, Herries knew very well that if his prisoner refused to obey him, he would not shoot at Charcas. It would have been too cold-blooded a business for a fellow like Herries to do. But Charcas came from a country where people were less particular in such matters, and it probably did not occur to the Rioguyan for a moment that Herries would be in the least reluctant to fire.

He evidently dared not disobey. He took hold of the pipe sullenly and began to climb.

"I've got you covered!" exclaimed Herries warningly.

It did not take the agile South American long to reach the window-sill of the upper room. The St. Jim's youngster drew back as his prisoner swung silently over the sill into the room and stood facing him with smouldering eyes.

"Good for you!" muttered Herries. "I fancy you'll be a pretty useful hostage, Charcas!"

He nodded towards the open door.

"Get along out there!" he commanded. "I'll be behind you, with this giddy popgun, so I shouldn't try any funny business. See? I'm taking you along to Sir Napier—"

There was a sudden, startled cry from the South American.

Wide-eyed, he was staring past Herries at the dark doorway.

Herries glanced round swiftly.

A moment later he realised that he had been fooled—and by an old trick at that! But it was too late. Charcas had leapt at him with the agility of a leopard, and dragged the rifle from his hands. Herries saw the other's black, glittering eyes alight with triumph—then a lightning fist crashed into his face.

He staggered back helplessly.

Again that fist landed, this time on the point of the jaw, with stunning force.

George Herries dropped to the floor in a senseless heap.

CHAPTER 9.

Within the House!

"BUENO!"

The South American laughed softly, as he stood staring down at the inert form of the St. Jim's junior sprawled motionless at his feet.

He stood listening. Not a sound broke the stillness.

It was clear that no one in the house had heard the sound of Herries' fall. Charcas gave a mutter of satisfaction, and stole across towards the shadowy doorway. An automatic was gleaming in his hand now.

He had gained entry to the house, after all, as he had set out to do! With a last glance back at the still figure lying on the floor, the Rioguyan stole out with catlike stealth into the passage beyond.

Like a shadow he crept along to the narrow stairway that led down to the first floor. The moonlight, streaming in through a passage window, showed him the head of another flight of stairs, evidently a back staircase. He moved quickly towards it.

But at the top of the stairs he halted, as if turned to stone.

He had heard footsteps crossing the floor of a room near him. The next moment a door opened, and a blaze of yellow light streamed out from the room beyond. Outlined in the lighted doorway was the fat figure of Baggy Trimble.

Baggy had become hungry again, after his long vigil by the bedside of the unconscious butler. He had come out now, intending to get hold of some more food, but at sight of Charcas standing there by the top of the stairs, the face of the Falstaff of the Fourth showed that he had quite suddenly forgotten all about food.

He stared at Charcas as though he could not believe his eyes.

"Mum-mum-my hat!" stammered Baggy.

Then a look of terror leapt into his face. He opened his mouth to yell, but already the South American had sprung at him. A steely hand closed over Baggy's mouth and he was dragged into the lighted room.

The muzzle of an automatic jabbed into his fat ribs.

"Quiet, you dog!" hissed the South American menacingly.

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Baggy would not have disobeyed at that moment for a thousand pounds.

Charcas glanced round swiftly. The old butler was lying in the bed, his lips moving as he muttered in delirium. There was a thin quilt on the bed, and Charcas snatched it off.

"One sound, and you die!" he muttered.

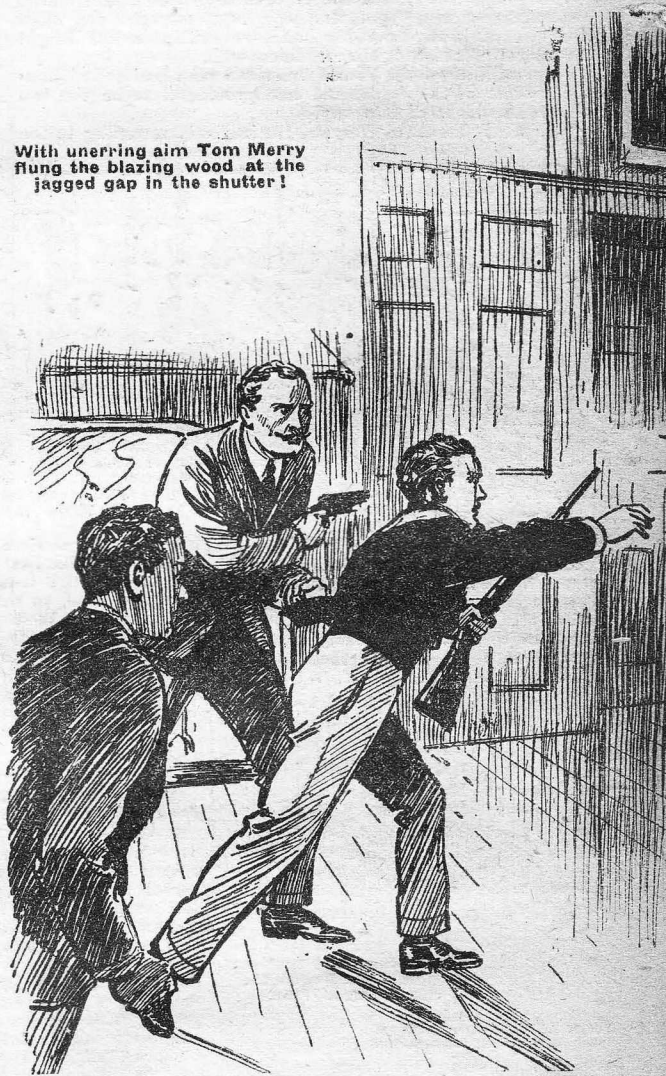
"Oh, lor'!" gasped Baggy. "I—I won't say anything, old chap. I won't even open my mouth, if you don't want me to."

"Silence, you fat fool!"

"Certainly!" gasped Baggy, quaking from head to foot. "Oh, certainly! Anything to oblige an old pal—"

Baggy got no further. Charcas had torn off a corner of the quilt, and he thrust it into Baggy's mouth, bringing

With unerring aim Tom Merry flung the blazing wood at the jagged gap in the shutter!



the Falstaff of the Fourth's stammering protestations to an abrupt end.

Swiftly the South American tied one corner of the quilt round the fat Fourth-Former's mouth, gagging Baggy utterly. The rest of the quilt he wound tightly round his trembling victim, fastening his arms to his sides, and securing his fat, little legs. When Charcas had finished, Baggy was lying on the floor in a helpless, palpitating heap, bound hand and foot, and staring up at Charcas with dumb terror.

"So much for you," muttered the South American.

He stepped swiftly out into the passage again, and listened. He could hear nothing. Closing the door behind him, he turned again to the stairs, and crept down them like a cat.

They led him to the kitchen quarters—dark and deserted. Stealing like a shadow along a passage at the back, he came, with a mutter of satisfaction, to one of the outer doors.

CHAPTER 10.

The Fight on the Stairs!

Softly drawing back the bolts, the Rioguanan drew the door open, and found himself gazing across a stretch of glittering snow towards the trees on the west side of the house.

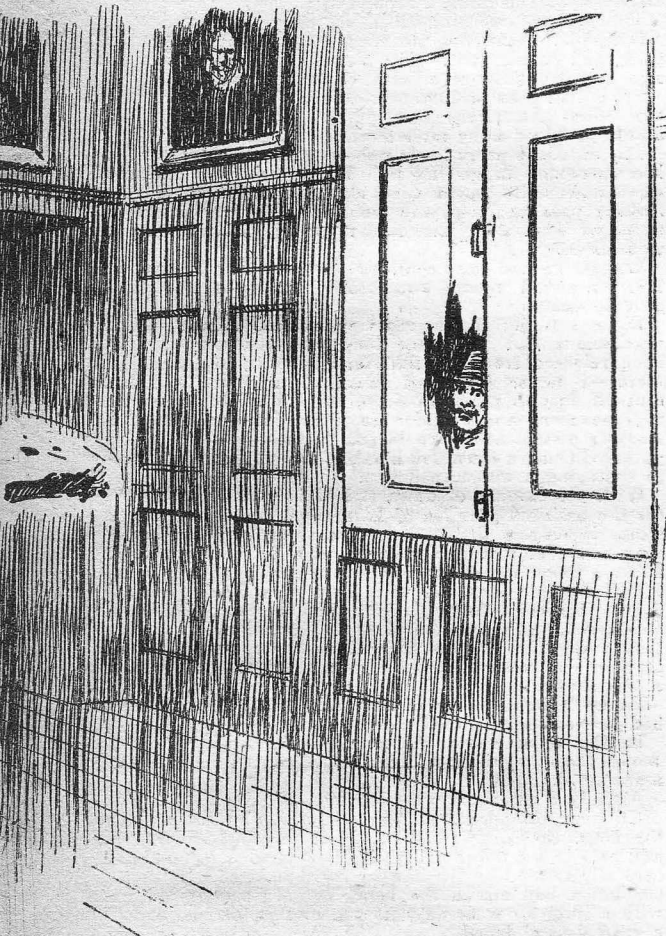
Even as he stared across towards the trees, a dark cloud slid over the moon.

"Bueno!" muttered Charcas, with a soft laugh.

He took from his pocket a little electric torch, and sent a stabbing point of light flashing out towards the trees.

His signal did not go long unanswered. There was a sudden rush of dark figures from the belt of trees, speeding towards the open door across the dim, shadowy lawns.

There was a shout from somewhere above, and the sharp report of a Winchester rang out. It was followed by a



"GREAT Scott!"

"Listen—"

"My hat, they've got in—"

The St. Jim's party could hardly believe their ears as the footsteps of the attackers echoed up to them from within the house.

That every door had been securely fastened, every window heavily shuttered, they knew. Yet their enemies were inside the house, a moment or two after their unexpected dash across from the trees.

It was staggering!

But there was no time to waste in wondering how they had managed it. With the Wolf and his followers in the house, their comparatively safe position as defenders of the besieged house was safe no more. In a few moments they would be at grips—hand to hand.

"Follow me!" shouted Kildare.

With the juniors behind him, the captain of St. Jim's raced for the top of the broad staircase.

As they came to the top of the stairs, the attackers came bursting into the hall below through the door that led from the kitchen quarters. The Wolf was in front, a huge, bearded figure with glittering eyes, a great, black revolver in his hand. Behind him were Charcas and Jackson, the renegade Englishman, and five other dim, villainous faces as the revolutionaries swarmed through into the firelit hall with trampling feet and excited shouts.

Sir Napier Wynter had been in the hall, having undertaken the dangerous task of guarding the broken shutters of the hall and library. Now he was crouching on the stairs, in the shelter of the heavy banisters, his automatic ready in his hand.

Crack!

Sir Napier's weapon spoke, and one of the shadowy scoundrels gave a cry, and reeled sideways against the wall, a hand to his shoulder.

In a moment there was an answering, heavy shot from the revolver of the great, bearded figure in the forefront of the band of scoundrels. The lead sang within inches of Sir Napier's head, and crashed into the panelling of the staircase wall. In another moment Sir Napier had leapt up the stairs and joined the others. To have stayed on the stairs would have been madness, as the next instant showed.

Half a dozen shots rang out, splintering the banisters, and thudding into the woodwork behind. The stairs were so shadowy that the scoundrels had not seen Sir Napier's swift retreat.

The ruffians in the hall came thundering in a shouting swarm towards the foot of the stairs.

The Wolf, staring up with savage eyes, flung out a pointing hand.

"There they are!" he shouted in Spanish. "Up the stairs, hombres—"

"Let 'em have it!" breathed Kildare.

And from the top of the stairs an echoing volley of rifle-fire rang out.

The St. Jim's party, crouching coolly at the top of the wide staircase, were hidden in dark shadows, invisible to the men below. But the Wolf and his followers were revealed by the glow of light from the big fireplace behind them.

One of them collapsed with a groan, and from Charcas there was a stifled cry, as a bullet from Talbot's gleaming Winchester grazed his forearm with a burning gash. Another of the scoundrels clapped a hand to a torn ear. It had been a wild shot from Lowther's weapon that had so nearly found his temple.

But even now the St. Jim's juniors were not aiming to kill. That was a thing that none of them could bring himself to do. And against such utterly unscrupulous villains as these men, it was a bad handicap for the defenders that they had such scruples, for they knew that no quarter would be given to them.

A ragged volley from the weapons of the men below whistled up the dark stairs.

But the scoundrels were firing blindly, unable to make out the figures of the defenders in the gloom. A lucky shot took Manners in the leg, searing the flesh like a red-hot iron, and a bullet tore through Tom Merry's sleeve, ripping it from wrist to elbow. But the majority of the shots flew harmlessly by, to bury themselves in wall and ceiling.

"Bai Jove, heah they come!" gasped Arthur Augustus, cramming another clip into his rifle.

Up the stairs the scoundrels were surging, the huge figure of their leader in front, a dim and shadowy swarm of cursing ruffians.

Suddenly Kildare leapt out before the others.

By the top of the stairs was standing a glimmering suit

rattle of firing from the windows of the house. But so sudden and unexpected had the rush been that the attackers were half-way across the open stretch before the watchers above had had time to fire at all.

And in the dim light, accurate firing was almost impossible.

In a few moments the giant figure of the Wolf himself had thundered in through the doorway where Charcas stood, his six followers at his heels. The scoundrels came crowding into the passage, with echoing footsteps.

From somewhere upstairs came a startled shout, in the voice of Tom Merry:

"They've got in! They're in the house—"

"Follow me!" roared the Wolf. "Carajo, we have them now! We will show these gringos it is not wise to have defied El Lobo!"

With crashing footsteps the great bearded chief of the revolutionaries thundered towards the front hall, his swarthy followers hot on his heels.

of plate-armour—one of the many suits of mail that ornamented the hall and staircase.

The captain of St. Jim's seized it and swung it into the air, exercising all his strength. Though his arm was bandaged where it had been gashed by broken glass from the window of one of the bed-rooms, he lifted the suit of heavy mail above his head as though it had been a sack of feathers.

With every ounce of strength in his muscular arms Kildare flung the gleaming suit of burnished steel down upon the scoundrels as they rushed up the staircase.

Crash!

Full on the chest of the leader of the revolutionaries the breastplate of the heavy mail fell, sweeping the great villain backwards like a ninepin. He crashed back against those behind him, and, with the suit of armour on top of them, the whole swarm went hurtling in a wild mass into the hall.

"Oh, good egg!" gasped Jack Blake.

"Hurrah!"

The men in the hall staggered and scrambled to their feet. One or two of them, clearly, had been hurt in their fall. But the Wolf swept a great arm forward, pointing up the stairs.

"Follow me!" he thundered in Spanish. "We will rout the dogs out—"

He got no further.

Sir Napier had raised his automatic and pressed the trigger. The bullet sang down the dark staircase, grazing the huge Rioguyan's swarthy temple.

It was a knock-out blow! El Lobo reeled and crashed to the floor, senseless.

Gasps of utter consternation rang out from his followers. The sight of the fall of their leader filled them with sudden panic.

They stood hesitating. Then with a yell and a cheer the St. Jim's party came racing down the stairs in a body.

It was a matter of bare hands now! In the dim-lit hall, with the shadowy, reeling figures black against the firelight, a bullet would have been likely to find friend or foe. In a whirling battle of fists the St. Jim's juniors, Eric Kildare, and Sir Napier Wynter hurled themselves at the suddenly panic-stricken scoundrels.

"Let 'em have it!"

"On the ball, St. Jim's!"

"Huwrah! On the ball, deah boys—"

"What ho!"

With trampling feet the combatants reeled and staggered together in the gloom.

Manners, clinging for support to the banisters above, for his wounded leg was paining him, stood at Digby's side and watched with gleaming eyes the desperate struggle. Digby, his arm in a sling, thanks to his damaged shoulder, was also out of things; but his face was as eagerly alight as though he had been in the thick of the fight.

But if the two juniors could not help, they could shout encouragement—and they did.

"Let 'em have it, St. Jim's!"

Watching intently, they saw Tom Merry, his head bandaged, his face like stone, deal one of the South Americans a staggering blow on the chin that knocked the man flying against the wall. They saw Arthur Augustus D'Arcy side-step nimbly as a glittering knife that one of the villains had dragged out flashed down at him—and the next moment the man who held the knife had reeled back from a stinging blow to the jaw from the swell of St. Jim's businesslike fist.

The others were doing good work, too, with Kildare and his uncle a tower of strength in the thick of the desperate struggle.

It was not long before the South Americans had had more than enough!

One of them dragged open the big front door, and almost before the St. Jim's party realised what they intended, they were retreating into the night, carrying with them the senseless figure of their leader. Talbot rushed forward with Tom Merry, Lowther, Blake, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy at his heels; but a bullet came whining in from the darkness, and they halted uncertainly.

The next moment Sir Napier had slammed the door and shot the bolts.

"Let them go" he said grimly. "No good trying to follow—they could shoot us down easily! We've driven them off, and that's all that matters!"

Once again the defenders of Llanfellyn Towers were left triumphant masters of the situation, and a breathless cheer rang out in the old firelit hall.

"Talk about an exciting night!" chuckled Talbot. "My hat—this beats the giddy band!"

"Yes, it's exciting enough," nodded Eric Kildare, with a faint, grim smile.

As Talbot had said, it was certainly proving an exciting night.

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But what was more, the St. Jim's party were showing themselves a thorough match for the gang of desperadoes from lawless Rioguyal!

CHAPTER 11.

Out of the Blue!

"GROOOOH! Oh! What is it, deah boy?"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rolled over, opened his eyes, and sat up sleepily, as Tom Merry shook him by the shoulder.

"Your spell at the window now, Gussy, old hoss!"

"Bai Jove! Alweady? Vewy well, deah boy!"

And with a yawn and a stretch, the swell of St. Jim's scrambled out of the blankets in which he had been sleeping on the floor, and blinked around him.

The light of morning filled the long bed-room.

Outside, the sun was gleaming on the snowy lawns and trees, and on the great white shapes of the mountains that rose against the sky on all sides of the lonely house.

There had been no further attack since the occasion when the South Americans had gained entry to the house and been driven away after the fall of their leader.

The St. Jim's party knew well enough how the scoundrels had succeeded in getting in. The discovery of the open door downstairs made that clear, as soon as Herries, looking pale and unsteady from his knock-out blow, had appeared soon after the retreat of the Rioguyans and told his story.

Though he had been senseless for more than ten minutes Herries pulled round wonderfully, and was now fit as a fiddle again.

Baggy's plight in the room where old Broom still lay unconscious had not gone long undiscovered. He had been released from the folds of the quilt, still in abject terror—a terror that had remained until he had been sent off duty to get some sleep, and his snores had started to echo along the corridor from one of the bed-rooms! Baggy's distant snores could still be heard as Tom Merry gathered Gussy's discarded blankets around him preparatory to snatching a well-earned nap.

With the coming of dawn it had been vitally necessary for the besieged garrison of Llanfellyn Towers to get some sleep, if only a little. So while three of their number kept watch at strategic points, and a fourth went to the butler's room, the others had turned in.

Rolled up in blankets, with their rifles beside them, the School House juniors, Kildare, and his uncle had been happy enough lying on the floor in the two long bed-rooms that overlooked the north and west corners of the old mansion—all ready to hand at a moment's notice if an attack should come.

Baggy Trimble alone of the party had actually gone to bed between sheets that night!

In the room above the front porch, Arthur Augustus moved to the window and stared out into the early morning sunlight.

Already Tom Merry was sleeping.

Kildare, Manners, and Herries were also rolled up on the floor, breathing steadily. Manners' face looked worn and pale in the morning light. His wounded leg had been carefully treated by Sir Napier and bandaged; fortunately the bullet had missed the bone, but Manners would walk with a limp for some days, it was certain, and he had lost a good deal of blood.

Of the others, Talbot and Blake were sleeping in the next room, where Sir Napier was on watch. Digby was with the delirious old manservant, and Monty Lowther was on watch in the south-east tower.

Arthur Augustus, staring across the lawns to the belt of trees beyond, could see no sign of the desperadoes hidden there.

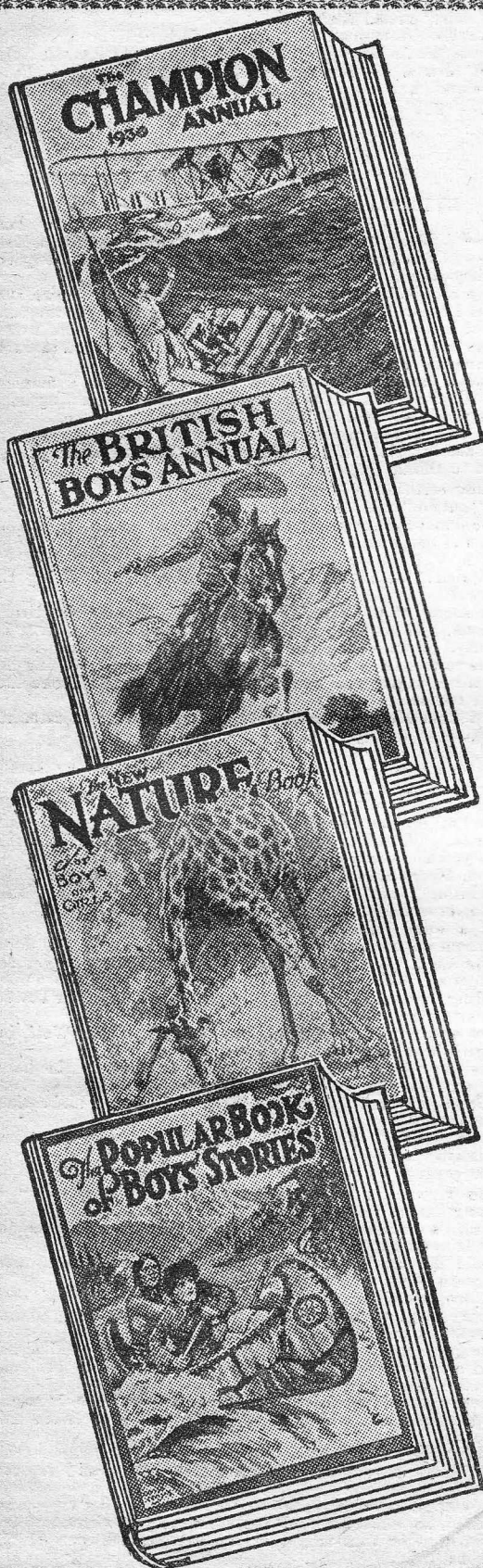
But that the Wolf and his followers were still ambushed round the house was known well enough, for the noise of their motor-car had not been heard during the night.

It seemed likely that the band of South Americans, knowing that the nearest other human habitation was miles away, and that no one was likely to come near the house for days, were intending now to bide their time, with the grim intention of starving the defenders out.

It would be easy enough for them to get food as they required it from the nearest village. But for the St. Jim's party, trapped in the old mansion with the telephone wire cut, there was no chance of replenishing their stock of food while their enemies were encamped in the trees by the house.

Arthur Augustus glanced into the magazine of his dully-gleaming rifle to make sure that it was loaded. He carefully polished his eyeglass with a silk handkerchief, jammed it into his eye, and sat down on a chair by the window, though keeping far enough back to be invisible to the men among the opposite trees.

(Continued on page 18.)



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The House on the Mountains!

(Continued from page 16.)

The swell of St. Jim's hitched up his elegantly-creased trousers, straightened his tie, and shivered slightly.

"Wotten business. havin' to sleep in one's clobber, bai Jove!" he muttered. "They get so dustay!"

Which was the swell of St. Jim's sole comment on the most exciting night he had probably ever spent.

"Look!"

Tom Merry, at the window of one of the big first-floor rooms, flung out a pointing hand.

"Well, I'm blessed!"

"An aeroplane!"

It was midday. A hot dinner, cooked by Manners and Monty Lowther, had just been enjoyed by all, after an uneventful morning. Though once or twice they had glimpsed movements among the trees, heard the motor-car drive off and return, doubtless with food fetched by one of the band, the scoundrels had not attempted to attack the house again.

The sound of an aeroplane, so unexpected among these lonely snow-clad mountains, had drawn them all to the windows, though they were careful not to get too near, lest the sight of them might tempt a shot from the distant trees.

They were all wearing greatcoats. Though fires had been lighted in the rooms which they were occupying, overlooking the points from which an attack might be expected, the windows were all broken, and the cold, wintry air came beating in, icy and chill.

"A giddy aeroplane, bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, staring out at the sky through his gleaming monocle. "Cuvious! Fancy seein' an aeroplane in this lonely cornah of the mountains!"

"My hat! Couldn't we signal to it?" cried Herries eagerly, staring up at the shining silver plane that was speeding over the mountains.

"It's coming this way," muttered Kildare.

Even as they had watched, the shining machine—a handsome monoplane—had turned, and was now heading straight for the house.

"It's coming down!" yelled Blake suddenly, a note of eager excitement in his voice. "Look!"

"Gad! It certainly looks like it!" muttered Sir Napier Wynter.

Nearer and nearer the plane was skimming, dropping down towards the old mansion in the hollow of the hills. It was a good-sized machine, capable of carrying several passengers.

"Must be a private plane," muttered Herries. "It can't be coming here, though."

"I believe it jolly well is!" ejaculated Reginald Talbot excitedly. "My hat! Look! Here she comes!"

There was no doubt about it. The aeroplane's engines had been cut off. It was gliding down towards the house, circling as if to land in the spacious meadows at the back.

The St. Jim's party stared at one another in utter amazement.

Who could be in the aeroplane was a mystery that bewildered all.

"Great pip!" Tom Merry caught his breath. "I suppose it can't be something to do with the Wolf—pals of his?"

"There's that possibility," nodded Sir Napier sharply.

"See here, some of you hurry along to the east tower and see who lands from it. It's evidently coming down in the meadows. Merry, Talbot, Blake—you go!"

In another moment the three were hurrying from the room.

In the tower, Monty Lowther was on guard. His face was excited as the other three came crowding into the tower-room.

"Seen the plane?" he shouted. "It's landing now!"

They ran to the window.

The big, silvery monoplane had touched the ground, its wheels bumping along through the dry snow. It swung round as it came to a standstill, and stopped with its nose towards the house, only a few hundred yards away, and not far from the end of the belt of trees that ran along the north side of the building.

Whoever had been in that aeroplane, the four St. Jim's juniors watching from the tower had certainly never expected to see the familiar figures that actually landed from it.

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One, obviously the pilot, they did not know; but the other four they knew well.

"Look!" yelled Blake.

For the passengers who had landed, and were moving towards the house, were Ernest Levison, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, his sister Doris, Gussy's pretty cousin, Ethel Cleveland, and their great chum of Spalding Hall School, Lady Peggy Brooke!

CHAPTER 12.

Captured!

"LEVISON and the girls!"

There was dumbfounded amazement in Tom Merry's voice as he stared down at the five figures strolling towards the house, chatting and laughing as they came.

The St. Jim's party at Llanfellyn Towers had known that Doris Levison had invited Ethel and Lady Peggy, the tom-boy of Spalding Hall, to stay with her at her parents' home. They had known, too, that the Levisons had an aviator cousin who owned a private monoplane.

But it had not occurred to any of them for a moment that Levison and his cousin and the three Spalding Hall girls would fly over to Wales one day to visit them.

In ordinary circumstances it would have been a very pleasant surprise indeed. But now the juniors scarcely knew what to think.

They certainly did not want the girls to be involved in the "battle" with the Wolf and his scoundrels. But, on the other hand, the monoplane might prove the means of settling with the desperadoes once and for all.

Tom Merry flung up the window.

"Quick!" he shouted. "Back to the plane! Bring the police!"

At sound of the opening window, the three girls, Ernest Levison, and his tall young airman cousin halted, staring up eagerly. Upon seeing the faces of the juniors at the window in the tower, Lady Peggy waved her hat gaily, revealing her gleaming, pretty red hair, and Ethel and Doris broke into quick smiles.

But Tom Merry's words caused them to stare in astonishment.

"Levison, the police—"

But apparently Levison of the Fourth had come to the conclusion that Tom Merry was joking. They saw him grin.

"What do you want the bobbies for?" he yelled back cheerily. "Has Baggy been raiding the larder? And what have you done to your napper, old chap?"

Tom Merry almost groaned. Every second was valuable. "Hallo, Tom!" sang out Lady Peggy. "Hallo, Jack! Hallo, everybody! Didn't expect to see us, did you?"

At a word from Tom Merry, Lowther had raced from the room on his way downstairs to unlock one of the doors at the back. But what Tom really wanted was to get the unexpected visitors back to the aeroplane, with the understanding that they must bring the police to Llanfellyn Towers without delay.

Not only would they then have checkmated the Wolf, but the girls would be safe.

The five figures below were moving on towards the house now, still looking up at the tower window.

"Good heavens!" groaned Talbot. "Can't we make them understand?"

"The police!" shouted Tom again, in desperate tones. "This isn't a joke! We're being attacked here by—"

The captain of the Shell got no further.

Into view round the corner of the house a group of running figures had appeared. The giant figure of the Wolf himself, a bandage round his head, was among them, an evil, triumphant grin upon his bearded face. In his hand he held his big black revolver, and the four ruffians with him were likewise armed.

Before the girls and their two companions realised their danger they were surrounded by a ring of grinning desperadoes and five levelled muzzles.

The juniors in the tower heard Levison's startled shout, heard a cry from Cousin Ethel, and a bewildered exclamation from Lady Peggy.

There was an incoherent exclamation from Tom Merry.

Tom's face was white, as were the faces of Blake and Talbot.

Instinctively they snatched up their rifles. But the captain of the Shell lowered his weapon with a groan, and the two others followed suit.

They could not fire at the scoundrels below, for they were gathered so closely round the girls, and Levison and his cousin, that a shot might easily have struck one of the Levisons' party.

Before the menace of those levelled weapons Ernest Levison and the young airman had been forced to raise their arms helplessly. It would have been madness to resist.

Already they were being hustled off round the corner of the house with the three startled girls.

As they vanished, Levison flung a startled, white-faced glance up at the tower window. Levison was no coward; but the fact that his sister and Ethel and Peggy had fallen as well as himself and his cousin into the hands of these mysterious ruffians had filled him with utter consternation and horror.

But Levison's horror was no more than that of Tom Merry, Talbot, and Jack Blake. Their faces had gone white and set.

"Good heavens!" Talbot's voice was low and hoarse. "They've got the girls!"

Blake looked dazed, stupefied. Lady Peggy was a particular chum of his, and the thought of the cheerful tom-boy of Spalding Hall being a prisoner in the hands of the Wolf and his fellow villains had turned Jack Blake's heart strangely cold. The plight of the others was terrible enough, but it was of Peggy that Blake was thinking most.

"We must let Sir Napier know!" cried Tom Merry, his face white and set. "Quick—"

He raced from the room, with Talbot and Blake at his heels.

With every ounce of strength in his muscular arms, Eric Kildare flung the suit of armour down upon the Wolf and his followers as they rushed up the staircase!

CHAPTER 13. Forcing Their Hands!

"OH, great Scott!" The voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was hoarse, and his face was deathly pale.

The news of the arrival of the three girls, together with Levison and his airman cousin, and the capture of them all by the Wolf and his ruffians, had filled the whole St. Jim's party with utter consternation when Tom had told the others of what had happened on the other side of the house.

"Good heavens!" breathed Sir Napier. "This is terrible!"

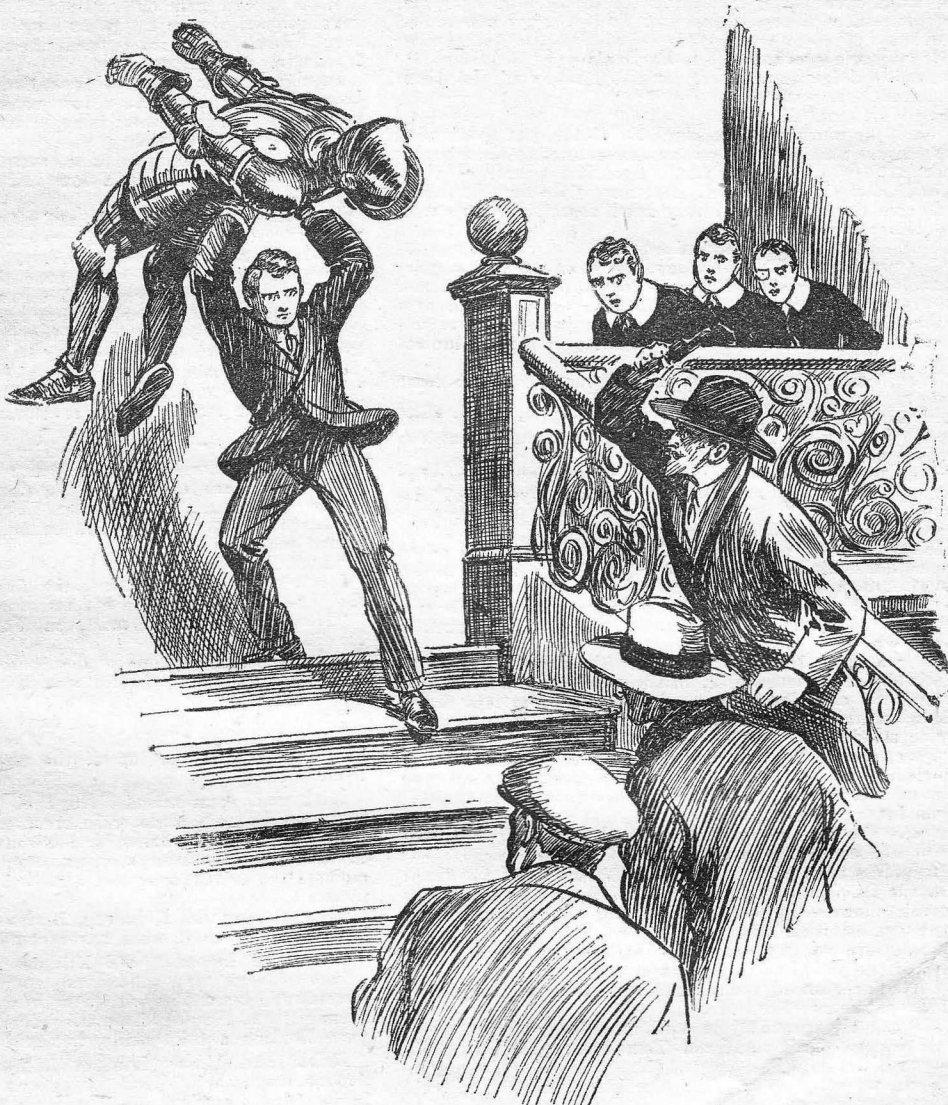
"What can we do?" muttered Kildare, his face dark and anxious. "Heavens! It's awful to think of those girls prisoners in the hands of those villains out there—"

"We've got to rescue them somehow!" said Blake, between his teeth. "If we made a rush from the front door—"

"We should be shot down like rabbits," said Sir Napier quietly. "We should not help them that way."

In the excitement they had all gathered in one room—the big room overlooking the front door. Baggy Trimble alone was absent; Baggy had been sent back to take another turn at watching by the bedside of old Broom. For the moment no one was keeping a look-out. It was a sudden shout from the garden that reminded them of the possibility of another attack.

They all turned swiftly to the three tall windows and stared out—most of them with their rifles in their hands.



A figure had appeared on the snow in front of the belt of trees, and was approaching towards the house. It was the Wolf himself—a wild-looking figure, with his bearded face alight with triumph, and a dirty bandage round his head.

He was followed by three of his scoundrels. Charcas was one, and Jackson, the renegade Englishman, was another. And with them they were bringing Ethel Cleveland, Doris Levison, and Lady Peggy.

The girls' hands were tied behind them. Their faces were white, but calm.

"Ethel!" breathed the swell of St. Jim's huskily. "Oh, great Scott!"

Of Levison or his cousin there was no sign. They were evidently considered less important prisoners, and were being kept in the scoundrels' camp among the trees.

As the St. Jim's party stared out of the broken windows at the advancing figures the Wolf gave another shout, evidently to draw their attention.

Sir Napier, Kildare, and the juniors had kept back in the shadow of the room as they stared out. But now Sir Napier stepped to the centre of the big middle window.

"Here I am!" he shouted grimly. "Well?"

The Wolf and his companions halted with their prisoners, staring up at the tall figure of Kildare's uncle standing at the window, with grins on their faces. Charcas caught sight of Tom Merry behind Sir Napier, and his white teeth flashed in a silky smile.

The Wolf swept off his hat with a mocking bow.

"Senor," he cried, "I desire a word with you!"

The three girls were staring up at the windows with

frightened eyes. They could now see the St. Jim's juniors, and their faces lit up. Ethel and Lady Peggy both smiled pluckily.

Sir Napier's eyes met Doris Levison's. "Don't be frightened!" he cried. "We won't let these scoundrels hurt you!"

The Wolf laughed softly. "No?" he murmured mockingly. "Senor, you speak with confidence. But how can you prevent us hurting these pretty señoritas? Of course, we would not hurt a hair of their heads if it could be avoided. But maybe we shall be forced to do something we should very much regret. It rests with you, Senor Wynter!"

The South American laughed civilly. "Let me warn you, by the way," he went on, with a grin, "that it would be useless for you now to try to shoot me. Were you to do so, my friends there"—he waved an arm in the direction of the trees—"they would then be reluctantly compelled, I fear, to shoot these charming ladies! That would be sad, would it not?"

"Well," said Sir Napier quietly, "what have you come to say?"

The swarthy scoundrel's eyes glittered triumphantly from face to face of the figures of his enemies standing at the windows above.

"You would be sad if you never saw your charming friends, these pretty señoritas, again, would you not?" he purred.

Tom Merry felt his heart go cold. He stared at his companions almost dazedly; at the ashen face of Jack Blake, his eyes on Lady Peggy, at the white lips of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as he, too, stared down at the girls—at the silent, set faces of the others. He saw that Kildare's hands were clenched so that the knuckles showed white.

The face of Sir Napier Wynter was like stone. "Well?" said the baronet, in the same quiet voice.

The Wolf chuckled. He stood with his great legs thrust wide apart, staring insolently up at the window where Sir Napier stood.

"This is what I have to say!" The voice of the South American was harsh and threatening now. "Unless you all surrender to me, you will never see these girls again!"

Tom Merry almost groaned aloud. It was the ultimatum that all had expected; but now that it had come it was no less a staggering blow.

For unless they were to sacrifice the safety of the three girls, the St. Jim's party had no choice but to accept the bargain offered—the safety of Ethel, Doris, and Lady Peggy against their own!

There were no two ways of choosing for them. The safety of the girls had to be won at any cost.

Sir Napier glanced round at the set faces of the juniors and the captain of St. Jim's.

"We are all agreed?" he said in a low voice. "Of course, sir," muttered Tom Merry swiftly. "We must save the girls!"

"Yaas, we can't do anythin' else but give in now," said Arthur Augustus quietly.

"Of course not," agreed Eric Kildare. There was a murmur of agreement from the rest.

Sir Napier again turned to the window. He stared down at the grinning, triumphant face of the chief of the revolutionaries.

"Well, senor," cried the Wolf harshly. "What is it to be? Your surrender—or that you never see the pretty señoritas alive again?"

There was a soft laugh from Charcas. Sir Napier met the mocking looks from below with steady, steely eyes. His voice was quiet.

"We surrender!"

CHAPTER 14.

At the Mercy of the Wolf!

A LOUD, raucous laugh rang out in the quiet of the snow-bound garden, as the giant South American threw back his head and laughed triumphantly.

"That is good!" he thundered. "This, then, is what you shall do! You shall leave the house two by two, and come to me, to be made my prisoners, walking with your hands raised above your heads!"

Again he threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "Very well," said Sir Napier calmly. "We agree to that, since we must."

"You are wise, senor!" The Wolf swept off his hat with another mocking bow. "And if there is any treachery on the part of any of you I shall shoot you down like dogs!"

Sir Napier's lips curled. "My word is my bond, as the Wolf knows!" he said contemptuously.

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With an evil grin on his bearded face, the leader of the revolutionaries gave a sign to his three companions. They turned and strode back towards the trees, taking the white-faced girls with them.

In a clearing among the trees Ernest Levison, his hands bound behind him, gave a low exclamation as he saw his sister and her girl chums brought back.

"Doris!" he breathed. His sister gave him a faint, reassuring smile. "Ernest," she said in a low voice, "they have surrendered—to save us."

Levison caught his breath, and stared round at the grinning faces of the band of Rioguanays with gleaming eyes. "You hounds!" he cried fiercely.

He and his cousin, standing near him, also with his arms tied, knew now the reason of the strange happenings at Llanfellyn Towers into which they had unwittingly stepped. Charcas had told them, mockingly, of the siege of the lonely house, and the reason for it.

Levison's cousin, a young man in the early twenties, with a good-looking face and the figure of an athlete, glared at the leader of the revolutionaries with gleaming eyes.

"You villain!" he cried hoarsely. "You——" "Silence!" snarled the big South American.

With the back of his hand he struck the young airman across the mouth. The young Englishman choked. But he was helpless, with his arms bound, in the centre of nine armed scoundrels.

"Look!" cried Levison. Staring through the trees, the five prisoners could see the big front door of the old mansion opening.

"Here they come!" muttered Jackson, the renegade Englishman.

"Bueno!" grinned one of the South Americans—the man with the torn ear, a wound received in the last desperate attack upon the besieged house.

There was a little despairing cry from Cousin Ethel. The tall figure of Sir Napier Wynter and Eric Kildare had appeared at the top of the steps leading up to the front door.

With their arms raised above their heads, the captain of St. Jim's and his uncle were crossing towards the trees.

They reached the trees, and strode into the clearing. Kildare gave Levison a grim, hopeless smile. The next moment the two were seized, and their hands bound behind them.

"Gad!" muttered Kellaway, Levison's cousin. "It would have been better if we'd never come."

"Can't be helped," said Kildare, with a shrug. Tom Merry and Manners appeared next, crossing towards the trees. They, in their turn, were made prisoners.

Manners was limping from his wounded leg. Tom Merry gave Levison a faint smile, but said nothing.

Talbot and Monty Lowther followed, then Blake and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Digby came alone, his arm still in its sling. Last of all, Herries came trudging through the snow, with the fat figure of Baggy Trimble floundering at his side.

Baggy gave a squeak of fright as he was seized by one of the South Americans, and felt his fat little arms being lashed behind him.

"Ow!—I—I say, you chaps, this is rotten! W-w-what did you want to surrender for?" gasped Baggy wildly. "I——"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Blake. "Oh, really, Blake——"

"Bring them to the house," ordered the Wolf harshly; and with their hands bound the gallant defenders and the friends for whose sake they had surrendered, were hustled across towards the house and into the big hall.

The Wolf staggered across to the fireplace, and stood there with his legs thrust wide apart, his eyes gleaming gloatingly at the tall figure of Kildare's uncle.

"And now, Senor Wynter!" he rasped harshly. "You will reveal to me the whereabouts of this little paper that I have been so anxious to obtain!"

A grim smile lit up the face of the baronet. "Before we discuss the matter of that paper," he said, "remember that you have promised to let these girls go safe!"

The Wolf made a gesture of impatience. "Bueno! I swear on my honour that they shall not be harmed, if you tell me what you know of this paper——"

"Then release them now!"

The Wolf made a sign to his men. The cords binding the wrists of the three girls were cut, and again the leader of the scoundrels turned to Sir Napier.

"There, does that satisfy you?" he snarled.

"No," said Sir Napier coolly. "First, they must be allowed to leave this house."

For a moment the big Rioguanayan hesitated. But he

realised that it was impossible for the girls to bring their friends help for a long while, in these lonely mountains, with the roads choked with snow.

"Very well!" he said impatiently. "They can go!"

There was a breathless cry from Cousin Ethel.

"We won't leave you—"

"Ethel, deah gal! Pway be sensible and go!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy pleadingly. "You cannot help us by stayin' here—"

"That is so, I suppose," nodded Ethel miserably. "Very well—we'll go!"

Sir Napier stepped swiftly towards her, and bent his head, whispering in her ear. With an angry snarl, the Wolf stepped between them, thrusting Ethel aside.

"Enough!" he commanded harshly. "Let the girls go if they wish, but I will have no secret plans hatched with them!"

With pale faces, the three girls turned towards the door. Then, after a last glance at the group of prisoners, they vanished into the garden. Through the window, the St. Jim's party saw them hurry down the drive and disappear among the trees.

"Now," snarled the Wolf, "this paper, my friend! You have promised to tell me—"

"I have promised to tell you what I know," answered Sir Napier quietly.

"Then where is the paper?" thundered the South American, thrusting his grinning, triumphant face into that of Kildare's uncle.

Sir Napier smiled. "I will tell you what I know of its whereabouts."

"Yes, yes?"

"It is hidden behind a secret panel in this house," went on the baronet calmly.

"I know that! Caramba! But where is this secret panel?"

There was a soft laugh from Sir Napier Wynter.

"I don't know," he said. "I have not the faintest idea."

For a moment the group of swarthy ruffians stared at him dumbly. Then there was a snarling exclamation from Charcas.

"He lies! He must know!"

"I tell you I know nothing," smiled Sir Napier coolly. "It was hidden, as you know, by my butler, and I never knew where this secret panel was."

"Carajo!"

The face of the Wolf was fiendish with rage. His great fists clenched as he took a step towards Sir Napier.

"So you have been fooling me?"

"That is one way of putting it," nodded the baronet.

"You dog!" The South American raised a shaking fist, and his followers crowded round Sir Napier with glaring faces. "You dog of an Englishman! I believe you are lying to me!"

"Then you believe quite wrongly," smiled Sir Napier. "On my honour, I do not know the whereabouts of this secret panel. I don't mind admitting I've searched for it and failed to find it myself. So I do not think you are likely to find it, either. But you can try. You've tried once—try again!"

The Wolf swung round on one of his men.

"The butler!" he muttered in Spanish. "Find him!"

"That won't do you much good!" broke in Sir Napier in English. "The poor chap's still delirious from that blow you yourselves gave him when you ransacked this place. Yes, you have yourselves to thank—"

"We shall see!" snarled Charcas. "Where is he?"

Sir Napier told him, and Charcas and another of the Rioguyans hurried up the stairs. They returned in a short while, with savage faces.

"It is no good," said Charcas to his leader. "The old fool is still delirious! He is very bad. It will be a long time before he recovers consciousness."

"What are you going to do about it now?" asked Sir Napier laconically. "You know as well as I do that you'll never find this secret panel."

The juniors chuckled. Despite the fact that they were the helpless prisoners of these scoundrels, it looked as though the Wolf was not going to have things all his own way, after all.

But one of the Rioguyans pushed his way forward and flung out a furious hand at Kildare's uncle.

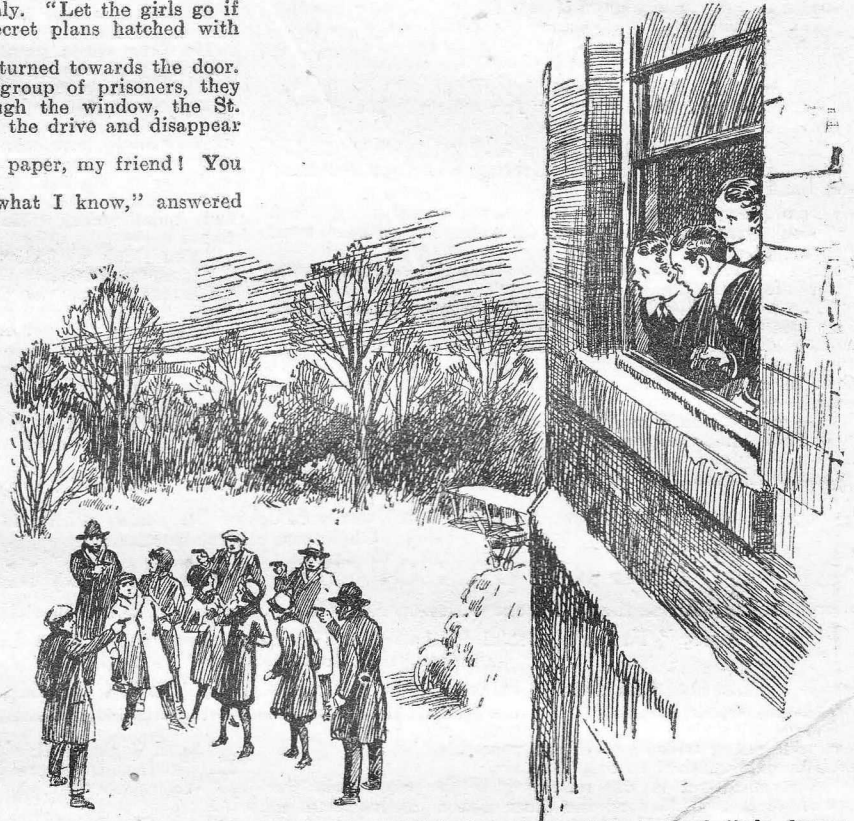
"He lies!" he shrieked. "Of course he lies! He knows where this paper is! Are you going to let him fool you! Make him tell!"

"I can tell you nothing!" exclaimed Sir Napier impatiently.

The Wolf brought a great fist crashing down on a little table beside him.

"Caramba! Santos, I believe you are right! He knows for sure! Of course he knows! Well, we will make him speak, I swear!"

His glittering eyes roamed over the group of juniors,



Before the three Spalding Hall girls and their two companions realised their danger they were surrounded by a ring of armed desperadoes!

standing with their hands bound, with half a dozen swarthy ruffians on either side of them, automatics in their hands.

There was a squeak of terror from Baggy Trimble as the South American's eyes rested on him. But it was on Tom Merry that the ruffian's gaze finally fixed.

There was a big oak screen standing in the hall, and the Wolf pointed to it.

He was smiling cruelly.

"Tie him to that screen!" he snarled.

Tom Merry was seized.

The cords binding his wrists were unfastened, and he was dragged by a couple of big Rioguyans to the screen and tied to it, with his arms and legs outstretched, cords attached to his wrists and ankles, being fastened to the heavy, ornamental carvings that ran along the top and bottom of the screen.

"Your knives, my friends!" purred the Wolf.

Instantly the South Americans had taken knives from inside their coats—eight glittering streaks of steel.

There was a cry from Monty Lowther. He took a swift step forward, but his arms were seized, and he was dragged back. With his wrists tied behind him, Monty was powerless to resist.

The Wolf glanced at him.

"Perhaps it would be better to tie the ankles of these dogs as well!" he grinned. "Then there will be no chance of their interfering with our sport!"

It did not take long for his words to be put into action. His followers bound the legs of their captives, and Sir Napier, Eric Kildare, Kellaway, the young airman, Levison, and the rest were soon sitting helplessly with their backs

to the wall, bound hand and foot now, watching with startled faces the figure of Tom Merry, tied to the screen.

"What are you going to do?" cried Kildare thickly.

The captain's face was pale.

"You will see, my friend!" purred the Wolf. He turned to Sir Napier. "Now, gringo, you shall tell me where that secret panel is which hides this little paper, or this boy—"

"I swear I cannot tell you!" cried Sir Napier hoarsely. "You lie!"

"On my honour, I can tell you nothing—"

"You lie!" repeated the South American in a thunderous voice.

He stepped back, facing the screen to which Tom Merry was tied.

The captain of the Shell stared at him, white-faced and silent. The juniors saw Tom lick his lips. But not by so much as the quiver of an eyelid did Tom Merry betray any sign of fear.

The Wolf raised the knife in his hand.

"Stop!" cried Sir Napier. "You villain! I would tell you if I knew!"

Even as the words broke from his lips the knife flashed through the air, flung with unerring aim from the hand of the South American.

Tom Merry closed his eyes as he saw that glittering streak of steel flying towards him, and for a moment his heart went cold.

But the Wolf had not aimed to strike the helpless youngster, after all.

The point of the knife bit into the wooden screen within an inch of Tom Merry's head, quivering.

The scoundrel laughed, and turned to Sir Napier.

"You see?" he hissed. "I aimed to place that knife within one inch of the boy's ear. I am skilful with the knife—yes?"

He took a second knife from one of his men.

"This time," he grinned, "I shall strike within one inch

Tom's sleeve, at his left waist, pinning the sleeve to the wood behind.

"You see?" cried the Wolf harshly. "If I aim for his heart, Senor Wynter, I shall not miss!"

He snatched another knife from those held out to him by his grinning followers.

With a boastful laugh the giant South American flung the gleaming blade. It flashed through the air—and came to rest, quivering and glittering, with its point pinning the sleeve at Tom's other wrist to the woodwork.

It was a wonderful exhibition of knife-throwing, and there were roars of applause from the other scoundrels. The Wolf gave another boastful laugh.

"Now, let us hear where this paper is hidden, my friend," he cried, standing over Sir Napier with his black eyes glaring down ferociously from beneath their heavy brows. "Or would you have me torture this boy further?"

He flung out a pointing hand to Tom Merry.

Tom's face was white as death.

When each of those knives had been flung, the captain of the Shell had endured moments of agonising suspense. For all Tom had known, any one of those gleaming streaks of steel might have been aimed for his heart. The perspiration was standing out on his brow.

He licked his dry lips.

"What Sir Napier says is true, I know," he said in a low, quiet voice. "He does not know where the secret panel is—"

"You think we believe that?" sneered Charcas.

"It is true!" cried Kildare.

Charcas snapped his fingers contemptuously.

"You cannot fool us—"

"Carajo! No, they shall not fool us!" roared the Wolf, snatching another knife from one of his men. He raised it in his hand. "Now, perhaps, this knife shall find a home in this boy's heart! Perhaps I shall simply play with his fears by putting it an inch—or half an inch—from his head! Ha, ha!"

He laughed cruelly.

NEXT WEEK'S SPECIAL ATTRACTIONS!

An extra-long, complete story of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's, which is the "grand finale" of this novel Christmas series, entitled:

"THE RETURN OF THE WOLF!" By Martin Clifford.

Another effort on the part of our whiskery old Wonder, the Oracle, under the title of: "ASK THE ORACLE!"

Mr. "Nosey" Parker's special football report on his visit to the famous Liverpool F.C. which contains interesting information for "footer fans."

And another instalment of "THE WORST FORM AT CODRINGTON!"

of your young friend's other ear, senor!"

The knife flashed through the air.

A second later it was quivering in the woodwork, the point of it embedded on the other side of Tom's head, so that a glittering knife now stood out on either side of his white face.

There was a murmur of applause from the South Americans. The Wolf grinned evilly, and took another knife from one of his men.

"You see how well I throw the knife, Senor Wynter? Now, perhaps, you will tell me where that paper that I want so much is hidden! For, unless you do, I may not aim for one inch away from your young friend's body again, but at the boy himself!"

And the leader of the Rioguyans laughed harshly as he raised the third knife.

From Harry Manners there broke a sobbing cry.

CHAPTER 15.

The Ghost Crusader!

"YOU villain!"

Sir Napier Wynter's voice was hoarse. He struggled for a moment to free his arms from their bonds, but the attempt was utterly vain.

Sir Napier, like the others, had been very securely bound when they had surrendered in the garden to their enemies. It was impossible to escape.

"I swear I do not know the whereabouts of that paper," he said in a tone that held a ring of desperation. "Whatever you do to that boy, I shall not be able to tell you more than I have. I swear it—"

"Pah!" The Wolf snapped his fingers. "I do not believe it. You can tell me, and tell me you shall! See—"

He raised the hand that held the knife, and sent it flying through the air towards the screen to which the captain of the Shell was fastened.

The glittering blade cut through the loose cloth of

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"Shall I throw this knife?" he purred. "Or will my English friends tell me what I wish to know?"

"We cannot tell you!" groaned Sir Napier. "If you harm that boy—"

The knife hissed through the air

Tom Merry shut his eyes. It seemed to him that the silvery streak was flying straight for his face. But again the point bit into the woodwork, this time so close above his head that he felt the steel touching his hair.

Again the Wolf had been playing with his fears, torturing him. And already the villain was gripping another knife.

"Now!" he thundered fiercely. "Enough! This knife, I swear, shall be aimed for the boy's heart—unless you tell me where that paper is hidden!"

Sir Napier's face was as white as that of the captain of the Shell.

Unable as he was to tell the leader of the revolutionaries where the coveted paper was hidden, Kildare's uncle was powerless to help Tom Merry. For he knew that nothing he said would convince the scoundrels of his ignorance of its whereabouts.

A cold horror gripped his heart, as it did the hearts of the other bound and helpless watchers.

Tom Merry gave a faint smile.

"Don't worry about me, sir," he said in steady tones. "The fools won't believe you don't know where that paper is, apparently. Anyway, the girls are safe. That's all that matters."

Tom broke off suddenly.

His eyes had gone past the figure of the Wolf to the broad staircase.

A faint, odd sound had come from the top of the stairs. Tom Merry, staring up them, caught sight of a dim figure moving in the gloom.

With the sky covered in heavy clouds, the winter afternoon was already darkening into night with wintry suddenness. The firelight relieved the deepening gloom of the hall with a ruddy glow; but the stairs were dark and shadowy.

"What is that?"

The Wolf swung round with a sudden startled exclamation in Spanish, and stared up the staircase, as he, too, caught that faint sound from the darkness above.

"Gweat Scott!"

From Arthur Augustus D'Arcy there broke a sudden breathless shout.

"Look!" yelled Blake.

A weird, ghostly figure had appeared among the deepening shadows on the stairs!

It was a figure in glittering chain armour, with a white surcoat marked with a blood-red cross.

Its visor was lowered, and in one hand it held a great shining battleaxe.

In deathly silence those in the hall below gazed up at that eerie shape at the head of the dark stairs. The dancing firelight from the hall touched the mailed limbs of the apparition with a fiery light, so that the steel seemed to glow with an unearthly light of its own. The dark eyeholes of the visor seemed to stare down broodingly at those below.

From Baggy Trimble there came a shaking cry of terror.

"The ghost!" he panted, struggling in panic-stricken fear to free his bound limbs. "It's the ghost Crusader! Help! Help!"

There was a breathless cry from Charcas.

Charcas knew the story of the ghost Crusader of Llanfellyn Towers as well as anyone, for Sir Napier had told the juniors of the legendary spectre of the old house when Charcas had been masquerading as Garcia, the son of the President of Rioguary.

And the swarthy face of the South American youngster turned a strange colour as he stared with startled eyes at the ghostly figure with the blood-red cross upon its mailed chest.

"Caramba!" gasped the Wolf. "What is it? In Heaven's name—"

The ghostly figure of the Crusader was still standing motionless at the top of the stairs, as if watching those below with strange, brooding intensity. But suddenly there was a clanking movement from those eerily gleaming mailed limbs.

With slow, heavy tread, the spectral figure was coming down the shadowy stairs!

From Charcas there broke a breathless, terror-stricken cry.

The South American flung out a pointing, shaking hand.

"Look!" he screamed. "It's coming! It is the ghost—the ghost of Llanfellyn Towers!"

Charcas seemed rooted to the spot, though it was clear that his every instinct urged him to turn and flee.

Faintly clanking, the great shining battleaxe glowing weirdly in the firelight, the figure of the tall Crusader moved on down the stairs.

The St. Jim's juniors watched it with dumb amazement. Again there was a cry of panic-fear from Baggy Trimble.

"Help!" moaned Baggy. "Help! It's the ghost—"

The spectral shape was half-way down the stairs now, more weird than ever as the full firelight fell upon it, turning the shining steel to glowing metal.

With steady, slow, clanking steps, the Crusader marched on down towards the hall.

From Baggy there was a faint sigh. Talbot, beside him, glanced at him swiftly.

Baggy's eyes were closed. He had fainted.

"Gweat Scott! What is it?" breathed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy in a hoarse whisper.

One of the South Americans gave a choking cry.

The sound seemed to break the spell that had gripped his companions, rooting them to the spot. In a moment panic had broken out.

All the superstitious fears of their breed uppermost, the South Americans turned blindly, fighting like animals to be first out through the big front door. One of them swung it open and dashed through, his face as white as paper, breathless with fear. The others tore through the doorway after him in a fighting mass, and vanished down the steps into the dusk without, the tall figure of the Wolf thrusting his followers aside as he fled.

Their footsteps could be heard dying away in the snow.

Still the weird apparition was clanking slowly down the stairs, looking neither to right nor left. It reached the hall—and as it did so, through the open doorway came the sound of a motor-car.

The Wolf and his men were driving away from Llanfellyn Towers as fast as they could go!

The sight of the ghost Crusader had been too much for them altogether. Their one thought was to get away from this haunted place where the spirits of long-dead men walked in unearthly glowing armour.

The sound of the car died away down the drive.

And then from the figure of the Crusader there came a low laugh.

(Continued on page 28.)

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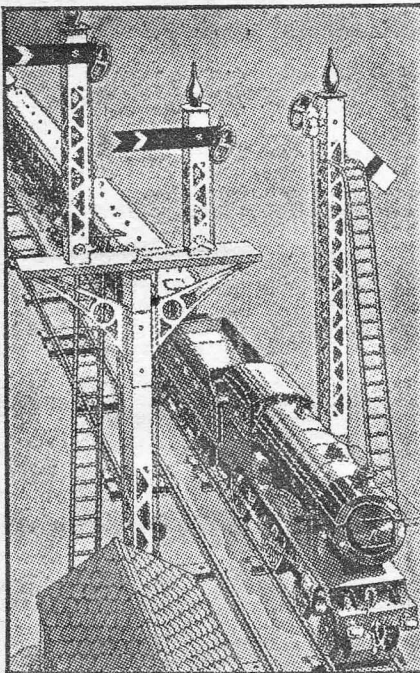
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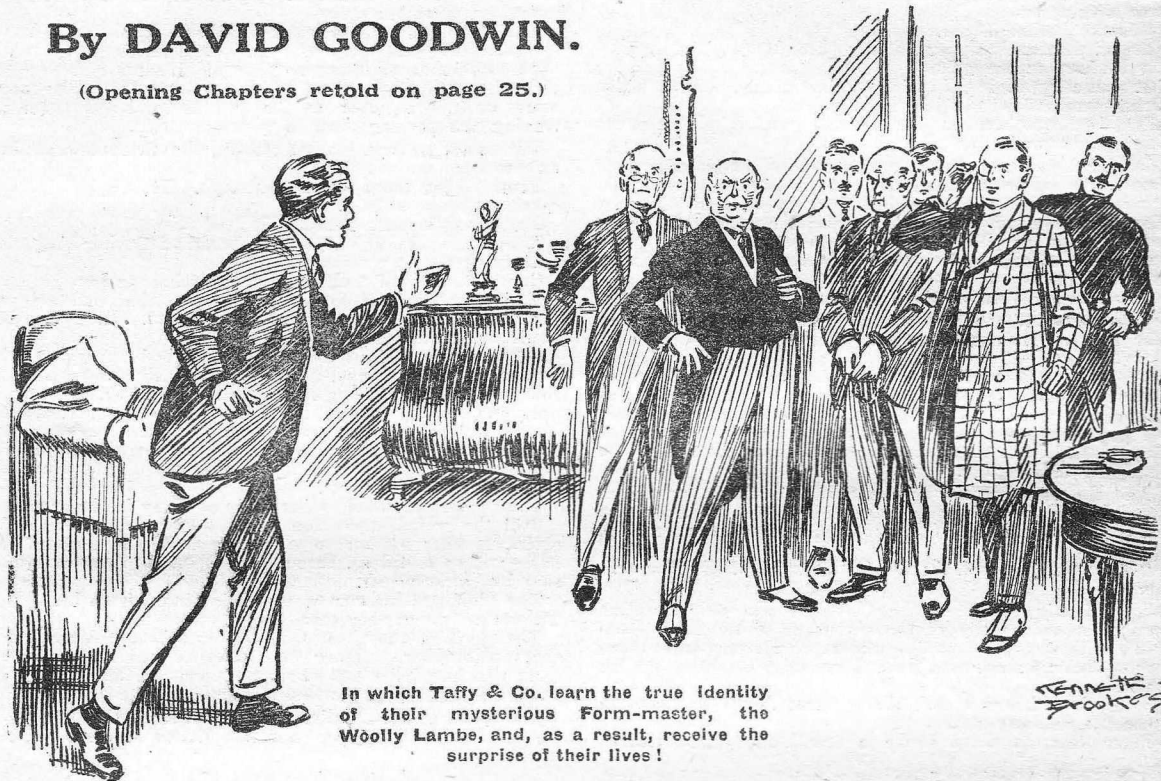
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THE WORST FORM AT CODRINGTON!

By DAVID GOODWIN.

(Opening Chapters retold on page 25.)



In which Taffy & Co. learn the true identity of their mysterious Form-master, the Woolly Lambe, and, as a result, receive the surprise of their lives!

The Booty!

THE chums made a thorough search of the arch and the ground, but with no success. There was not a sign of digging anywhere, either. The time was slipping away; but the waiting motor-car was forgotten, so engrossed were the boys in the search.

There was evidently no hiding-place except the empty sluice, however, and they had to own themselves baffled.

"It's a cert those beggars had got rid of the bags, though, when we saw them appear again by the hedge there," said Dereker, stirring up the floor of the little cavity thoughtfully with a long stick. "And yet—Hallo! There's wood or something under this stuff!"

Taffy lay down quickly, and reached to the floor of the hole. He scooped away the pebbles and earth with his hand, and, sure enough, there was a flat board there. The earth had been scooped in over it to conceal it. He got his fingers under the side of the board and pulled it up. Then both boys uttered an exclamation as they saw another hole underneath, completely filled up by two green-baize bags.

"Here they are!" ejaculated Taffy. "By Jove, we nearly missed 'em!"

"Good! At the worst we shall get some hare-soup out of the job!" said Dereker.

"Precious heavy for hares!" said Taffy, heaving one of the bags up.

It clanked harshly as it was dropped on the pebbly ground; and Taffy, his fingers trembling with eagerness, whipped out his pocket-knife and cut the cord that bound the neck of the bag. He thrust his hand in, and drew out a small solid gold salver.

Dereker and Taffy gave a whoop of triumph. They capered with delight on the door of the river-bed.

Dereker pulled out another piece of plate—a chased golden goblet with Sir Harry Beckford's coat of arms on it.

"Taffy, I swear you're a great man!" exclaimed Dereker.

"You were right all the way! This is the biggest scoop we've ever made. Out with the other bag!"

They hoisted it up from the hole, and it was crammed with the famous Roydon Hall plate, just like the first.

The boys only glanced at it to satisfy themselves, and then Taffy quickly tied up the bags again.

"We've done 'em!" he said triumphantly. "They won't grow fat on this burglary—and they'll be nabbed, too! All

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the police need to do is to watch the place on the quiet till the thieves turn up again to look for the stuff. Up with that bag, and let's get back to—"

"I say," said Dereker, under his breath, "there's somebody coming already! I wonder if he's making for this place?"

Taffy glanced through the arch, and saw a tall figure moving rapidly along towards the watercourse. He was a good distance off yet, and was keeping very close to a tall hedge on his left.

"Yes, he's coming here," said Taffy, pausing. "He wouldn't be sidling along like that for anything else. Funny thing—I seem to know the shape of him!"

He stopped abruptly; and Dereker clutched him by the arm.

"It's Lambe!" said Dereker, in a horrified whisper. "I'd know him in a hundred!"

Taffy gave a gasp. Yes, it was the Woolly Lambe, sure enough. He could be seen more plainly as he came round the angle of the hedge. Glancing to left and right, he was making quickly and quietly straight for the bridge.

"This is awful!" muttered Dereker. "He's the thief, sure enough, and he's coming back to get the swag! What shall we do?"

Taffy seemed incapable of speech for a moment. Then he seized the nearest bag of plate.

"Quick!" he said. "Get these to the car, and let's clear out before he sees us!"

"Oughtn't we to stay, and—and—"

"You can if you like; I'm off!" said Taffy, swinging the bag on to his back and decamping through the other end of the bridge.

"I'm with you!" said Dereker, taking the other bag and doing the same.

It was too gloomy under the bridge for anyone to have seen them from outside at a distance. Once clear, the bridge itself sheltered them, and the banks of the watercourse prevented their being seen by the approaching master. They followed it for a hundred yards, and then, doubling round the end of a hedge, ran along the other side of it and gained the road.

"After all, he saved my life," muttered Taffy. "And I'll have no hand in giving him up; others can do as they like. We've got the stuff!"

The bags of plate were heavy, as much as the boys could carry at any speed, and their anxiety to get away without being seen made them all the heavier burdens.

Dereker wondered what Mr. Lambe would do if he saw and caught them. It would be an ugly situation to face a desperate man in such a case. But once on the road they felt safe, and quite out of breath and exhausted they reached the motor-car.

"Heave these inside!" panted Taffy, calling on the other two to help.

"By gum, you've got it, then!" said Birne. "What is it—game?"

"Can't you feel what it is, you chump! Go ahead, driver, as fast as you like!" said Dereker, slamming the door of the tonneau.

The chauffeur looked curiously at the boys and their burden as they came up; but he started the car and drove on at a rapid pace. Taffy got up on the seat to peer over the hedge as they went, in the hope of seeing something of Mr. Lambe; but they were out of sight of the bridge already, and he sat down again, looking very glum and pale.

Birne had fingered the bags, and was about to raise a howl of glee, when Dereker checked him and nodded towards the driver's back.

"A veritable triumph!" murmured Jellicoe. "Accept my congratulations!"

"We'll shove these bags somewhere till we see how the land lies," said Taffy, in a decisive tone.

The car drove into Royden Park and up to the Hall. There seemed scarcely anybody about, and a solitary footman opened the doors.

"Where's Canon Wyndham?" asked Taffy.

"With Sir Harry in the library, sir. I was to take you up at once when you came."

"Anybody else with them?"

"Inspector Browning, sir, of the police force."

Taffy drew a breath of relief.

"We'll come up," he said, "only we've got some baggage here we want to have locked in a safe place. Is there a room where—"

"The butler's pantry, sir, if that'll do?" said the footman, showing the way to a small room lit by a little high window that was not made to open.

The boys put the baize bags gently inside, and Taffy coolly double-locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

"Now we're ready!" he said.

And the footman led them upstairs to the library and ushered them in.

Sir Harry was standing with his back to the fireplace, looking harassed and worried. The Head looked no less so, and was paler than usual. The third person was a big, smart-looking police-inspector. The baronet came forward and shook hands sadly with the boys.

"I'm sorry to drag you over here like this, my lads," he said, "but there's no help for it, and we must give the police all the assistance we can. I'd almost sooner lose the plate altogether, heirloom though it is, than have any of my guests worried like this after offering them hospitality."

"Oh, no, sir!" said Dereker, anxious to reassure him. "It's—it's a holiday for us; only we're awfully distressed about this loss of yours. Is there—have they caught the thieves?"

"You can rely on it they'll very soon be in custody, sir," said the inspector, as a man who states a fact and is quite sure of it.

"I hope so," said the Head.

"With the case in such able hands as it is now," added the inspector, "and after what we've heard, you can look on it as a certainty. I gave the thieves till to-night. But after this wire"—he held up a flimsy telegram—"I shouldn't be surprised to see them brought here in custody at any moment."

"You seem very confident," said the Head moodily.

"I am confident, sir. I'm an old hand, but I know my betters," said the inspector. "I'd be sorry to be the thief who stole your plate, Sir Harry, with Mr. Methuen after me, and knowing what he does know about the case already. He'll have the thief. The thing I'm worried about is your gold plate, which may have gone into the melting-pot by now."

"That would be a disaster," said the Head.

The boys glanced at each other at the mention of the gold plate; but the inspector's words fell on them like cold water. Each in his heart still hoped that the Woolly Lambe would get safely away. The gold was found.

"If I could get a word with Sir Harry apart," whispered Taffy to Dereker, "I believe he'd chuck the case and not prosecute, when he knows the plate's safe."

"If I'd had this telegram a bit earlier," said the inspector, "there wouldn't have been much need to send for these young gentlemen at all. But as they're here, I'll ask them a few questions."

"Answer everything the inspector asks you, boys," said the Head. "Tell him all you know."

Taffy, in an agony of doubt as to what questions were going to be put, faced the inspector.

"You were alone together in the dining-room," he said to the boys, "for some time before you joined Sir Harry at the shooting-range?"

The four nodded.

"Did Purvis, the butler, come in during that time?"

"No; nobody came at all till Sir Harry fetched us," said Taffy.

"You're sure?"

"Quite."

"One of you young gentlemen was hidden under a dish-cover in the room by the kitchen stairs, I think, before dinner?" said the inspector, looking at his notebook.

In spite of themselves, the boys grinned.

"Yes; it was I," observed Jellicoe.

"Did the butler come in during that time?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear him say anything to the other servants?"

"Yes. He said: 'Don't forget we lock up earlier to-night,'" replied Jellicoe, "to the second footman, who replied: 'Somebody's put the hall clock on nearly half an hour.' And the butler answered: 'No, they haven't; it's the right time.' That's all."

"Ah," said the inspector, jotting down some notes, "you're a very intelligent young man! I wish there were more like you! Where was Mr. Methuen about that time?"

"Mr.—who?" said Jellicoe, puzzled.

"He means Mr. Lambe," said Sir Harry.

"He'd gone to dinner, sir," said Jellicoe.

"Ah!" said the inspector. "Well, Sir Harry, there's only one thing. I wish you'd kept that anonymous letter you received instead of burning it!"

"The thing annoyed me so much at the time that I threw it into the fire," said Sir Harry. "I'm sorry now. But do you suppose that had any bearing on the case?"

"I don't know, sir; but it's very suspicious, coming just before the occurrence like that. If you'd got it, I'd soon trace it to the writer. I think I might manage to do it yet."

Dereker glanced meaningfully at Taffy, and the quartet nodded to each other. It looked as if Kent-Williams were having a narrow shave of becoming more public than was good for him.

"I say," said Dereker, under his breath, to Taffy, "hadn't we better tell 'em we've got the stuff here?"

Taffy nodded. He had been hanging on as long as possible, hoping to learn something before he sprang his surprise on the company. But he could not make head or tail of the proceedings, and it seemed useless to keep their news back any longer. He was just going to speak when the inspector broke in:

"There's nothing for it now, gentlemen, but to wait as patiently as we can till the result of this telegram turns up. As I said, it may be—Hullo! There's a motor coming up the drive now!"

The hoot of a horn was heard outside as a rapid car

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Convinced that Mr. Wollaston Lambe, their new Form master, is an escaped convict, Taffy Wynne & Co. and Ferguson & Co. rival factions in the Remove, the most unruly form at Codrington, determine to bring pressure to bear to rid the school of the new master. Their efforts prove of little avail, however, for the Woolly Lambe not only shows that he is capable of taking care of himself and his Form, but startles the school by catching a cracksman in the act of looting the school's strong room. Although Wynne & Co. are now ready to back up the Woolly Lambe, Ferguson and his cronies are still determined to expose him. Later, Taffy Wynne and his chums, together with Canon Wyndham, the headmaster of Codrington, and Mr. Wollaston Lambe are invited to dine at Royden Hall, the home of Sir Harry Beckford, a governor of the school. Kent-Williams at the instigation of Ferguson, expresses an anonymous letter to Sir Harry warning the wealthy baronet that the Form-master is a thief. Sir Harry promptly ignores the incriminating misdeed. Next morning, however, news is received to the effect that a robbery has taken place at Royden Hall and Taffy & Co. are requested to return there immediately. Remembering two suspicious characters they had seen the previous night, whom they had taken to be poachers hiding their game in a culvert under an old bridge, Taffy and his cronies decide to make investigations in that quarter first. A close examination of the spot soon reveals two distinct sets of footprints. "Keep your eyes open, Taffy," whispers Dereker excitedly. "The stuff they hid must be here somewhere!"

(Now read on.)

buzzed up to the doors, so quickly that it was hidden by the porch, from where the inspector stood at the library window, before he could see much of it. Almost at once footsteps were heard on the stairs.

"I'm not a betting man," murmured the inspector; "but, if I were, I'd lay long odds that's him, and that he's got 'em!"

The door was opened, and in walked Mr. Lambe himself. And with him was Purvis, Sir Harry's butler, with handcuffs on his wrists—a prisoner.

The boys were absolutely dumbfounded. That the butler should be the culprit, and the Remove master, of all people, should be his captor, astounded them.

Behind Mr. Lambe came a plain-clothes police officer with a second prisoner, also handcuffed. This man was a rough-looking customer, quite unlike the suave, bald-headed butler.

"Well done, sir!" cried the inspector. "I was just saying I knew you'd make a cert of it!"

"My dear sir," exclaimed Sir Harry, striding forward eagerly to greet Mr. Lambe, "this is really wonderful! My best congratulations!" His brow clouded over as he turned to the butler. "You scoundrel, Purvis! To think that you, whom I've trusted and treated well so long, should serve me like this!"

The butler maintained a glum silence, and did not open his lips. Mr. Lambe, though cool as ever, and correctly eyeglassed, did not look at all pleased over his capture.

"Here are the thieves, inspector," he said. "The other man is Ike Raynes, whom you probably know of. He's Purvis' accomplice. But what is troubling me is the loss of the plate."

"You didn't overtake them with it, then, sir?" asked the inspector eagerly.

"No. They had hidden it in a certain spot which, with the clues I had, I was able to trace," said Mr. Lambe. "It is in the open fields not far from here. I left the two prisoners in the car in charge of Police-constable Gray here and went to the spot. I found the hiding-place, but the loot has already been removed."

"Removed?" cried the baronet.

"Yes, Sir Harry. I had hoped to restore to you your gold plate as well as the prisoners; but the hiding-place has been rifled, and they have got clean away with the stuff."

"What a pity!" exclaimed the Head.

"It is a pity, canon! It will be doubly difficult to discover where the gold plate has gone now. But I shall do it!"

"If it isn't already in the melting-pot!" put in the inspector in a melancholy voice.

Taffy stepped forward as Dereker nudged him violently in the ribs.

"It isn't melted, sir!" he said to Sir Harry.

"Eh—what? How d'you know?"

"Your gold plate is all right, sir. We've got it here!"

A thunderbolt could not have made more sensation. They all stared at Taffy as if they thought he had gone mad.

"If you'll excuse me and Dereker a minute," said Taffy, "we'll bring it."

The two chums promptly disappeared before anybody could reply, leaving even the inspector scratching his head in bewilderment. In a couple of minutes Taffy and Dereker were back, panting under the weight of the baize sacks. Then, lowering them to the floor, they cut the strings and let a stream of solid gold plate rattle out on to the carpet.

"Good heavens!" said Sir Harry, and then words failed him.

Mr. Lambe put up his eyeglass in amazement, and the inspector nearly scratched all his hair off. The Head, in his surprise, blew his nose like a motor-horn.

"Where on earth did you find this?" said Mr. Lambe.

"In the secret hiding-place where the thieves left it, sir, under the old sluice-gate, beneath the little bridge in Fenn's Meadows."

"This beats cock-fighting!" said the Woolly Lambe. "How did you know it was there?"

"We saw the thieves put it there last night, sir, when we were waiting for the motor-car to be mended. We supposed they were poachers at first, and didn't take any more trouble about it. But, hearing Roydon Hall was burgled, we thought we might as well go and see, and we found the stuff," said Taffy. "We brought it in the car, and it isn't Sir Harry's chauffeur's fault that he was late; it's ours."

The Woolly Lambe broke into a peal of hearty laughter.

"Well done, lads!" he said. "You gave me a pretty fright, too! You see, Sir Harry, I'd traced this hiding-place by means of the clues I had, and it was a bit of a shock to find the gold gone. I knew you two young rips

had been there as soon as I entered the room," he added, with a glance at Taffy's boots, to which a few grains of the river-bed sand still clung; "but I didn't guess you'd got the swag yourselves. I was just going to motor back and investigate, after getting rid of my prisoners."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Sir Harry, shaking hands heartily with Mr. Lambe and the boys. "This is a record! I don't know how to thank you, gentlemen! Egad, if Codrington School were given a free hand, it seems to me there wouldn't be a criminal left in the country!"

"What we did was only a slice of luck, sir," said the bewildered Taffy. "But it really was wonderful how the Woolly—how Mr. Lambe managed to track the burglars down and find the hiding-place of the loot in a few hours."

"It was simple enough," said Mr. Lambe. "I knew the attempt was going to be made, and that it would probably be made directly we left the house last night. The butler's accomplice, Raynes, is well known to me. I left Canon Wyndham and the brougham soon after we started and kept watch."

"The burglary was very cleverly done, and I was thrown off the track of the real malefactors, who got away with the plunder. With the clues I had, however, I was able to run the men to earth near Fordhaven early this morning. They did not dare try to get the gold plate away across country while the hue-and-cry lasted, and I knew they had hidden it. To find the hiding-place was a little more difficult, but I had a couple of good clues. There is no need to give you all the small details of a criminal case. I managed to trace it to the old bridge, and the rest you know. Just make the prisoners show the soles of their feet, will you, constable?"

The plain-clothes man did so. The butler, who was, of course, no longer in his dress uniform, wore leather boots, with patent rubber heels. His accomplice had on rib-soled tennis shoes.

"The capture was made only just in time," concluded the Woolly Lambe, "for Purvis would have got out of the country by steamer in another half-hour, leaving his partner to negotiate the gold plate at leisure. By the way," he added, turning to the boys, "what time was it when you took away the stuff? About eleven o'clock, I think."

"Yes, sir, just a few minutes before," said Dereker. "I looked at my watch."

"And you saw me coming—eh?" said Mr. Lambe, smiling. "Don't deny it! You must have. Why did you scuttle out with the stuff in such a hurry?"

"We thought—" began Taffy, and then he checked himself.

The Woolly Lambe laughed heartily.

"Yes; you thought I was the thief!" he said, chuckling. "Don't deny it! You did!"

The boys blushed scarlet, and the remorseless Woolly Lambe enjoyed their embarrassment.

"You thought I was coming back for my own plunder—eh? Ha, ha!"

"Thought he was the thief?" exclaimed the inspector, staring. "Thought the finest detective in the South of England was a thief? What d'ye mean?"

"Detective?" echoed Taffy, in a dazed voice.

"Yes; an' beggin' Canon Wyndham's pardon, it's a thousand pities Mr. Methuen ever took to schoolmastering," said the inspector, with a sigh.

"I wish I could understand half of what's being said," returned Taffy, in bewilderment. "Who's Mr. Methuen?"

"Have you never heard of Slade Methuen, young sir?"

"I—I seem to know the name," said Taffy, "somehow."

"You don't know much if you haven't," said the inspector contemptuously. "But beg pardon, sir, perhaps I'm talking too much."

"Well, you'd better go on now," said Mr. Lambe, "for we've got too far to keep it to ourselves any longer. You can give the plain facts if you like, inspector."

A Cloud Lifts.

"WELL, gentlemen," continued the inspector, "Mr. Lambe, under the name of Mr. Slade Methuen, was for six years one of the cleverest crime investigators in England. There were few detectives to beat him that I've met!"

"Whew!" muttered Dereker. "I'm beginning to see a glimmering light!"

"Sometimes," said the inspector, "when a case had fairly baffled Scotland Yard, one of our best men would go to Mr. Methuen—Mr. Lambe, that is—and he'd take the field all on his own, and solve the knottiest problem you please. I never knew him to—"

"Come, draw it mild, inspector!" said the Woolly Lambe impatiently. "That will do! They don't want to hear you pouring melted butter over me. The plain facts are all that are wanted to save me the trouble!"

"Well, sirs, Mr. Lambe only did this for a hobby, so to speak, and spent most of his time in study, and a good deal in athletics. He's on old Oxford Blue, which I dare say you know."

"All right, inspector; thank you!" said Mr. Lambe, breaking in. "That's enough to set things straight."

"I won't say any more, sir. I'm afraid we've given you a lot of trouble, even at Codrington. We were always coming to you for help, for it means a lot, especially to a country policeman, to handle a good case successfully. Why, I remember, gentlemen," added the inspector, laughing, "the very first day Mr. Methuen—Mr. Lambe, I mean—went to Codrington, me and an officer from Fordhaven were fairly chasing him after he left the train to get his advice over a coining case that was beating us; but he hid somewhere down by the river, and dodged us till we went by, and fairly gave us the slip. He'd decided to cut himself adrift from detective work, and have nothing more to do with it, d'ye see?"

"By gum! That day when you hid under the bush, sir!" blurted out Dereker.

And Mr. Lambe roared with laughter, the Head joining in.

"Well, this isn't exactly a time for mirth," said the Woolly Lambe, "as we've got these prisoners here. Inspector, I think the sooner you take them to the cells the better."

"And I'll come to the police-court in the afternoon, then," said Sir Harry. "Thank you, inspector!"

The prisoners, who had remained sullenly where they were placed and said no word, were removed, and soon were spinning towards Fordhaven in the motor-car with the two police-officers.

"You enterprising youngsters seem rather astonished," said the Woolly Lambe.

"Astonished isn't the word, sir," replied Taffy. "We— we always knew you were a brick, if we may say so. But a detective as well—did anybody know it?"

"I only learned it this morning," said Sir Harry, "and I'm all the prouder of my guest, you can depend."

The boys glanced at the Head.

"Yes," said Canon Wyndham, with a slight smile; "I knew it from the first."

"Do you mind my having a short talk with these youngsters alone, canon?" asked the Woolly Lambe. "Just to put things straight, for the sake of the school?"

"By all means," said the Head.

"You don't object, Sir Harry?"

"Take 'em into the next room, my dear fellow," said the baronet genially. "How could I object?"

The Woolly Lambe told the boys to follow him, and as soon as they were by themselves he began.

"Sit down," he said. "I want to give you a few words of explanation, and to ask you to give me a promise. You're very straight, loyal youngsters, all four of you, and what I'm going to say is for the good of Codrington. I want you to understand just what has happened."

The boys were all attention.

"You've heard enough to put you on the right track," said the Woolly Lambe, smiling. "You saw me on the first day hiding from the police. So I was, because they're such confounded nuisances. The inspector told you the reason."

The Woolly Lambe's eyes twinkled behind his eyeglass.

"Then there was the worthy gentleman who climbed the ivy to my study. He was plain-clothes officer, and took that method to get at me and pester me for advice. I had forbidden the police to call at the school for me.

"There was also the School House burglar. I heard him breaking in, and secreted myself in the room where the coins were, knowing he would go there. I caught him in the act, and he seemed to suspect me of having been there for the same purpose as himself." Mr. Lambe smiled.

"Again there was a gentleman from Scotland Yard—an old friend of mine—whom I was glad to see. He consulted with me. One of your—er—friends—"

"Not friends, sir!" said Taffy warmly. "Anything but—"

"Well, never mind. The youth I mean received a little wholesome chastisement from my friend. Then there was Wynne's own exploit as a policeman. Taffy groaned. "I'm afraid I nearly shook the life out of you over that Wynne. I really thought at first you were a policeman who had come to badger me about some case or other. Never mind; it is forgotten."

(To say that Taffy Wynne & Co. are flabbergasted is only to put it mildly. Anyway, chums, you'll thoroughly enjoy next week's gripping instalment. Don't miss it, whatever you do!)

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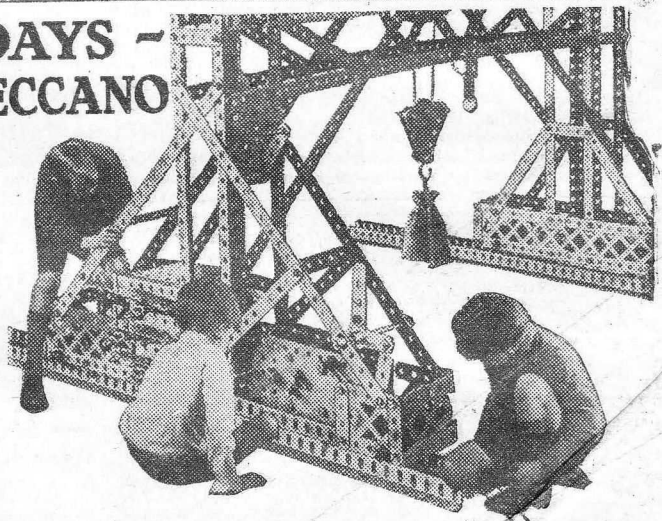
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THE HOUSE ON THE MOUNTAINS!

(Continued from page 23.)

A mailed hand rose to the visor, raising it. The next moment a human face was staring out of the gleaming helmet, watching the bound figures against the wall.

From Tom Merry there broke a breathless cry.

Tom did not believe in ghosts. Never for one moment had he really imagined that the weird figure, despite its eerie ghostliness, could really be that of a spirit from another world. For a moment, when he had first caught sight of that spectral shape at the top of the stairs, there had been a tug at his nerves; but it was the unexpectedness of the apparition that had so startled him.

But, though he had believed all the time that there was a human being within that apparently ghostly figure, never for one moment had Tom suspected who it really was.

He had been racking his brains to solve the problem, even as the ghost had been striding down the stairs. But he had never guessed the truth.

"You—," he gasped in utter bewilderment.

For the face that was looking out from the helmet of the Crusader was that of Jackson, the renegade Englishman.

"Yes, I'm the chap, young 'un," said the man quietly.

He lifted off the helmet, climbed out of the gleaming mail, and crossed swiftly towards Tom. Dragging out one of the knives that formed a pattern around Tom on the screen, he slashed through the cords that held the junior's wrists.

"Bai Jove!" There was an exclamation of bewilderment from Arthur Augustus. "How vewy extraordinaary—"

"What did you do it for?" asked Sir Napier quietly, as Jackson stooped over him and severed his bonds, while Tom Merry freed Kildare.

It did not take long to free the whole of the St. Jim's party. Then only did Jackson answer Sir Napier's bewildered question.

"I may have been a wrong 'un," said the man grimly, "but I'm not so bad that I haven't any gratitude in me. That youngster"—he nodded towards Tom Merry—"saved my life the night before last, you remember; he went down to me when I'd fallen over that precipice. I hadn't forgotten that."

He glanced round the ring of listening faces, with a wry grin.

"Perhaps I'm a coward," he went on slowly. "But I didn't dare let the Wolf and the others know I wanted to chuck in my hand. I've been with them in South America—helped in the revolution, for what I could get out of it. If they thought I was turning on 'em they'd have killed me. So I said nothing. But I've been on your side in my heart; and when the chance came of helping you I took it. That's all."

"My hat!" breathed Digby.

Tom Merry gripped the man's hand.

"Thanks!" he breathed. "You saved my giddy bacon! That scoundrel meant to chuck the next knife at my heart."

"It was lucky they never saw you clip away upstairs when you did," grinned Talbot. "I saw you go, and I wondered what your game was. But I never dreamt you'd planned to get into one of those suits of armour and play the ghost Crusader of Llanfellyn Towers!"

Sir Napier held out his hand. Jackson took it after a moment's hesitation.

"I feel ashamed of myself, and that's a fact!" he blurted awkwardly. "I—I've been a renegade, a traitor to my own people. It was pretty dirty, my joining in with them against Englishmen. But—"

"That's all right," said Sir Napier, with a smiling face. "You've made up for all that!"

There were high spirits in Llanfellyn Towers that night. The girls had been fetched from the empty cottage by the gates to which Sir Napier had told them to go for safety when he had whispered to Ethel. And the three chums of Spalding Hall were very bright and gay at finding themselves among their chums of St. Jim's—all safe and sound!

Jim Kellaway, Levison's cousin, who was an old St. Jim's boy, flew over to the nearest town with Sir Napier, and there the police were informed of all that had taken place in the lonely house among the mountains. They returned with several police-officers, who stayed at the house for the night. Thus the St. Jim's party were free of the necessity of keeping a watch for a possible return of the Rioguanys, and were able to spend the evening enjoying themselves with their girl chums.

Not that anyone expected the Wolf and his followers to return to attack the house, even when they had got over their fright.

At Sir Napier's invitation, the three girls, Levison, and his cousin agreed very readily to staying on at the Towers to spend Christmas there. And when, next day, a staff of servants duly arrived, "everything in the garden," as Monty Lowther remarked, "was lovely!"

There was only one thing to spoil the cheeriness of the party at the Towers.

Broom, the old butler, was still delirious—and the secret which he alone knew was locked in his unconscious brain. Until he recovered, the whereabouts of the precious paper that the Wolf had striven so hard to obtain would be still as much a mystery as ever to Sir Napier and the St. Jim's party.

And until that paper was found, and its contents decoded and cabled to the Government of Rioguanay, even the St. Jim's party could not feel quite sure that their struggle with the Wolf and his ruffians was really over.

THE END.

(Look out for the thrilling wind up to this dramatic Christmas series: "THE RETURN OF THE WOLF!" which will appear in next week's bumper Christmas-week issue of the GEM.)

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