

The Terrible Three's Christmas Party

Double-
Length
Story
By
Martin
Clifford.

The **GEM** LIBRARY **2**

*Christmas Double
Number.*

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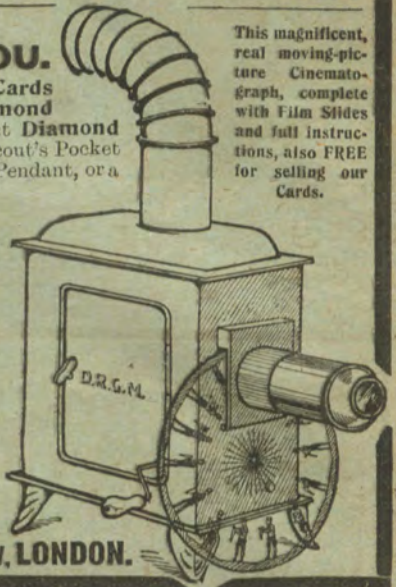
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The TERRIBLE THREE'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

A Double Length Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1.

Arthur Augustus is a Little Hasty!

"**B** AI Jove, it's cold!"
Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, made that undeniable statement. It was cold!

The chums of St. Jim's were packed into the railway carriage in reckless excess of the regulations, and they had coats and rugs galore; but all the same, it certainly was cold!

Tom Merry stamped his feet, and Monty Lowther was beating a tattoo with his boots, which kept up an accompaniment to the rattle and roar of the train. Manners, with a

big rug round him, was reading—a text-book on photography, of course.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were jammed together on the opposite seat, with Harry Noble and Blake and Digby. The Terrible Three occupied one side, with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his minor Wally. And it was cold! There was no doubt about that. Monty Lowther said it was on account of the weather not being warm, a feeble attempt at humour that was greeted with a general grunt.

"Don't you be funny, Lowther," implored Jack Blake. "There are enough discomforts in travelling in the winter, without that."

"Oh, rats!" said Lowther.

"I must repeat and approve of the remarks of my friend Blake," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his eyeglass into his eye and glancing at Lowther. "I appeal to the fellows—is this a time to be funny?"

"Certainly not," said Figgins. "Lowther's jokes, like football boots, are barred. Speaking of football, I wonder if we can get any in this country?"

"We'll manage it somehow," said Tom Merry. "I haven't kicked a footer since we left St. Jim's, and it's beginning to tell on me."

"Yaas, wathah! I dare say we shall be able to wig up a game at Cernay's digs," said Arthur Augustus. "We ought to be gettin' near the station now."

"I'm getting hungry," remarked Fatty Wynn.

"Only getting!" exclaimed Blake, in astonishment.

"Why, it's nearly a quarter of an hour since you had your last meal."

Fatty Wynn grunted.

"I get so jolly hungry in this cold weather," he remarked. "It's a time of year when I get a specially good appetite."

"Is there a time of year when you don't?" asked Monty Lowther, with an air of affectionate interest.

"Well, I can always keep my end up at the dinner-table," said Fatty Wynn modestly. "There's no fairy-appetite rot about me."

"No, by Jove, there isn't!"

"It's cold-dead boys."

"I believe I've heard that before," said Figgins, stamping his feet. "That's the way to keep your tootsies warm. Hallo!"

Arthur Augustus had jumped up with an agonised howl, and appeared to be attempting a breakdown in the carriage. The juniors gazed at him in astonishment.

"Jolly good," said Lowther. "But, really, you know, the carriage is too crowded for any terpsichorean exhibitions just now, Gussy. You ought to leave the Maud Allan business till we get out at the station."

"You uttah ass!"

"Now, I put it to you, Gussy, is this a place to dance in?" remonstrated Lowther.

"I'm not dancin', you duffah. Figgins stamped on my toe."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It is no laughin' mattah, you ass! He has hurt my toe, and uttably wuined the polish of my boot!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I decline to have my remarks greeted with waucous laughah. I should be sowwy to have to give you fellows a feahful thwashin' all wound—"

Jack Blake pulled the swell of St. Jim's back into his seat.

"Sit-down, Gussy," he remarked. "I can't have you making rows like this. As your keeper, I feel responsible for you."

"I wefuse to wegard you in the light of a keepah, you uttah ass!"

"Shoo!"

"If you make that impertinent noise again, Blake, I shall have no wesource but to thwash you."

"Shoo!"

Arthur Augustus jumped up and pushed back his cuffs.

"Pway put your hands up, deah boy."

"Shoo!"

"You—you uttah wottah—"

"Shoo!"

Now, it was exasperating to the swell of St. Jim's to be "shoo'd" as if he were a chicken in a farmyard. He gave a tap on Blake's nose.

"Now, you ass—"

"Shoo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

Arthur Augustus turned round upon the long-legged junior. As Blake was his own chum and study-mate at home at St. Jim's, he didn't want to "thwash" him, as he expressed it; but he had no hesitation about thrashing Figgins, who was a New House fellow, and an ancient rival at St. Jim's.

"Figgins—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway shut up, or I shall give you a feahful thwashin'."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tap!

It was a forcible tap on Figg's nose. It brought the water to Figg's eyes, and he gave a roar.

"There! Now pewwaps—"

Arthur Augustus had no time to say more.

The long limbs and lengthy body of Figgins uprose, and his arms were thrown round the elegant form of the swell of St. Jim's, imprisoning him in a mighty grasp.

"Ow!" gasped D'Arcy. "Wefuse me, you wuff beast! You are wufflin' my necktie, and wumplin' my beastly jacket."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

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"Wefuse me at once."

"Are you going to sit down and be quiet like a good boy?" demanded Figgins.

"Ow! Certainly not. I uttably wefuse to be a good boy. I wegard you as an ass. I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'."

And Arthur Augustus, whose indignation was rising to boiling point, made a terrific effort, taking Figgins somewhat by surprise, and they rolled over together.

Now, in that crowded French railway carriage there wasn't much room to roll over, and the two falling juniors landed upon a seat full of other fellows.

There was a general roar.

"Ow!"

"Oh!"

"Yaroo!"

"Groo!"

"Bai Jove!"

Kerr and Wynn and Noble and Blake roared together, and struggled out from under the struggling combatants.

They laid violent hands upon them, and wrenched them apart. Figgins was laughing so much that he could not resist; but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was quite excited, and he refused to give in.

"Chuck it!" roared Noble—the Cornstalk junior usually known at St. Jim's by the nickname of Kangaroo.

"Wats!"

"Stop it!"

"I wefuse to stop it."

"Will you ring off?" yelled Blake.

"I uttably decline to wing off. I am goin' to thwash Figgins."

"Then we'll jolly well squash you," said Kerr. "Shove him down on the floor, and all of you put your feet on him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good egg!"

"Ow! I wefuse—I decline—"

Bump!

Down went the elegant form of the swell of St. Jim's. Wally kindly rescued his topper. As a rule, Wally did not show a proper respect for his major's toppers, but perhaps his heart was softened by the approach of Christmas. He placed the topper in safety upon the rack, and then lent a brotherly hand in shoving Gussy down upon the dusty floor of the railway carriage.

The elegant form of the swell of St. Jim's disappeared under countless feet.

"Ow! Yow! Gr-r-r-r!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Help! Wescue! Yah!"

"Will you keep the peace?"

"No! Yow! No! Wats!"

"Then you'll stay there," grinned Tom Merry.

There was a rattle and a bump as the train slackened and stopped. The door of the carriage flew open. In a moment the juniors drew their feet away from Arthur Augustus to allow him to rise. A new passenger—a man in a thick coat, with a black pointed beard—was stepping into the carriage.

But D'Arcy was too bewildered to notice that the train had stopped, or that the door of the carriage had opened.

As soon as the feet were withdrawn, he struggled up blindly, and hit out with equal blindness.

"Look out!" yelled Tom Merry.

But the warning came too late.

Arthur Augustus's blow crashed upon the chest of the new passenger, and sent him whirling out of the carriage door, and staggering back on the platform—where he sat down, with a bump and a gasp.

CHAPTER 2.

An Angry Fellow-Passenger.

TOM MERRY sprang to his feet.

"You ass!" he roared. "You've done it now!"

"Weadly—"

"Look what you've done!"

Arthur Augustus already saw what he had done.

His excitement passed and he was all horror and contrition. He had smitten a stranger, and knocked him out of the carriage—an unoffending stranger—and a foreigner, to whom it would be difficult to explain.

Horror upon horror's head!

How could the swell of St. Jim's ever sufficiently apologise for that unlucky assault?

"My hat!" murmured Blake. "Sling out your French, Kerr—it's wanted now."

"Yes, rather."

Kerr cleared his throat. The Scottish junior could talk—his friends said jabber—French like any Frenchman, and he was the interpreter during this sojourn of the chums of St. Jim's in la belle France.



Jack Blake caught Tom Merry's arm quickly.

"Look!"

From the darkness of the night gleamed a light, flashing like a searchlight through the gloom.

The chums had left Paris, on their way to the Chateau Cernay, where they were to spend a holiday in the provinces with their French chum, Auguste Cernay—a Christmas holiday, though it was not yet Christmas. They were within a few stations now of the chateau; and, as Blake remarked, it was just like Gussy to signalise their arrival by an affray of this sort.

French politeness had greatly impressed the chums of St. Jim's during their visit to Paris. But it was soon evident that they were not to receive any further samples of it from the man D'Arcy had inadvertently knocked down.

Undoubtedly he had good cause for losing his temper, but that was no excuse for the towering rage he was in, and the torrent of abusive language that poured from his lips.

Fortunately, the chums were too little acquainted with colloquial French to fully understand what he said; but they understood enough to make them feel less apologetic.

Several porters had rushed up, and raised the unfortunate stranger to his feet, and he was swearing and gesticulating like a lunatic.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "I'm sowwy—I'm awfully sowwy! Tell him I'm sowwy, Kerr."

"All right; shut up!"

"Weally, Kerr—"

"Give me a chance to speak."

"Certainly. Tell him—"

Blake gave D'Arcy a tap on the mouth, as a hint to ring off, and Kerr pitched out to the stranger in French at express speed.

Kerr put it very nicely, but the stranger did not take it in good part.

"Ah, bah!" he exclaimed. "Fools—dolts—English dolts!"

"Bai Jove! He speaks English."

"Nice polite English, too."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Learned it in Billingsgate, I suppose," remarked Tom Merry. "Go on, old chap—get some more off your chest, if it relieves you."

The stranger ground his teeth.

"Fools! Cochons! Beasts!"

"Go hon!"

Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass, and turned it severely upon the stranger.

"I have already apologised," he said, with dignity. "I wedard you as bein' no gentleman. A fellow can't do more than apologise for an accident."

"Fool!"

"I wefuse—"

The engine shrieked, and the porters bundled the man into the carriage. It was already over-full, but there was no time for him to seek another.

Tom Merry & Co., after what had happened, did not exactly like him for a travelling-companion; but there was no help for it now.

The train rolled out of the country station.

The Frenchman glared round at the boys, expecting somebody to make room for him to sit down. As he had entered an over-full carriage he had no right to expect anything of



the sort; but after the accident, they felt he was entitled to some concession.

"Your seat, Gussy," said Blake. "You can't do less."

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agwee with you, deah boy. I

"Well, get up."

"Certainly. Will you pway do me the honah of acceptin' my seat, deah sir?"

The Frenchman down without a word.

He was evidently still in a savage temper, but he kept it under control now. His annoyance was natural; but his looks showed that he was anything but a good-tempered man. His thick black brows, drawn closely together, gave him a hard and harsh look, which was added to by a long scar on his left cheek, which puckered up the skin. That scar had evidently been made by a sword stroke, doubtless the relic of a duel.

Arthur Augustus, who was still considerably ruffled, stood up in the carriage, dusting himself, while the train rolled on.

The black-bearded Frenchman sat silent, scowling. He had taken some papers from his pocket, and his scowl died away gradually as he became interested in them.

But all the time his face never lost its grim, forbidding look.

Tom Merry glanced at him once or twice casually.

The man was well-dressed, and did not appear to be poor; yet, as Tom looked at his face, it occurred to him that he would not care to meet him alone in a lonely place at night. The Frenchman looked up irritably several times as Figgins stamped his feet to warm them.

It was certainly cold weather.

And suddenly Fatty Wynn, as he looked out of the window, uttered an exclamation of surprise and pleasure.

"Snow!"

"Bai Jove, snow!"

It was snow—an early, flaky fall of snow. The train was climbing into a hilly region, amid which the Chateau Cernay stood. Down from the hills came a bitter wind, and upon it were borne white flakes that fled round the train like tiny birds.

Rattle, rattle.

The train stopped.

The winter dusk had fallen, and as Tom Merry looked out of the damp windows, he failed to see the name of the station.

The scarred Frenchman rose, thrust himself past Tom, opened the door, and alighted. It was a little country station, and dim lights flickered on the platform.

"Blessed if I can see the name of the station!" growled Tom Merry. "Porter!"

"Ours is Proly," said Blake. "We ought to be near it by this time. The train's late, too. But I suppose Cernay will wait for us at Proly?"

"Sure to."

"Est-il Proly?" called out Tom Merry, as a porter came up.

The man shook his head, and pointed along the line, and jabbered.

"What's he saying, Kerr?"

"It's the next station."

"Oh, good!"

The porter closed the door, and the train rolled on again. The juniors caught a glimpse of the scarred Frenchman leaving the station. He did not glance towards them, having apparently already forgotten their existence.

The train rushed on through the dark.

"You can sit down now, Gus," said Wally. "I must say you've made a good beginning."

"Weally, Wally—"

"Next time, you'd better think twice before you hit once," said Wally, with an air of severe admonition.

"Weally—"

"Well, it won't be long to the next station, and Cernay will be waiting for us there in the car," said Tom Merry. "I shall be jolly glad when the journey's over, though Gussy has made it exciting."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"These French country trains are jolly slow," said Blake, with a yawn. "I don't believe this wretched rattletrap will ever stop—"

Bump!

Crun-n-n-n-eh!

"Bai Jove, what's that?"

"The train's stopping!"

"But it's not the station!" exclaimed Blake. "It's only a few minutes since we left the last."

"Gwent Scott, there's something wrong!"

Tom Merry looked grim.

"That's it," he said quietly. "There's something wrong on the line."

"Bai Jove!"

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CHAPTER 3.

Stopped on the Line.

TOM MERRY flung the window down and looked out. There was blackness outside, broken only by the glimmer of whirling flakes.

Hoarse voices shouted along the line, but Tom could not make out what they were saying. The train bumped again, and then was quite still.

Passengers looked out of the other carriages, doors were opened, and a hundred voices added to the din in bass and treble.

"Bai Jove, there's somethin' weally wong!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps I had bettah get out and see if I can do anythin'."

"You might get behind the train and shove," suggested Lowther.

"Weally, Lowther—"

"Of you might sing one of your tenor solos. That would make anything get further on if it could."

"I wegard you as an ass, and I wefuse to weply to your widiculous wemarks. Pway let me pass, Tom Mewwy."

"We may as well get out, kids," said Tom Merry. "The other passengers are getting out. I hope it's nothing serious. No fun in being stuck up here on a freezing night."

"By George, no!"

"Wathah not!"

The St. Jim's juniors crowded out of the carriage. They took their small personal belongings with them. Their trunks were with the luggage, and if the train was held up, would be held up with it.

Tom Merry hurried along to the crowd that was gathering round the halted engine.

The engine-driver was making hopeless gestures.

"Something wrong with the line," said Kerr, after listening for a few minutes to the excited hubbub of talk. "A bridge has given way in a flood."

"Phew!"

"From what I can gather, we've had a narrow escape of going to kingdom come here," said Kerr. "But the engine-driver was warned in time. The bridge isn't down, but it's unsafe. Looks as if we sha'n't get through to-night, my sons."

"But is it imposs. for us to remain here."

Kerr shrugged his shoulders.

"Better whistle for an aeroplane, then."

"Weally, Kerr—"

Some of the passengers were getting back into the carriages, as the warmest place. Others were already walking back along the line towards the station they had left. The hubbub of voices subsided a little.

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows thoughtfully.

"Look here, you chaps, we can't stay here, that's certain," he said. "And Cernay's waiting for us at Proly, too, in his governor's car—"

"He'll hear of the accident," said Blake. "He'll get home when he knows that the line is blocked, and we can't come through."

"Yes; but what are we to do? No good going back, and hanging up at a draughty railway-station all night. If we're going to walk, we may as well walk forward."

"Forward's the word!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I don't know about getting along the line, if the bridge is unsafe," said Tom Merry. "But there is some road or other, I suppose. Find somebody who hasn't lost his head, and pitch it to him, Kerr. Ask if there's a road direct to the Chateau Cernay. No good going to Proly if we can get direct to Cernay's place."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kerr inquired. In spite of the excitement of the accident, the national politeness of the French made a dozen people ready to afford the boys any assistance in their power, and Kerr extracted the information that if they followed the line for a short distance, and then took a road which they would perceive at a curve, and followed that road, it would lead them within sight of the lights of the Chateau Cernay—a building that seemed to be well known in the district.

"Jolly good!" said Tom Merry, when Kerr reported.

"Let's bunk!"

And the juniors of St. Jim's marched on through the darkness and the falling flakes.

It was evidently the best thing to be done; but the boys soon found that they had not undertaken an easy task.

There was no danger of a train coming along the line, under the circumstances, and so long as they kept to the railway-track all was plain sailing, though even there it was not easy to find one's way in the darkness. But the metals guided them, and they reached the curve of the track.

"Here's the curve," said Tom Merry, halting. "Now, where's the road?"

"Puzzle," said Lowther. "Find the road."

"It's on the right of the track," said Kerr.

"Here's a blessed embankment here—careful how you get down."

"Yaas, wathah! Shall I help you, Tom Mewwy!"

"Better help yourself, Gussy."

"Oh, I'm all wight! I'm wemarkably sure-footed in a place like this. You see, I—"

Arthur Augustus suddenly broke off, and there was a sound of rolling and scrambling, and of crashing bushes.

Tom Merry burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! Where are you, Gussy?"

"Ow!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Ya-a-as, wathah!"

The swell of St. Jim's had disappeared. The juniors followed him down the slope more cautiously, and, groping for him in the dark, dragged him out of a hedge.

Arthur Augustus gasped for breath.

"Bai Jove!"

"Are you damaged?"

"I feah that my toppah is wuined."

"Never mind your topper. What about your bones?"

"My toppah—"

"Blow your topper!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I canot pwoceed without my toppah, and, as a mattah of fact—"

"Any bones broken?" demanded Blake.

"No," said D'Arcy peevishly. "Nevali mind my bones. My toppah is somewhere on the othah side of that beastly hedge."

"Better leave it behind," said Fatty Wynn. "We ought to get in as soon as possible. We don't want to keep them waiting supper."

"Weally, Wynn—"

"I wish I had Pongo here," said Wally. "He'd soon find the topper. He'd guide us, too, in this rotten dark. I—"

"Here's the topper," said Blake, who was groping for it. "It feels a bit squashy, but it's all right. Now, come on!"

They squeezed through the hedge into the lane. It was a narrow, dark lane, and there was no glimmer of a lamp.

"Now then, Kerr, which way?"

"Left, after leaving the line."

"Right-ho! Come on!"

They marched on.

The darkness was hardly broken by a glimmer in the sky; round them the light flakes were still falling, and the ground was assuming a ghostly glimmer of white. Progress was still slow, but the St. Jim's juniors stuck it out manfully.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "This is a wathah original way of goin' to a Christmas party, and no mistake!"

"I only hope we shall get there!" grunted Manners. "Here's a blessed cross-road! Which one are we to take, Kerr?"

The juniors halted.

A lane crossed the one they were following at almost right angles, and, although they struck matches and groped, they could find no trace whatever of a signboard. There was no indication of any sort. Kerr rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Well, which way, Kerr?" demanded half a dozen voices.

The Scottish junior shook his head.

"Don't ask me."

"But you found out the way, didn't you?"

"They never told me anything about this cross-road. I suppose they didn't think of it."

"And you didn't?" said Kangaroo.

"Well, hang it," said Kerr warmly, "how the dickens was I to think of it?"

"This is what comes of trusting a New House chap to do the interpreting!" said Blake. "We've really only got ourselves to thank!"

"Look here, you School-House ass—"

"Oh, don't jaw—that won't make it any better! Kerr has got us into a hole—"

"You dummy—"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Kerr as havin' got us into a feahful hole! The best thing Kerr can do is to apologise to all the gentlemen pwesent!"

"Fat lot of good that will do!" remarked Wally.

"Wally, I object to those vulgah expressions! I—"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! What the deuce are we to do?" said Tom Merry. "We've got a choice of three ways, and one's as good as another!"

And the juniors looked at one another grimly, while the whirling flakes dropped thicker and thicker about them.

CHAPTER 4.

The Mysterious Light.

THERE was silence for some moments. The predicament was a serious one. The juniors of St. Jim's were fond of adventure, true; but, as Blake said, this was a little too thick! They were out in the snow and darkness, at a late hour, in a foreign country, and they hadn't the faintest idea which road to take of three. And if they found the right one, there was still a long and weary tramp before them to reach the hospitable roof of their French chum.

"Most enjoyable Christmas party this of yours, Merry!" said Blake, at last.

"Oh, rats!"

"Looks like being a frost!" ventured Lowther.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass in the direction of Monty Lowther's voice, not being able to see Lowther himself.

"Lowthah, I object vewy much to your wotten jokes at a time like this! I object—"

"The question is, what's to be done?" said Noble.

"You are intewwuptin' me, Kangawoo!"

"Yes, I know that, Gussy! What's to be done?"

"Toss up for it," said Dig.

"Well, that really seems the only thing to do," said Tom Merry. "Anybody got a coin handy?"

"Yaas, I've got a twenty-fwanc-piece here!"

"Get a match out, Blake."

Blake struck a match, and D'Arcy tossed up the gold louis. Of course, he missed it coming down, and the coin dropped to the ground.

"Bai Jove!"

"A guess for each turning," said Tom Merry, "and the odd man wins."

"I've dwopped the coin."

"Ass!"

"Get another," said Blake. "Look sharp!"

"But it was a twenty-fwanc-piece! Stwike anoathah match!"

"Bosh! It's lost now, of course."

"It would be vewy extwavgant to lose twenty fwancs that way, Blake!"

"Well, you always were an ass, you know! Let it be a lesson to you not to be an ass, and it will be worth the gold Nap! Here's a French penny. I'll toss."

"But I've lost—"

"Well, look for it, duffer!"

Blake tossed the dix-centime-piece, and caught it in his palms.

"Now, then, Tommy!"

"Head for the left turning!" said Tom.

Blake showed the coin in the glimmer of a match. It was tail.

"Left turning's barred," he said. "Try again."

"Head for middle turning!"

"Tail again."

"Then we take the right one," said Tom Merry. "Well, it's as good a way of deciding as any other, but I wish we had a surer one. Anyway, it's settled now—the right turning. Come on!"

"If it turns out to be right—" began Lowther.

"Oh, don't be funny now—march!"

"I haven't found that louis, yet!"

"Leave it there."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Well, you'll have to stay and look for it alone!" grinned Blake. "Good-bye!"

Taking the turning to the right, the juniors marched on. Arthur Augustus hesitated a moment, and then followed them, leaving his twenty-franc-piece reposing somewhere amid the mud and snow on the road.

The middle turning, and the turning to the right parted at an obtuse angle, and there really seemed little to choose between them—indeed, it would have been difficult to decide which was the lane, and which was the turning. But at a short distance from the cross-roads the lane wound round further to the right. This was hardly to be observed by the juniors, encompassed in darkness as they were. They followed the road, tramping steadily in hopes of meeting someone who would direct them more surely, or of seeing the lights of a cottage where they could make inquiries.

But no pedestrian on the road, no glimmer of light from the wayside gladdened their eyes. The country seemed to be deserted.

Tom Merry struck a match and looked at his watch at last.

"My hat! Guess the time!"

"Oh, give it up!"

"Half-past eleven."

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "It will be wathah bad form pwesentin' ourselves at a fellow's house at this time of night!"

"We haven't much chance of presenting ourselves there!" growled Figgins. "More likely to present ourselves in a snowdrift!"

ANSWERS

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"Cernay will think we've stayed somewhere for the night, owing to the breakdown," said Kangaroo. "I wonder if we could find shelter?"

"I've been looking for a light—a cottage, or anything," said Tom Merry. "But there doesn't seem to be anything. Of course, there might be a building within a few yards of us and we shouldn't see it. There would be no lights at this hour."

"Well, we can only keep on."

They tramped on wearily. Their limbs were growing heavy with fatigue, and sleep weighed down their eyelids. The snow was still falling with a steady persistence, and the roads and hedges and trees glimmered white in the darkness.

The juniors had welcomed the sight of the snow when it began to fall, as seasonable for a Christmas holiday—they were changing their minds now, as it settled upon them, and clung to them, and blew round their faces and ears.

Arthur Augustus uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Stop, deah boys!"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothin'."

"Then keep on, ass!" growled Blake. "There's no time to waste now."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, come on!"

"I tell you—"

"Well, you can stand there and jaw to the snow!" said Blake, who was a little crusty, perhaps. "I hope you'll enjoy it! Good-bye!"

"But—"

"Why don't you come on?" shouted Tom Merry.

"Because I've seen a light, deah boy!"

"What?"

"I've seen a light."

"Oh! Why didn't you say so, then?"

"Weally, you didn't give me a chance! You—"

"Oh, never mind! Where's the light?"

The juniors halted eagerly. Any glimmer of light in that dense and snowy darkness was a godsend to them. If they could get into any shelter for the night—even if it were only a cattle-shed—they would be glad. In the dawn they would be able to find their way to the chateau, or to get a conveyance thither. Now, tired Nature called out imperiously for rest.

"Where is the light, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus pointed across the level land beside the lane, separated from them only by a row of low trees.

"It was there, deah boy."

"I can't see it."

"Neitah can I, now! But it was there! I saw it distinctly."

Jack Blake growled.

"You ass! It's only a false alarm—there's no light! It's only Gussy going to sleep and dreaming he sees things!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Let's get on," grunted Digby. "If we stay here while Gussy talks, we sha'n't get a move on till morning."

"Weally, Dig—"

"There's no light, that's certain!" said Tom Merry, straining his eyes into the gloom. "You must have been mistaken, Gussy!"

"I decline to admit the possibility of my bein' mistaken, Tom Merry! The light has disappeahed now, I know, but I certainly did see it!"

"Was it moving, or still?"

"Movin', I think—but I caught sight of it only for a moment."

"It might be some chap out to get cattle in, or something," said Manners, hopefully. "Better make sure before we go on."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, I suppose so," agreed Tom Merry doubtfully. "If it was a chap with a lantern, he might have passed behind something. There may be a farm here, for all I know. Keep your eyes on the spot."

Jack Blake caught his arm quickly.

"Look!"

From the darkness of the night gleamed a sudden light—sudden, bright—flashing like a searchlight through the gloom.

It was only for an instant, and then it vanished, and the darkness of the night seemed darker than before.

CHAPTER 5.

The Ruined Chateau.

TOM MERRY drew a quick, deep breath. The juniors had all seen the light this time, and there was no possibility of a mistake about it. The light was there—but what did it mean?

That was a question which Tom Merry thought needed an answer.

"Bettah shout," said Arthur Augustus. "The chap is bound to hear us if we bawl loud enough, you know; and then he'll come and show us a light."

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Tom Merry caught him by the shoulder.

"Silence—silence!"

"Bai Jove, what do you mean?"

"Not a sound!"

"Weally, Tom Merry—"

"There's something odd about this," said Tom Merry, in a low tone. "Don't make a row, any of you. That may be a place for us to give a wide berth to."

"It struck me the same," said Figgins. "There's something jolly mysterious in those flashes. There it goes again."

The light flashed out of the heart of the gloom again. It blazed straight towards the juniors, turned in a half-circle, and disappeared.

Blackness again!

"It's a signal," said Blake.

"Bai Jove! They know we're here, then."

"Rats! It's a signal to somebody else."

"Gweat Scott! I nevah thought of that, you know."

Tom Merry's face was very serious.

"That light is too bright for a farmer's lantern," he said.

"It is either electric or acetylene, and it can't belong to a farm-hand. It's not a chap looking for cattle, and it's not a chap belonging to a farm signalling to another chap. You don't find acetylene lamps on a farm in a country district like this."

"Not likely!"

"Besides, at this hour—"

"Looks fishy."

"There may be something fishy going on, or there may not," said Tom Merry; "but, in any case, we may as well be careful. No good running one's head into trouble."

"Wathah not."

"Robbers are a bit out of date, I know, but there might be footpads in a lonely region like this. One never knows."

"The light doesn't seem to be coming again," said Blake, after a pause.

"No. We don't know how long it's been going on, though. The chap it's a signal to may have arrived."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The St. Jim's juniors waited and watched, with the flakes of snow settling thickly round them. They were anxious and curious. They needed shelter, for the most hopeful had almost given up hope of reaching the Chateau Cernay that night. They did not want to spend six or seven hours wandering in the snowy lanes. But shelter in this spot might mean worse for them.

The light did not reappear.

"Well, what's going to be done?" said Blake, at last.

"Forward, or halt?"

"Halt, deah boys," said D'Arcy. "I wathah fancy myself as a walkah, but weally I am gettin' vewy fatigued now. I would wathah wun any wisk than spend the west of the night in twampin' about."

"Well, I feel like that, too," said Figgins. "We can't get to Cernay's, that's a dead cert. My belief is that we took the wrong turning; but if we go back, we don't know which of the others to take."

"We may be on the right road, and only a few minutes from the chateau."

"Or a few hours."

"Well, there's no telling."

"I'm tired," said Fatty Wynn. "The only thing is, if we put up in a barn or something, what are we going to have for supper?"

"Oh, let's risk it," said Wally. "I can't go on tramping much further, and the snow's coming down thicker than ever."

"Well, I'm willing to take the risk, whatever it is, if you chaps are," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "After all, there are eleven of us, and most of us have sticks, and we all have British fists. We ought to be able to take care of ourselves."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Only don't make a row; we don't want any trouble if we can help it."

"Wight-ho!"

"You fellows all agreed?" asked Tom Merry.

They were all agreed. They felt that they would rather risk penetrating into the den of a gang of footpads than continue the weary tramp through the snow and the dark.

"Come on, then," said Tom Merry, "and quiet!"

"Right-ho!"

"Bettah let me lead the way, Tom Merry."

"Rats!"

And Tom Merry marched ahead into the trees. He had to feel his way carefully, for the ground was rough and hilly, and, as far as he could ascertain, uncultivated.

He stumbled presently over an invisible mass in the darkness, and uttered a slight exclamation.

"Anythin' w'eong?"

"Stop a minute."

Tom Merry felt over the obstruction with his hands. It was a huge block of stone, covered, of course, with snow.

"What is it?" asked Kerr.
 "A big chunk of stone," said Tom Merry, in perplexity.
 "I don't know what it can be doing here, unless—"
 "Unless what?"

"Well, if we were at home, on Rylcombe Hill, I should think we were running into the ruins of the old castle," said Tom Merry. "I don't know if there's any ruined building about here. I wish I knew where we were."

Blake uttered a slight exclamation.

"By George! I remember now Cernay telling us something about a ruined chateau—a building destroyed by the mob in the French Revolution, and never rebuilt. It's in the same neighbourhood as the Chateau Cernay—how near I don't know."

"This might be the place, then."

"Quite likely."

They moved on cautiously. Blake's surmise was probably correct, for as they went on they stumbled many times against masses of masonry, and once they almost fell down a flight of several stone steps. They were evidently passing over ground that had once been occupied by an extensive building, of which the fragments still remained.

A dark mass loomed up before the juniors, and they stopped at last. The mass, darker than the surrounding darkness, showed them that they had reached a building.

"Look out!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

"Music. Hark!"

"My hat!"

The juniors stood spellbound.

From the silence and the dimness of the night, proceeding whence they could not tell, came strange strains of music.

Now high, now low, now almost inaudible, the strains came softly through the night to the ears of the astounded juniors.

"It's a violin," said Kerr.

"My hat! Here, at this hour!"

"Well, the light showed there was someone in the building," said Blake. "I suppose the chap is keeping it up, as Christmas is coming."

"It's pretty certain, as I said, that it wasn't a farm-hand with the light," said Tom Merry. "A farmer's man wouldn't have a violin, and certainly wouldn't be playing it here at this time of night."

"Nor a tramp, either, nor a footpad," said Kerr.

"Well, no," said Tom Merry, puzzled. "What the deuce—"

"I wonder—" began Blake; and then he paused.

"Well, what do you wonder?" said Tom Merry. "Have you got the faintest idea what it may mean?"

"I only remember what Cernay told me."

"Cernay?"

"Yes. I suppose this is the building he was speaking of—the ruined chateau," said Blake, in a low voice.

"Most likely. What about it?"

"He told me something about it," said Blake hesitatingly.

"Oh! What was it?"

"Well, it's not a cheerful sort of thing, considering where we are, and the time of night," said Blake.

"Oh, go ahead!"

"Well, he said the chateau was supposed to be—be—"

"What?"

"Haunted," said Blake.

"Bai Jove!"

"The seigneur and his family were keeping up some festival, with music and dancing, when the Jacobin mob broke in on them," said Blake, in a hushed voice. "They were all murdered. Since then, so the country people say, Cernay told me, though he laughed at the story himself—since then the ghosts have haunted the place, and the music is often heard of a winter night."

"Phew!"

"I—I—I think we'd better get on," said Fatty Wynn.

"I—I—I'm not superstitious, you know, but—but—"

"Ghosts are all bosh," said Tom Merry decidedly.

"Yes, of course they are, in the daytime; but—"

"The music's stopped!" said Kangaroo.

"Perhaps the ghosts have heard us," suggested Monty Lowther. "Anyway, it wasn't a ghost who was waving that lantern about, I suppose."

"Ha, ha! Hardly."

"We'll go on," said Tom Merry determinedly. "Most likely the music is somebody playing a trick to scare off people for some reason."

"But whoever it is, he wouldn't expect people to be prowling round to hear the music at this time of night."

"Well, no. Anyway, we want shelter, and we're not going to be frightened away by the squeak of a violin."

"Not half!"

"Come on, then!"

And the juniors, feeling their way in the darkness, moved on. But their hearts were beating very hard now.

CHAPTER 6.

Camping Out.

DAWK and gloomy was the building as the juniors cautiously approached through the fast-falling flakes. The mysterious sound of music had died away, and a silence as of the grave had fallen upon the ruined building.

It was only broken by the slight sounds made by the boys as they stumbled among the masses of fallen masonry, and brushed against the massive walls of the old chateau in the darkness.

Suddenly they became aware that the snow was no longer falling upon them.

"Bai Jove, it's left off snowin'!" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remarked.

"No, it hasn't, duffer," grunted Blake; "we're under a roof now."

"Bai Jove!"

The wind still swept about them, but the snow was gone. They were under a roof of some kind, but they could see nothing.

On every side, darkness and silence—darkness that could be felt, silence as of the grave. The uncanny place was having a strange effect upon their nerves. They were silent, with fast-beating hearts.

They stopped, under the shelter of the unseen roof, and Tom Merry broke the silence.

"We can't stand here," he said; "we've got to find some place more comfy to camp for the night. We must get a light."

"But that will give the alarm."

"I know—but it can't be helped. We're not afraid of ghosts, I suppose; and as for human beings, there are eleven of us."

"That's so," said Kangaroo. "Let's get a light. There may be a corner of this place where we can be quite comfy for the night. There might be fuel, too—old doors and windows, to make a fire."

"Bai Jove! I should be glad of a warm."

"We—we might find some grub, too, if there's anybody digging here," said Fatty Wynn. "I'm—I'm awfully hungry, you know. I get very hungry at this time of the year, and—"

"Not much chance of grub," said Tom Merry. "Lucky we've got some matches."

He struck a wax vesta.

The juniors looked round them eagerly in the glimmering light of the match. It showed large damp stone walls, and gave them a glimpse of an arched roof overhead.

All was cold, desolate, dark.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, with a shiver. "It's a place for ghosts, you know. I wish we had a lantern."

"We can make a torch," said Lowther.

"Bai Jove! How?"

"We could burn your topper—"

"Pway don't be an ass."

"We'll burn a handkerchief, anyway, and get a look round," said Tom Merry. "Come further in—it's more sheltered."

A handkerchief was twisted round the end of a stick and set fire to. The light blazed up and illuminated the strange quarters in which the juniors found themselves.

It was a large room, and seemed to have been an ante-chamber to the great hall of the chateau, over the ruins of which they had stumbled into their present refuge.

Windowless openings gave admittance to the wind and to stray flakes of snow; but the roof of the room seemed to be almost intact, only here and there fugitive flakes coming in. Three or four doorways—bare of doors—opened on various sides, giving admittance to what had been other apartments of the chateau—now windowless ruins, walls and fragments of the roofs alone remaining.

The juniors looked about them—with curiosity—and with anxiety, too. In the light of the improvised torch, they did not know what strange sight might meet their gaze. That there were others besides themselves in the ruined chateau they were certain. Others—at least one other. Where was he? Who was he?

Not a wayfarer like themselves—the light signals showed that. Of whom, then, was this desolate ruin the den?

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But there was safety in numbers. Even if the denizens of the chateau were thieves, eleven sturdy fellows ought to be able to take care of themselves.

"Can't see anything of his ghostship," said Monty Lowther. "The fellow with the lamp is lying low, too."

"Suppose we call to them," suggested Blake.

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, it wouldn't do any harm. After all, they must know we are here, so we sha'n't be giving ourselves away."

"Wathah not."

"Let's give 'em a yell," said Blake. "It will break this horrible silence, anyway."

"Good! All together!"

And with one voice the St. Jim's juniors roared:

"Hallo!"

The echoes of the shout came thundering back.

But nothing else answered them. If there were another occupant of the ruined chateau he could not have failed to hear that shout; but he did not care to show himself.

"Hallo, hallo!" roared the eleven powerful voices again.

Again the thundering echoes were the only answer. The torch was burning out.

"Call out in French, Kerr."

Kerr obeyed. He called out to anybody who was there to show himself, and help belated travellers who wanted rest and shelter. But only the echoes replied.

Blake snorted.

"The bounders are lying low," he said. "That's pretty certain proof that they're no class. We shall remain here, in spite of them; but we'd better keep watch, and keep our eyes peeled."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The last flicker of the torch died out. Darkness rushed upon them once again. The juniors instinctively drew closer together.

"The first thing is to get a fire," said Tom Merry. "There must be some wood of some sort left here, if it's only a window-frame. I've got a newspaper in my pocket; we'll burn it for a light."

And the "Paris Daily Mail" was twisted into a torch and lighted. By its light the juniors hunted for fuel.

The chateau had probably been stripped of its woodwork by the peasants of the surrounding country for fuel, for it was a difficult task to find any left. But they found a window-frame at last, and dragged it from the almost inaccessible casement where it was still jammed, and brought down a shower of stones with it. There was no axe to chop it with, and they smashed it as small as possible with heavy stones, and then set to work chipping it with their pocket-knives.

It was weary work; but there was an adventurous excitement about it that banished sleep and fatigue. After all, it was a ripping adventure to camp for the night in a ruined chateau in the heart of France. There were a good many fellows at St. Jim's who would have given a term's pocket-money for the chance.

When a pile of chips, large and small, had been accumulated, Blake extracted from his pocket the last number of the "Marvel," and it was sacrificed to the fire. The paper burned up cheerily, and a dozen matches laid on it blazed up, and then the smaller of the chips were fed upon it, burning freely. Then the larger chips were laid carefully on the infant fire, and finally chunks of wood.

It was a labour of time, but the fire burned up, and soon the ruddy gleams of it were reflected on all sides, casting strange shadows into the recesses of the old chateau.

"We shall want some more fuel, though," said Fatty Wynn, warming his hands at the blaze. "Where the dickens are we to get it?"

"Use your head," said Lowther.

"Bai Jove, it's the tenth time I've heard Lowthah make that wotten joke!"

"Oh, rats! Let's look for some more wood."

They hunted high and low for wood. Figgins came upon a stone staircase leading downwards into impenetrable darkness, and he struck a match and descended.

Then he suddenly stopped.

From below him, in the dense darkness, came a strange sound—the sound of a deep groan, as of a man in agony.

Then silence again.

Figgins stood for a moment, the blood running cold in his veins, and the hair standing on end upon his head.

Only for a moment; then he turned, and raced up the stairs again at top speed, his heart thumping against his ribs like a hammer.

He dashed back into the light thrown by the fire, and the ghastly hue of his face drew every glance upon him at once.

CHAPTER 7.

Haunted?

Figgins gasped for breath. That terrible sound from the darkness on the staircase was ringing in his ears still. He could not speak. Kerr tapped him on the shoulder.

"What's the matter, Figgy?"

"Oh!"

"I say, old chap, what on earth—"

"Good heavens!" gasped Figgins. "It—it gave me a turn."

The juniors gathered quickly round. Tom Merry grasped his stick tightly.

"What was it, Figgy? Have you seen anything?"

"N-n-n-no!"

"Then what—"

"I—I heard something," gasped Figgins. "A—a groan—an awful groan."

"Phew! Where?"

"There's a stair just outside this room—leads downwards. I was going down for fuel, and—and I heard it—"

"Gwheat Scott! What did you do?"

"Bunked!" said Figgins laconically.

Tom Merry grinned.

"I think I should have done the same," he remarked. "It must have been startling; but—it must be somebody playing a trick."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Or else somebody tumbled down the steps, and broken his leg," suggested Blake. "That's as likely as the other."

"Ah! Possibly. We—we ought to look."

Figgins's face grew longer. He did not like the idea of going down those steps again. But he would not draw back.

"Right you are," he said. "I'm game, if you are."

"Anybody got a newspaper for a torch?"

Fatty Wynn had the "Petit Journal," and it was sacrificed to the cause. With the paper torch in his hand, blazing brightly, Tom Merry followed Figgins, who showed the way to the stone stair; the other juniors bringing up the rear.

"Here you are," said Figgins.

Tom Merry led the way downward.

The stone stair apparently led to the old vaults beneath the chateau. The torch illuminated the narrow staircase, and revealed the dark stones, the moss of ages, but nothing living.

There was no sign of a human being.

At the bottom of the staircase Tom Merry flashed the light to right and left. It flickered dimly into wide, dark vaults.

But there was no one to be seen.

"It wasn't a chap hurt himself here, then," said Tom Merry, in a low tone. "It must have been a trick to frighten us away."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hark!"

From the darkness of the vaults came a repetition of the sound which had so alarmed Figgins—the deep, terrible groan.

The juniors started and changed colour.

"Good—good heavens! What is it?"

"A trick," said Tom Merry firmly. "It's a trick. Hallo, there—hallo, hallo! We know you are playing a silly trick, and you may as well drop it."

"Tell him in French, Kerr."

Kerr sang out the same words in French. No reply came to either—only the booming echoes of the great vaults.

"Let's get up," said Fatty Wynn.

They ascended to the upper floor. Convinced as they were that the groan was merely a trick, they were glad enough to get back to the light of the fire.

Tom Merry piled on the rest of the fuel.

"They can keep up that game as long as they like," he said with knitted brows. "They won't make us leave here till the morning. If we had lanterns, I'd be jolly well inclined to go on a ghost hunt."

"Better go on a fuel hunt," said Blake. "This fire won't last long. We must have some more wood from somewhere."

And the search for wood recommenced. They did not go near the lower stair again.

After all, they were not likely to find wood in the vaults.

Several heavy fragments of wood were discovered at last, and dragged to the fire, and Tom Merry judging that there was sufficient to last until morning, they gave up further search. The fire was replenished and piled high, and the cheerful blaze changed the aspect of the room, and made the spirits of the juniors rise.

Outside, amid the ruins of the chateau, the wind howled, and the snow was falling more thickly.

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A dark mass loomed up before the juniors. "I suppose this is the building Cerway told us about—the ruined chateau," said Blake in a low voice.

But the snow could not reach them, and they were sheltered from most of the wind, which only made the fire flicker and waver, and caused strange shadows to dance on the walls.

Shelter and warmth they had obtained, but supper was another matter. The juniors were all hungry, but where was food to come from?

"We shall have to take it out in sleep," grinned Figgins. "Poor old Fatty! Look at his face."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was thinking——" said Fatty Wynn slowly.

"Go hon!"

"I suppose it wouldn't be cricket?"

"What wouldn't?"

"Yet—I'm hungrier than any of you chaps—I always get specially hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn. Blake gave a shout.

"My hat! He's got some grub!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Only a packet of sandwiches," said Fatty Wynn. "I—I'm willing to share them all round. It—it's a bit of a struggle, but—here you are."

And he extracted a fat packet from the pocket of his coat. Figgins gave him a slap on the back in great appreciation.

"Bravo, Fatty!"

"Ow!"

"Bravo! I know it must be like having a tooth out to part with the grub."

"Worse," said Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, Fatty shall have the lion's share," said Tom Merry, as he unfastened the packet. "That's only fair."

"Yaas, wathah."

There were a good many sandwiches in the packet, enough for one each all round and a couple over. Fatty Wynn had heroically refrained from devouring them, as he might easily have done unseen in the darkness. And the chums of St. Jim's fully appreciated that self-denial on the part of Fatty Wynn.

They knew how much it must have cost him to hand out the provisions for a fair division, instead of bolting them alone and unaided.

The couple over were handed to Fatty; who had three to his share, and his three disappeared before the others had got through their one each.

Then Fatty Wynn gave a deep sigh.

"Well, it was cricket," he said.

"Yaas, wathah, it was cricket, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Considerin' what a feabfully hungwy

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best you are, it was a great sacrifice to make. I regard Fatty Wynn as havin' played the game."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Blake, with a very good imitation of D'Arcy's beautiful accent, which drew the elegant junior's eyeglass in his direction.

"Weally, Blake—"

"A vote of thanks to Fatty Wynn!" said Kangaroo.

"Passed unanimously."

"I have somethin' better than that," said Arthur Augustus, fumbling in his coat-pocket. "Fatty Wynn, pway accept this bar of milk chocolate as a sign of my appweciation of your extraordinary self-denial."

"What-ho!" said Fatty Wynn.

"It is too small to share out," said D'Arcy. "But we will all watch Fatty eat it, and I weally think the expression of his face will be weward enough."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Fatty!"

The bar of milk chocolate followed the three sandwiches. Fatty Wynn smiled a beaming smile.

"Well, it does make a chap feel better to get even an instalment of grub inside him," he remarked. "I feel as if I could face a thousand ghosts now, you know—I—oh!"

Even as Fatty Wynn spoke, there came the sound of a deep groan—so close, so deep and thrilling, that the juniors started and turned pale.

Fatty Wynn broke off, as white as chalk.

"Wh—wh—what—"

"Where is the rotter?" muttered Blake, looking round him with wide, scared eyes.

There was no reply to that question. The fire cast a ruddy light for a dozen yards round—and there was no one in sight.

Yet the groan had seemed to be quite close to them.

The juniors gazed at one another with startled eyes. What did it mean? Was it—was it possible, after all, that the ruined chateau was—haunted?

CHAPTER S.

A Sudden Flight.

"WH—WH—WHAT can it mean?" said Figgins.

"Ow! There it is again!" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"Gweat Scott!"

Groan!

Deep and terrible was the sound, and it sent a shudder to the veins of the juniors. Whence did it come? There was no one within the circle of the ruddy firelight—yet that terrible sound was close at hand.

Tom Merry looked downward.

The ground was of huge blocks of stone, moss-covered. Once there had been a floor, but that was long torn away to be burned for firewood. The rough stones were revealed; and they were evidently thick, solid. No sound uttered in the vaults below could penetrate through them.

Yet whence came that fearful sound?

The St. Jim's juniors were all on their feet now—pale, shaken.

Groan!

The sound died away faintly, tremulously.

"My only hat!" said Tom Merry, and his voice was shaking like a leaf. "I—I begin to wish we hadn't come to this place. But—but it must all be a trick."

They gazed round them.

Solid stone floor, solid walls—firelight playing for a dozen yards round—where was the room for trickery? Yet—

"It's no ghost!" said Blake.

"Hark!"

Through the night came that strange wail of music once more—the weird music that they had heard when they reached the ruined chateau.

Low and faint, then swelling higher, it penetrated to their ears. But from what direction it came, not one of them could tell.

The juniors shuddered.

In the daylight it was all very well to laugh at ghost stories, but in the mysterious shadows of the ruined chateau, in the blackest hours of the night—

"Let's get out," said Dig.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"They're not going to frighten us away."

"But—the storm," said Figgins. "The snow's thicker than ever! We can't get through it—and where to go?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll stick it out," said Tom Merry, between his teeth.

"It must be trickery."

Blake suddenly gripped his arm.

"Look! Look!"

"Good heavens!"

In the distance, through a shattered doorway, a strange

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and terrible figure appeared. It was a ghostly form in white, moving with a slow and gliding motion towards them.

Near the broken portal it stopped, and stood motionless.

The juniors felt the blood freeze in their veins.

Tom Merry stood for a moment spellbound.

Then, stooping, he seized his stick and hurled it through the broken doorway with all the force of his arm, full at the ghostly figure.

Dim as was the light at the distance, the straining eyes of the juniors saw the heavy, whirling stick strike the white figure full in the breast.

It struck with a crash that would have sent any man hurtling to the ground; but the white figure did not fall—there was no sound from it.

It remained perfectly motionless.

Tom Merry's teeth came together with a click.

"Good heavens!"

"It's—it's a ghost!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"Impossible!" shouted Tom desperately.

He seized a heavy, jagged stone, he swung it into the air with both hands, and hurled it with all his force.

Crash!

There was a fearful crash as the stone smashed upon the blank wall beyond—but the white form never moved.

Tom Merry shuddered from head to foot.

From the darkness came a wailing sound.

That was all!

"I—I can't stand this," muttered Figgins, through his

ashen lips. "I—I—"

"It's coming!"

"Oh!"

The figure was moving!

For a single instant the juniors stood spellbound. Then, with one accord, without waiting to speak, they dashed away.

Away from the cheerful fire—away from the sheltering roof—anywhere to escape that fearful vision.

Away—away—at frantic speed!

The cold wind and snow dashing in their faces recalled them to themselves. Tom Merry was the first to stop.

"Hold on!"

"Oh, come on!" muttered Manners.

"Stop!"

"But—"

"Stop, I say."

They stopped. Tom Merry gasped for breath—the bitter wind was lashing in his face.

"I—I won't go," he said between his teeth. "Man or ghost, I'll stick it out. Come back."

"But—"

"Then I'll go back alone."

And he turned.

"That you jolly well won't," exclaimed Kangaroo.

"Come on, kids!"

"Wight-o!"

And they all turned back. How far they had run, in those few minutes of panic, they did not know.

Tom Merry looked for the ruddy glare of the light to guide them—but the fire had disappeared.

He stopped, and rubbed his eyes, and looked again.

There was not a gleam from the fire.

"I can't understand this," exclaimed Tom Merry. "The fire must show to a great distance—and we haven't come far."

"It's gone out."

"There was enough to last for hours—"

Blake uttered an exclamation.

"They've put it out, of course."

"Ghosts don't put out fires," said Tom Merry, between his teeth. "I was sure that it was a trick—only—I lost my head for the minute."

Blake laughed ruefully.

"I think we all lost our heads," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah! Even I must have lost my head, deah boys! But undah the circs—"

"If they've put the fire out, they're human enough," said Figgins. "But the question is, can we find our way back without the light?"

"Can't strike a match in this wind," said Kerr.

"We'll find the chateau somehow."

They plunged on in the thick gloom. The wind had risen, and it was whirling thick flakes round their ears. There was not a glimmer of light to guide them—the fire in the ruined chateau had evidently been extinguished.

"Hallo! Here's something!" exclaimed Blake. "A hedge near that blessed chateau, chaps?"

"I don't remember seeing one; but there might have been," said Tom Merry. "Is it a road?"

"On the other side of the hedge, I think."

"It may be the lane we left—we may be able to work our way from it again."

"Well, we'll try."

They scrambled through the hedge. Were they in the lane from which they had sought the chateau? They could not tell. There was no guessing in the darkness.

"Hark!" said Tom Merry abruptly.

"By Jove! I can hear—"

"It's somebody coming."

The juniors listened intently, as well as they could in the wind. Down the wind the sound came to them—heavy footsteps grinding in the mud and snow of the lane, and a muttering voice in French.

"What is he saying, Kerr?"

Kerr chuckled softly.

"I can't repeat it; but he's annoyed by the wind, whoever he is, and he's saying things. Seems to me I have heard his voice before."

"He's close to us now. Mind—"

Bump!

The invisible form ran right into Tom Merry. Tom staggered under the unexpected impact as a sharp voice cried in French:

"Gaston! C'est bien!"

It was the voice of the scarred Frenchman—their disagreeable fellow-passenger of the railway train!

CHAPTER 9. A Night Out!

"GASTON!"

The Frenchman was peering through the darkness at Tom Merry, trying to make him out—already suspecting that he had made a mistake, as the boy did not answer. Tom felt a strong grasp laid upon his shoulder.

"Let go!" he said quietly.

There was an oath in French.

"Parbleu! Vat—vat—who are you?"

The grasp on Tom's shoulder tightened. But the others were gathering round now. They all knew that sharp, unpleasant voice, and they were ready for trouble. The scarred Frenchman was evidently alone.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "It's the chap I thumped, you know! How extraordinary!"

"Ah, cochon!"

"I refuse to be called a cochon!" said D'Arcy indignantly.

"I regard you as a vewy bad-mannah boundah!"

"You, again!"

"Yes, here we are again!" said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"Will you have the goodness to let go my shoulder? I am not used to being handled like that!"

The Frenchman released him. He peered at the boys in the gloom for a few moments, and then, with another oath, he strode away.

"Bon soir!" said Tom Merry.

There was no answer to that.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "This is a most surpwin' meetin'! I weally wondah how that chap came here, you know!"

"Walked, I suppose," said Wally.

"Pway, don't be fwivolous, Wally! It is vewy wemarkable that he got out of the tmain the station before Pwoly, and yet we find him in this dvection!"

"Perhaps we've been going the wrong way."

"Bai Jove!"

"Well, I haven't the faintest idea where we are," said Tom Merry. "It seems impossible to find the chateau again. What silly asses we were to run!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Blake, with a shiver. "It was enough to make anybody cut and run, I think! I can't make it out yet!"

"Wathah not!"

"Bless this wind—how it cuts!" said Figgins. "We can't find the chateau, but we shall have to find some shelter or other, or be blown to bits!"

"Well, we can only keep on."

They kept on. The lane they were in had dwindled to a rutty track, and evidently led nowhere, unless to some farm or cottage. Arthur Augustus uttered a sudden exclamation, and stopped.

"Oh, what's the matter now?" demanded Blake crossly.

"I've stumbled against somethin'!"

"Never mind—"

"It feels like a wall—a wooden wall," said D'Arcy, groping in the darkness. "Bai Jove! It's a buildin' of some kind!"

"Good egg!"

They groped at the wall, and groped their way round it till they felt a door. Tom Merry pushed it open, and there was a smell of hay.

"It's a barn, I suppose?" said Tom.

"It's a godsend, deah boy!"

They crowded in and closed the door. Tom Merry struck a match, and shaded it with his hand. They were in a wooden building, with several bales of hay in one corner, but no living occupant.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "This is luck, and heaps of it! I'm ready to drop!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Yank out the hay and make beds of it. We can pay the owner to-morrow, if he turns up. By Jove, this is luck!"

In five minutes the juniors were buried in the hay and fast asleep. Strange as their quarters were, the boys slept as soundly as they had ever done in their own beds in the dormitories at St. Jim's. They were too cold and fatigued to think of anything but warmth and sleep, and the hay afforded them both.

From the darkness of the barn came nothing but sounds of regular breathing—save when Fatty Wynn broke into a melodious snore.

When Tom Merry, the first to awake, opened his eyes, the sun was streaming into the building through a dozen chinks in the walls. It was a bright sunlight, and it dazzled him as he opened his eyes in the rays.

The snow had ceased to fall—there was no sound of the wind. It was a calm, bright, winter's morning.

Tom Merry sat up and pushed away the hay. What the hour was he had no idea, but it was evidently full day. He looked at his watch—ten o'clock.

"My hat!"

He jumped up. Ten o'clock! It was not surprising, considering the fatigue of the previous night, but Tom was thinking of the anxiety his friends would be feeling at the Chateau Cernay.

"Wake up, kids!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, sitting up in the hay. "Bai Jove, deah boys, I—I hardly know where I am! Have I weally passed a night sleepin' in hay in a barn?"

"Ha, ha! Looks like it, Gussy!"

"Gweat Scott! I feel most disreputable, you know!" said D'Arcy, dragging his elegant limbs from the hay. "My hat is ruined! I am afraid my clothes are done for!"

"Lucky we weren't done for ourselves!" said Blake. "Here, wake up, you lazy slackers! Are you going to sleep there all day?"

This was a little cool, as Blake had only risen that moment.

"Tumble up, you lubbers!"

"Yaw-aw-aw!" said Figgins.

"Sleepy, Figgins?"

"Oh, yes—awfully!"

"Poor kid! I'll help you up, then!"

And Blake kindly laid hold of Figgins's ankles, and dragged him bodily out of the hay, and Figgins yelled furiously.

"Ow! Oh! Leggo, you lunatic!"

"I'm helping you."

"I'll help you to a thick ear if you don't chuck it!" yelled Figgins.

"I suppose that's what you call gratitude in the New House?" said Blake, letting Figgys's big feet drop to the ground.

"Br-r-r-r!" said Figgins.

"Hallo, here's a visitor!"

The barn door had opened, and a fat, red-cheeked, French country labourer put his head in. He had a pitchfork in his hand, and he stared at the boys in blank amazement.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry.

"Comment!" gasped the native.

"Pitch it to him, Kerr!"

Kerr advanced towards the labourer, spreading out his hands French fashion for a start. The man raised his pitchfork threateningly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake. "He takes us for tramps, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I refuse to be taken for a twamp!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy indignantly. "I regard the man as an ass!"

"Go it, Kerr!"

Kerr waved his hands and jabbered. The labourer's expression became a little less truculent, and he lowered the pitchfork. Finally he grinned.

"Well, what's the verdict?" demanded Figgins.

"We're on a farm on the Cernay estate," said Kerr, "so this chap says. We're less than a mile from Cernay's house."

"Bai Jove!"

"Ask him where the haunted chateau is?" said Tom Merry.

Kerr babbled on again, and the labourer gesticulated and babbled.

"Good as a comedy, isn't it?" said Blake.

"Ha, ha! Better!"

"The ruined chateau is nearer Cernay's place than this," said Kerr. "We seem to have done all our wandering last night within the radius of about a mile."

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"Gwreat Scott!"

"Well, we couldn't see it in pitch-dark," said Tom Merry. "Has he got a cart, or a trap, or anything he can drive up to the chateau in—that's the question?"

"Yes, a farm-waggon."

"Well, that's better than nothing."

"I've promised him twenty francs," said Kerr. "He's going to get the waggon."

"Jolly good!"

"Bai Jove! I don't feel much like pwesentin' myself at Cernay's house in this fashion!" said D'Arcy, looking down disconsolately at his muddy, draggled, hay-speckled attire. "We shall look an awful lot of guys!"

"Nothing new to you, old chap."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"I don't see that there's much choice in the matter," said Tom Merry. "Cernay will be anxious about us. He will know that if we had stayed anywhere for the night we should have wired him. He'll think we've been lost in the storm—perhaps buried in a snowdrift. We ought to get to the chateau as quickly as we can."

"Yaas, but—"

"Here, I'll dust you down!" said Blake.

"Thank you, deah boy! That will be bettah than nothin'! But you haven't a bwush!"

"This is all right."

Blake began to dust down D'Arcy's clothes with his open hand. He dealt the swell of St. Jim's several hearty smacks, which certainly made the dry mud fly in clouds.

"Ow! Not so hard, deah boy!"

"I hope you're not afraid of a little pain in the cause of cleanliness, Gussy?" said Blake severely.

"N-no, but—"

Smack, smack, smack!

"Ow! Ow!"

Arthur Augustus retreated precipitately.

"Stand still, you ass!" said Blake. "I haven't finished yet!"

"If you stwike me again, Blake, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'! I uttably disappwove of this spiwit of pwactical jokin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you—"

"Hallo, here's the waggon!"

There was a trampling of horses outside, and a rumbling and creaking of clumsy wheels. The juniors crowded out of the barn.

CHAPTER 10.

The Arrival.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS had his misgivings, as was only natural, about presenting himself at the Chateau Cernay in such a state, but there was clearly no help for it. The juniors clambered into the farm waggon, and the farmer's man, with a broad grin, drove off with his two lumbering horses. The native seemed to be very much amused at the appearance of the chums of St. Jim's, and that was not surprising.

They were certainly not looking their best.

A night out—such a night—did not agree with them. They were muddy from head to foot, dirty and dishevelled, their hair tousled, their clothes rumpled, their linen decidedly soiled. D'Arcy was as bad as the rest. The sleep in the hay had left them covered with clinging particles, which gave them a curiously speckled appearance.

Arthur Augustus looked round the waggon-load of dishevelled juniors with a glance of great disapproval.

"By Jove," he remarked, "you fellows do look a lot of weeks!"

"Have you any idea what you look like yourself?" asked Lowther politely.

"I am afraid I look a feahful sight."

"Yes, rather. Much worse than usual," said Lowther.

"Weally, you know—"

"Well, Cernay will forgive us when he hears the circumstances," said Tom Merry. "We could have got a clean-up at the farm, but it would have taken time, and Cernay must be anxious."

"Of course, we want a clean up," said Fatty Wynn. "But what I feel most is the need of brekker."

"You would!" said Kangaroo. "Why didn't you have a go at the hay for a start?"

"Or we might have found you some thistles," said Lowther.

"I get awfully hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn unheeding. "I suppose it's the weather, you know. I always notice it."

"Yaas, I've noticed it, too."

The waggon rumbled on.

Round the juniors was a typical French country landscape THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 93.

—level fields, rows of trees, cultivation carried into every possible corner. In the distance was the thick wood of the park, and amid the trees they could catch a glimpse of the roofs and stone walls.

Tom Merry pointed it out to the driver.

"Is that the chateau?"

"M'sieur!"

"Le Chateau Cernay?"

"Oui, m'sieur!"

"Good! We haven't far to go."

The waggon rumbled into a lane, which ran past the park gates of the chateau. The driver turned in at the gates, which were wide open, and the heavy vehicle rolled on towards the handsome, stone-walled house, half covered with ivy.

More than one face looked out of a window at the strange sight, and, in spite of their nerve, Tom Merry & Co. felt their cheeks begin to burn.

It certainly was a strange manner in which to present themselves at their French chum's house; but, as Tom Merry said, it could not be helped.

The waggon halted before the wide stone steps of the portal.

There was a sudden shout, and an active figure came bounding out of the house. It was Auguste Cernay.

He jumped into the waggon.

"Ciel! Mes amis—mes amis! Bon Dieu!"

"Here we are, old chap," said Tom Merry.

"Ciel! I have been to zink zat you are dead in ze snow."

"Not quite dead yet, thank goodness!"

"Ah, I have been anxious! It is zat mon pere has gone to ze station to inquire again—encore—vous comprenez? I have been up and down ze all time."

"It's rotten to make you anxious like that," said Tom Merry. "But it couldn't be helped. We couldn't come on in the train to Proly. But I dare say you know the line was broken?"

"Oui, oui."

"We've slept in a barn."

"Ah, it is good—fortunate—zat you are not dead viz yourselves!"

Cernay jumped out of the waggon, covered with hay and mud, and the juniors followed.

Tom Merry handed a gold louis to the farmer's man, who touched his hat, and drove off, still grinning.

Cernay conducted his friends into the house, ordered breakfast, and then led them upstairs to the apartments they were to occupy.

"It is zat you vill vant ze vash," he remarked. "Your baggages zey have been sent on, and you vill find zem all here."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a gasp of relief.

"Bai Jove, that is a stwroke of luck! I shall be able to get a change."

"Oui, oui; zough it is zat my wardrobe would have been at your disposal," said Cernay. "Zis vay, s'il vous plait. Zere are ze rooms."

There were four rooms in a row, opening on the same corridor, with three beds in each.

"It is zat I stay viz my shums!" exclaimed Cernay. "Ah, my heart it vas heavy last night, mes amis, when it is zat you do not—vat you call—turn down."

"Turn up!" grinned Blake.

"Ah, oui, zat is it, turn up!"

Cernay left his friends in their quarters while he hurried down to look after breakfast. He knew that they would be in want of a solid feed, especially Fatty Wynn.

The juniors revelled in hot water and soap, and Arthur Augustus's face began to beam.

"Bai Jove, this is bettah, deah boys!"

"Yes, rather!"

"I am beginnin' to feel like a Chwistian again."

"Good!"

"Pway unstwap my twunks, Blake."

"Pray go and eat coke, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Buck up, you chaps!" said Fatty Wynn, looking in at the door, half dressed. "I don't want to go down first. But don't keep me waiting, will you?"

"What's the huwvy, deah boy?"

"Hurry? Why, breakfast, of course!"

"Oh, wats!"

"I'm hungry—awfully hungry. I don't know what the grub is like here, but I think we can depend upon Cernay to do us down all right."

"Yaas, wathah! If you want me to huwvy—"

"Yes; do get a move on!"

"Then, pway come and unstwap my twunks. I shall want somethin' out of each of them, you know."

"Rats!"

"My ideah is to save time."

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"More rats!"
 and the fat Fourth-Former retired.
 "Pway open my twunks, Tom Mewwy, to save time."
 "Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry. And he picked up a heavily ornamental pair of brass tongs from the grate, and raised them in both hands over the lock of D'Arcy's best trunk.

The swell of St. Jim's gave a yell.
 "Hold on!"
 "Eh?"
 "What are you goin' to do?"
 "Open the trunk."
 "You uttah ass! Let it alone!"
 "Oh, very well! I only wanted to save time," said Tom Merry, putting down the tongs.
 "I wegard you as an uttah ass, Tom Mewwy. Pway unlock the twunk, and take the stwaps off, and—"

"Rats!"
 And Arthur Augustus was reduced to the necessity of doing his unpacking himself. He warned his friends that he would keep them waiting, but they were unmoved. When the others were ready to go down to breakfast, Arthur Augustus had got as far as getting his trousers on, but no further.

"Ready?" said Tom Merry.
 "I am not weady, deah boy—not quite weady. I cannot go down to bwekkah in this state, you know."

"Come on!"
 "I am hardly likely to descend in my shirt-sleeves, Tom Mewwy."

"Will you come?"
 "Certainly not!"
 "Collar him!"

"I wefuse to be collahed! I— Oh, pway welease me! Unless you immediately welease me, I shall no longah wegard you as my fwends!"

"Yank him along!"

"Ow! Oh! Bai Jove!"
 Arthur Augustus was propelled to the door. He struggled desperately, but unavailingly.
 "Pway don't be silly asses!" he gasped. "We—we may meet some ladies, you know, in—in this incomplete state of attire."

"You are not likely to meet any ladies in an incomplete state of attire."

"I was wefewin' to my own state, Lowthah, as you know vewy well."

"Look here, we'll give you a chance," said Tom Merry. "Two minutes!"

"I could not possibly put on my collah and tie and waistcoat and jacket in two minutes. I can do a lot of things, but it's no use attemptin' impossibilities."

"You'll jolly well come down without them, if you don't!"
 "Besides, I haven't decided yet which waistcoat to wear."

"Any old thing will do."

"Nor which necktie—"

"Rats!"
 "I have fifteen to select from, and allowin' only one minute each—"

"Two minutes!" said Tom Merry taking out his watch. "Stand ready, you chaps, and in two minutes take him by the neck—"

"I decline to be taken by the neck—"

"And yank him out—"

"I uttably wefuse to be yanked out—"

"And carry him downstairs!"

"I wefuse—"

"Right-ho!"
 Upon reflection, Tom Mewwy, I will wear this necktie, and—and this waistcoat, and—and I think I can be weady in two minutes."

And he was.

CHAPTER 11.

Fatty Wynn Thinks it Good.

TOM MERRY & Co. breakfasted in high spirits. Rough as their night had been, they had had a good rest, after all, and they felt little the worse for it. While they breakfasted they related to Auguste the adventures of the night. Cernay listened with astonishment to the story of the ruined chateau.

"Ciel!" he said. "I am amaze—I am astound! Zat chateau is on ze estate of mon pere, and I have visit it many ze time, because ze villagers and ze farmers say zat it is haunt. I have never seen nozzing."

"We saw something, though," said Tom Merry, "and even now I don't know what to make of it."

"Yaas, wathah! It puzzles me, you know."

"Zey say zat ze music is heard, and zat ghostly figures skow selves at night," said Cernay. "Ze seigneur was murder by ze Jacobins in ze Revolution. He was bad man,

and ze country people hate him. He wall up ze village fountain, and he drive zem out of zeir homes in vun place, to turn ze farm land into hunting land, vous savez. Zen came ze Revolution, and ze mob sack ze chateau, and cut his head off. Zey say zat ze ghosts still linger in ze place, but moi—I laugh!"

"So do I—in the daytime," said Blake. "But then—and there—it was different. It didn't seem a laughing matter."

"Non, non!"

"We bunked," said Tom Merry frankly. "But we're going to have another try, Cernay. I suppose there's no objection to exploring the old chateau?"

"Ciel! Non!"

"Then I think we'll have a ghost-hunt."

"Bai Jove, what a wippin' ideal!"

"I'm pretty certain it was trickery; but if we go provided with lanterns and things, we can track the rotters down and make them own up."

Cernay's eyes danced.

"Zat is good, zat is good," he exclaimed. "I like ze idea ver' mooch."

"Yaas, wathah."

"What do you fellows say?"

"Jolly good wheeze," came a reply from everyone but Fatty Wynn.

Fatty Wynn was busy upon his sixth bacon and egg.

"Well, Fatty, can't you speak?"

"Um!"

Figgins slapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't you think it's good, Fatty?"

"Yes, rather."

"You'll come?"

"Wait till I've finished breakfast."

"Eh! We shall go at night, of course."

"What?"

"We shall go at night to hunt ghosts."

"Who's talking about ghosts?"

"Why, you ass, what were you talking about, then?"

"Seems to me you're all off your rockers," said Fatty Wynn. "Figgy asked me if I thought this bacon good, and I said I did."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What's the cackle about now?"

"I wasn't speaking of the bacon, ass!" said Figgins, with a chuckle. "We were planning a ghost hunt in the ruined chateau for to-night."

"Oh!"

"Don't you think it's a good idea?"

"Good! Better take plenty of grub in case of accidents."

"Ha, ha! Trust Fatty to think of that."

"Well, I suppose it's an important point," said Fatty Wynn warmly. "They say an army marches on its stomach; and I'm jolly certain it couldn't march if the grub wasn't well looked after."

"Quite right," said Tom Merry. "We'll take a pantechicon van with a light lunch for Fatty."

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty.

And he buried himself in his breakfast, and said no more.

"It is going to be ze fine day," said Cernay, looking out of the window. "Ze snow have passed right off, and ze temps is fine."

"Looks like it."

"I have some friends who come to meet you zis day," went on the French lad. "I tell zem zat you play ze English game of ze football."

"Football?"

"Oui, oui! You play him viz only one foot?"

"Ha, ha! No."

"Zen vy you call him ze football, and not ze football?"

"Oh, it's a way we have in English, to call anything by the least suitable name," said Monty Lowther. "But we'll make it football, if you like, positively for this Christmas season only."

Cernay looked a little puzzled.

"Mes amis play ze game a little," he said. "I play ze game much, moi. How you like zat ve get up a match zis morning?"

The chums brightened up at once.

They had not had a chance to kick a football since they had left St. Jim's on their holiday to Paris. They were enjoying their stay in la belle France; but they missed the grand old winter game.

"Jolly good wheeze," said Blake. "Why, there's just eleven of us—enough to make up a side—if we can let a Third Form fag play."

"I don't know wethah it would be wathah dewogatory to our dig," remarked Arthur Augustus, looking at his minor thoughtfully.

Wally grinned.

"Are you looking for a thick ear, Gus?" he inquired, in his affectionate brotherly way.

"Weally, Wally—"

"I'm going to play. I'll show you asses what Third Form footer is like, too," said Wally. "My only Aunt Jane! I've seen some of you Fourth Form and Shell fellows play footer that would make a ragamuffin weep."

"Pway don't be impertinent, Wally. It would look far frowm well if I were compelled to give a thwasnin' undah Cernay's woof."

"You would look far from well when you'd finished," said Wally.

"About the footer," said Tom Merry. "Have you got a ball, Cernay?"

"Oui, oui!"

"Soccer or rugger?"

"Ze round ball."

"Good—that's soccer. How many fellows are turning up for the game?"

"Five or six."

"Then we'll make up two sides of equal numbers, some of us in your team," said Tom Merry. "But what about the ground? It will hardly be in a state for play?"

"Oh, we don't mind a little mud," said Blake. "The weather's fine, anyway, and so long as we aren't knee-deep in snow—"

"Ze ground I have keep cover with sacks, mes amis."

"Jolly good."

"Zen! I zink—ah! C'est mon pere!"

A stout, handsome Frenchman, with a slightly troubled expression upon his face, entered the room.

CHAPTER 12.

On the Football Ground.

Monsieur CERNAY greeted the boys very kindly. He had been anxious about them, and was greatly relieved to find them at the chateau, safe and sound. But Tom Merry thought he observed that the old gentleman was thinking about something else, too, as well as their non-arrival the previous night. He had a paper in his hands, and Tom guessed that he had received disturbing news of some sort.

Monsieur Cernay laid the paper on the table. Across the front in large type was the announcement of a bank robbery.

Auguste Cernay glanced at it, and uttered an exclamation.

"Mon pere!"

"Yes, we have been robbed," said Monsieur Cernay, speaking in English. "The Lyons-Dijon Bank in Paris was robbed, avant—the night before last," he went on, explaining to Tom Merry & Co. "I have shares in the bank—I shall lose much—more than fifty thousand francs, if the thief is not found and forced to return the money. The bank suffers a great loss. This is the latest paper—it says that there is no news—the police know the criminal, but cannot find a trace of him."

"They know him?"

"Oui oui—it is Maximilian Ponsac, a man who is well known as a cracksmán in Paris—he has an accomplice, one Vinol, who was a native of this district; who was in my employ as an agent, and robbed me and fled to Paris. Both of them are known to have been concerned in the bank robbery—but they have disappeared—the Paris police can find no trace of them! But perhaps they will be found."

"I hope so, sir."

"If they are found, the money is safe—it is in banknotes, which they will not be able to pass for weeks, months," said M. Cernay. "They cannot be in Paris, or the police would find some trace of them—they are hiding in the provinces somewhere—so the police think. You will excuse me if I leave you to my son to-day—I must go to Paris."

And M. Cernay, who evidently felt more uneasiness and anxiety than he cared to show, left the room.

"Bai Jove, that is wotten!" said D'Arcy. "How much is fifty thousand swances, Kerr?"

"Fifty thousand francs."

"I mean how much is it in English?"

"Two thousand pounds."

"A jolly heavy loss," said Tom Merry. "I hope they'll lay the rascals by the heels."

Arthur Augustus looked thoughtful. He drew Tom Merry aside rather mysteriously while the others went out into the grounds.

"Tom Mewwy—"

"Come on—they're going to play footer."

"Yaas; but—"

"Cernay's friends are coming."

"Yaas, but—I want to speak to you. It's wathah wotten this heavy loss fallin' on our respected host, isn't it?"

Tom Merry stared.

"Eh! How on earth can we help?"

"You know that while we were at St. Jim's, I did some

twainin' as a pwivate amateur detective," said Arthur Augustus modestly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no cause for laughtah, Tom Mewwy. I have solved several mystewies to my own satisfaction—"

"Ha, ha, ha! To anybody else's?"

"That is a minah point. The question is, do you think it would be the pwopah thing to place my skill and expewience at the disposal of Monsieur Cernay in this mattah?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

Tom Merry wiped his eyes.

"Oh, Gussy! You'll be the death of me, some day, I know you will."

"I fail to see the cause of your mewwiment," said D'Arcy, putting up his eyeglass, and giving the hero of the Shell a freezing look.

"My dear ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass. If I could capchah the criminals, and westore the stolen banknotes, it would be a sort of Chwistmas pwesent for Monsieur Cernay, and a sort of wepayment for his hospitality."

"Ha, ha! Now, look here, Gussy—"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, unless you tweek the mattah with pwopah and becomin' sewiousness, Tom Mewwy."

"I'll be as sober as a judge. Don't you think your lack of French might stand in the way of your handling the case successfully?" asked Tom gravely.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that."

"If you had to disguise yourself as a waiter, or a general in the army, or President of the Republic, or anything of that sort—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Your accent would give you away."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy nodded thoughtfully.

"Pewhaps you are wight, Tom Mewwy. But I should weally like vewy much to be able to help our esteemed host undah the pwesent painful cires."

"Never mind; come and play footer instead."

And they followed the others out of the house.

D'Arcy was still looking very thoughtful, as though he could not quite make up his mind whether he ought to offer his valuable services as a detective to M. Cernay. But the old gentleman soon settled the matter by whizzing off in his motor-car. And D'Arcy soon had something else to think about, too.

Cernay's friends had arrived.

There were half a dozen of them, lads of fourteen to sixteen, and all very plump and healthy-looking, and remarkably good-tempered.

They greeted the English lads effusively.

It was easy to see at a glance that they were enthusiastic about the unknown game of "football," and looked upon the visit of Tom Merry & Co. as a blessing, because it enabled them to get some first-hand information about the game.

English sports have made great progress in many parts of France, and there are soccer and rugger teams galore; and these youths were simply following in the footsteps of the sporting leaders.

They wanted to play footer; but their knowledge of the game was extremely limited, and between ignorance of the rules, enthusiasm, and French excitability, Tom Merry thought the coming match was likely to be a lively and a peculiar one. And he was not mistaken.

Cernay introduced each of his friends in turn—Charpentier, and Lavalle, and Moncey, and Meyrac, and Noitier, and Barras. Tom Merry & Co. were glad to know them, and curious to see how they played footer.

Cernay evidently took the matter very seriously. In the spacious grounds of the chateau there was plenty of room for a footer ground, or half a dozen of them, for that matter, and Cernay had had one prepared as well as his father's gardeners could do it.

During the fall of snow it had been protected by sacking and straw, so that it was in a pretty fit state.

But, as Blake said, they didn't care for a little mud.

The ball was brought out, and it proved to be a real Association match ball, which Cernay had purchased in Paris, somewhat to Tom Merry's relief. He would not have been surprised if his French chum had brought out a tennis ball or a cricket ball; indeed, Monty Lowther declared that he might have brought out an aniseed ball.

Then arose the question of clothes. To Arthur Augustus D'Arcy it appeared utterly impossible to play footer in anything but footer rig, and the chums of St. Jim's, of course, had not brought their football things to France with them.

But even here Cernay came to the rescue. He had plenty of everything, and even D'Arcy could not stand very particularly upon the fit of football shorts.

The chums of St. Jim's were soon arrayed in the footer

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garb, which, though highly coloured, was comfortable enough, and then they were ready for business.

The French youths, similarly arrayed, were chattering away like a family of magpies, apparently holding an informal competition to decide who could utter most words in a given space of time.

"Zero are sept—seven—of us," said Cernay; "zero are eleven of you. Perhaps as ze stronger team ve should allow you ze odds."

"Not this time," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We'll lend you a couple of men, and that will make it even."

"Very good—c'est bien."

Cernay explained to his friends in fluent French, and they bowed graciously, and accepted the loan of two of the English juniors.

"Now, which of you chaps are going to play for the tricolour?" said Tom Merry. "Better give them the best we can; to make the game worth playing. I don't think they'll put up much footer."

"Wathah not! You are captainin' this side, I suppose, Tom Mewwy?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Then pawk... I had bettah captain the othah, to make the team as stwong as poss., and give them a chance."

"Rats!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Cernay will have to captain that side," said Blake. "Where's your blessed politeness, Gussy? This is the country for it, you know."

"Bai Jove, I nevah thought of that!"

"Figgins and Fatty had better help them," said Tom Merry. "Fendy Wynn is the best goalie we can muster, and if we lend him to Cernay we sha'n't score a goal against them at every kick, as I expect we should otherwise."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Will you keep goal for Cernay, Fatty?"

"Certainly!" said Fatty Wynn. "I like Cernay. He's an awfully sensible chap—understands that a fellow gets a good appetite in this weather."

"And you're a jolly good forward, Figgy."

"All right, I'll play for them."

And Tom Merry presented the two recruits to Cernay. Cernay embraced them. All the French fellows were willing to let Fatty Wynn take the posts, as they wanted rather to distinguish themselves in the open field. Figgins took his place in the forward line.

Figgins, of course, would have captained the side better than Cernay, but politeness to one's host came before everything.

"What about a referee?" asked Kangaroo.

"We shall have to do without one."

"I vill call mon tutor," said Cernay. "He vill be please to what you call reffer—"

"Referee?"

"Zat is it—referee. What does he do?"

"Ha, ha! I mean, he blows the whistle, you know."

"Ah, oui, of course! I vill get a whistle."

And Auguste Cernay ran into the house for a whistle. He returned with a whistle, and a quiet-looking young man in spectacles, with watery, blue eyes. This was apparently his tutor. There was a friendly smile on the tutor's face. He was quite willing to make himself useful, but he did not look experienced in football matters.

Cernay posted him on the touch-line, and explained in endless French what he was to do; and the spectacled young man nodded and nodded like a Chinese mandarin all the time Cernay was talking.

"Now ve are retty," said Cernay.

"Right—ho!"

"Oui, oui, oui."

Cernay made a sign to the referee. The latter gentleman blew a loud blast upon the whistle, and Tom Merry burst into a laugh.

"Toss for goals," he remarked. "Hold on with the whistle!"

And he produced a dix-centime piece, and held it out, and Auguste Cernay gazed at it in wonder, evidently not having the faintest idea what it was for.

CHAPTER 13.

The Match.

"Is it not zat ve keeck ze ball?" asked Cernay, after a minute inspection of the ten-centime piece, looking at Tom Merry.

"Toss up for kick-off, you know."

"Toss ze ball?"

"Ha, ha! No, the coin."

"Ciel! But zat is anoizzer game altogezzer, tossin' ze penny."

"My only chapeau!" said Blake. "Carry me home to die, somebody!"

"You see," said Tom Merry, "it's a common custom—ahem!—in footer to toss for choice of goals, you see."

"Ah, I see! But vat does it mattair?"

"Wind blowing from one goal—that's an advantage."

"But zere is no vind."

"Not to-day, perhaps; other days, you know."

"But ve play zis match to-day."

Tom Merry groaned in spirit.

"Never mind; toss up the coin as a matter of form," he said. "It's—it's an English custom."

That was touching Cernay upon a Frenchman's weakest point—his courtesy to a stranger in the land. The French boy assented at once.

He took the dix-centime piece, and tossed it into the air, giving it a good throw, and it disappeared, nobody knew exactly where.

"Now ve kicks off ze ball," he said cheerfully. "Afterwards, mon ami, you sall explain to me ze use of tossing ze coin into the air. Now ve vill play ze football."

Tom Merry gasped. His eye followed the flight of his French penny till it disappeared, and then he stared at the French football skipper.

"Oh, all right," he said, recovering himself; "you kick off."

"Ferry good."

And Auguste Cernay kicked off.

With a simultaneous shriek, the French team followed up the ball, and the game began in earnest, and hotly enough.

With all their enthusiasm and keenness for the game, it was pretty clear that what the French team did not know about football would have overflowed whole libraries.

Their one idea was to get possession of the ball, and that they proceeded to do, using legs and feet, and hands and arms, and heads and teeth for the purpose.

The English side, amazed by these wild-cat tactics, fell back a good deal, and the Cernay side shrieked with triumph as they rushed on.

Phip, phip, phip! went the whistle.

The referee was blowing with all his might. The French lads took no notice, but the English boys stopped their play. Obedience to the referee was one of the first articles in their creed, as in that of every true footballer.

Unheeding the fact that the Merry side were not playing, the French players rushed on, and slammed the ball at the goal.

Wally had been put into goal, and he saved in a commendable manner. True, the kicks were not difficult to stop. He sent the ball whirling out again almost to mid-field.

Phip, phip, phip!

By this time it had dawned upon Cernay that Tom Merry & Co. were simply acting the part of spectators in the busy field. Cernay ran up to Tom Merry.

"Vy for you not play?" he cried.

Tom pointed to the referee.

"Well, and vat?" asked Cernay, looking puzzled.

"Whistle's gone."

"Vat zen?"

"Oh, you have to stop playing when the referee blows his whistle."

"Ciel! Is zat so?"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"Zen I tell him to stop."

"Eh?"

"You tell me zat ze referee blow ze whistle," explained Cernay, "I tell him to blow it. I not know vy for he blow, but I take your word for it, as you know all about ze game."

Tom Merry gasped with laughter.

"But he's supposed to stop the game when anything goes wrong," he explained. "That's what he blows the whistle for."

"Ah, I see! How very cleavair you English are!" exclaimed Cernay admiringly. "But how he know anyzing wrong when he not know ze rules of ze game?"

"Ha, ha! A ref's supposed to have the game at his finger-tips."

"Ah, zat is not so now. Sall I tell him to—vat you call—buzz off?"

"Yes; we'll play without a referee."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The obliging tutor, who hadn't the faintest idea what he was doing it for, only that he had been asked, was still performing a solo on the whistle. Cernay called out to him, and he desisted and walked away.

"Well, that's a blessing!" said Kangaroo. "That shrieking was getting on my nerves. Going to play without a referee?"

"That's the idea."

"Ha, ha! Good!"

And the game was resumed.

The French footballers—or, rather, feetballers, as they

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would have termed themselves—made a stout rush for the ball, and Charpentier seized it in his hands and bore it away in triumph. Blake stopped running, and gasped.

"Hands!" he roared.
 "Yah! Hands, hands!"
 "Yah! What game do you call that?" shrieked Digby.
 "Is that chap playing soccer or rugger, or playing the giddy goat?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 But Charpentier, unheeding, was tearing on. He may have seen a rugger game somewhere, and not known that there was any distinction between the two forms of football.

His comrades, shrieking, dashed after him, shoving aside and clawing any of the St. Jim's juniors who got in the way.

Right up to the St. Jim's goal rushed Charpentier, still in triumphant possession of the ball, which he was carrying in both hands.

Wally glared at him, and grinned at him, and stood ready. Charpentier hurled in the ball, and Wally caught it and flung it out.

Charpentier caught it in his hands, and flung it in again. Wally met it with a kick that sent it out, and this time it biffed on Charpentier's nose, and sent him flat on his back. He gave a yell as he went down.

Moncey picked up the ball and rushed for goal. He dashed right into the goal, and Wally, who wasn't prepared for his tactics, was a little taken by surprise.

Grasping the ball in both hands, Moncey gave Wally a tremendous biff on the head with it, and levelled the youthful goalkeeper with the ground.

Then he tossed the leather into the net, and set up a crowd of triumph.

There was a yell of enthusiasm from the French team.
 "Goal! Vive Moncey! Goal!"

CHAPTER 14.

Five Goals to Nil.

"GOAL!" gasped Figgins. "Goal! Why—why—what—my only hat!"

"Goal! Bai Jove!"
 "Goal!" shrieked Wally, scrambling to his feet.
 "Goal! I'll goal you! Where's that dangerous maniac who biffed me on the napper?"

"Goal! Vive Moncey! Goal!"
 "Where's that blessed lunatic—"

"Hold on, Wally!"
 "I've been biffed on the napper!" yelled Wally. "I'm going to scalp him! I'm going to tap his boko! Where is he?"

"Hold on, dear boy! I insist—"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus!"

"Weally, Wally—"

"Where's that dangerous imbecile?"
 "Vive Moncey! Goal!"

The French fellows were all crowding round Moncey, embracing him and slapping him on the back. Moncey struck an attitude, somewhat Napoleonic. He evidently felt that he had done great things.

Cernay gave Tom Merry a dig in the ribs, with an agreeable grin.

"It is zat ve can play ze footer different from vat you expect, eh?"

"Yes," gasped Tom.
 "You not beat us easily if ve play like zat?"

"Oh, no! Not at all—if you play like that."

"Ve line up again, I zink?"

"That's right."
 "C'est bien."

Cernay walked off with the football under his arm. The chums of St. Jim's were trying to pacify Wally, but the hero of the Third was wrathful.

"I've got a blessed lump on my blessed napper," he said.
 "I shall feel all right if I give that blessed idiot a blessed black eye."

"Can't be did," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We are guests here."

"He biffed me on the napper."

"It is evidently the French way of playing footer—at least in the country. You must look after your napper, that's all."

"You're not going to let them score that goal, and count it, are you?" yelled Wally.

"Yes."

"Why—why—I—"

"It's all right," said Kangaroo. "It's fun, if it's not football. Let them rip."

Wally grunted.
 "I'd undertake to wipe them up with a team of babies."

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out of the Second Form at St. Jim's," he said. "Oh, go on with the rotting, then!"

And the sides lined up again.

Cernay and his friends were in the highest possible spirits, evidently pleased with the way they had started the match. Figgins was looking dazed. He had intended to put in some good footer to help Cernay's side, but there wasn't any room for good footer in that game.

Cernay kicked off again, doubtless regarding the kick-off as a reward appertaining to the side that had scored the goal.

The juniors were soon in the thick of it.

Inspired by their early success, the French youths did wonderful things. They yelled and they shrieked, they passed in every conceivable direction, with hands and feet. They carried the ball, and they hugged it, and they threw it.

Some of the St. Jim's juniors were inclined to adopt the same tactics, but their skipper forbade it.

Whatever the French did, it was for the English to play the game, and played it was, as well as such a peculiar match could be played.

Tom Merry & Co. adhered strictly to the rules, and let Cernay and his comrades play ducks and drakes with them.

The result naturally was that the French kept their end up, whereas otherwise they would have been swept off the field.

A team playing rugger, soccer, or a mixture of both, as the humour seized them, naturally had an advantage over a side that remained true to Association rules only.

Besides this, Tom Merry had given the French an almost invincible goalkeeper.

Fatty Wynn always kept goal for the St. Jim's junior team, and he kept it wonderfully well; and he was playing finely now.

Whenever Tom Merry & Co. got the ball away from clawing hands and feet, and bore it down to goal, Fatty Wynn was always ready, with foot or fist.

Fatty was laughing so much at the antics of his own side that he was several times nearly taken by surprise; but not quite.

Tom Merry & Co. could not penetrate the goal; while Cernay's side several times found the English goal vulnerable.

For what was a goalkeeper to do when he was clawed out of his goal by one forward, while another ran in with the ball in his hands and tossed it into the net?

That was Wally's experience more than once.

It needed all Wally's self-control to keep from hitting out on occasions like that, and several brilliant scorers of extraordinary goals never knew what narrow escapes they had of securing thick ears or swollen noses as well as goals.

"My hat!" gasped Blake, when it had gone on some time.

"This match ought to be taken down on a cinematograph—it ought, really!"

"Bai Jove, wathah!"

"I can't it about time for the interval?" demanded Blake.

"Isn't, Cernay, it's time we had a rest."

Cernay stopped at once.

"Certainly, mon ami—my dear friend. I did not know zat you were tired viz yourself."

Blake snorted.

"I'm not tired."

"But you vish a rest—"

"It's time for the interval."

"Ze—ze interval."

"The entr'acte," grinned Figgins.

Cernay brightened up at once. He understood.

"Ah! I see! Ve vill have ze entr'acte, and ve vill rest. Vill you have some ginger-beer and ze cake?"

"Not much—thanks."

"Oh, I don't know!" said Fatty Wynn. "When you come to think of it, it's not a bad wheeze. I'm getting rather hungry."

"You'll get slain if you begin eating now," said Figgins darkly.

"You see, Figgins—"

"Br-r-r! Ring off."

And Fatty Wynn unwillingly rang off.

"Sall ve go for a walk, or sit in ze house?" asked Cernay.

"Ha, ha! The interval's only five minutes."

"Cinq minutes! If you feel fatigued, zere is no reason why you not rest longair," said Cernay. "It is all vun to us."

"Certainment," said Moncey.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Better stick to the rules."

"Oui, oui! You English are so commonsensible."

And after five minutes, the game was restarted. Cernay & Co. recommenced with the same tactics, and although

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Grasping the ball in both hands, the French boy gave Wally a tremendous biff on the head with it, and levelled the youthful goalkeeper to the ground. Then he tossed the leather into the net, and there was a yell of enthusiasm from the French team.—"Goal!"

most of the French fellows were getting pretty well blown by this time, they kept to the game very well.

Wally was called upon to save several times, and there was a gleam in D'Arcy minor's eye now.

He was growing exasperated.

Three French youths at once scored a goal, two of them sitting on Wally, and the third carrying in the ball; and surely that was enough to exasperate any goalkeeper.

Wally kept goal now with a gleam in his eye, and he meant serious business if they came any more "funny business," as he expressed it.

And the "funny business" soon came.

The English forwards rushed up the field, dribbling and passing the ball in good style, till Moncey hurled himself upon it, and captured it between himself and the ground. The forwards did not want to dribble Moncey as well as the ball, so they stopped it—and with a yell Cernay & Co. rushed upon them, and dragged them right and left with clawing hands.

Moncey jumped up and raced for goal.

Digby, at centre-half, tackled him, and charged him over, but Meyrac caught the ball in his hands, and ran for goal.

and ran right in, meeting Wally in full career.

Wally was ready for him.

"Goal!" gasped Meyrac.

But Wally grasped the ball, and, using it as a club, he smote Meyrac over the head with it, and Meyrac reeled out of the goal area and rolled on the ground. Wally brandished the ball over his head.

"Come on!" he roared. "Any more coming on?"

Charpentier and Lavalie rushed at him, and Wally smote them hip and thigh. Biff, biff! went the muddy ball upon their features, and they rolled over Meyrac.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Chuck it, Wally!"

"Any more coming on?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Chuck it!" yelled Figgins.

"Certainly!" grinned Wally. And he "chucked" it—but not in the sense in which Figgins had intended. He chucked the leather at Figgins, bowling him over like a ninepin.

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"Oh!" roared Figgins.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I wathah think it's about time the weferee's whistle went, Tom Mewwy!"

Tom Merry staggered against a goalpost, and held on to it. He was laughing too much to stand upright.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Yes, certainly! Hold on! Stop! The game's up!"

"Is it zat it is time to knock off, as you say?" asked Cernay.

"Yes, yes!"

"Messieurs, ze game is ovaïr—c'est fini."

"Ve have von!" ejaculated Moncey.

It was indubitable—the French had scored five goals to nil. The British boys were not inclined to argue about it. They gave the palm of victory to their rivals without demur.

"You are sportsmen, you Britishers!" said Cernay admiringly, as they walked off the field. "You know how to take ze licking!"

"Ha, ha! Yes."

"You Britishers have more knowledge of ze game," said Cernay, "but ve French, we have more dash—more esprit—n'est-ce-pas? Ve vin by de dash! You do not play ze game as ve do, you will admit! Is it not so?"

And Tom Merry agreed that it was so.

CHAPTER 15.

D'Arcy is in Doubt.

AUGUSTE CERNAY and his friends were in the best of spirits over that game of "football." It was the first time they had played an English team, and to win the first match was very gratifying. There was no mistaking the fact that French dash and esprit had carried the day—and five goals to nil was a score to be proud of!

And Tom Merry & Co. did not mind.

As Blake remarked, it had given them something to laugh over for weeks to come, and the only regret was that Lowther or Manners hadn't had a chance of getting the game on the camera, and taking a photographic record of it home to St. Jim's to show the fellows there, and make them shriek, too.

Cernay & Co. were delighted with the spirit in which Tom Merry's team took their defeat. It showed such a true sportsman's spirit to laugh over a licking like this—and certainly the St. Jim's juniors did nothing but laugh about it.

Cernay's friends stopped at the chateau for the rest of the day to help him entertain his English visitors, as his father was absent, too, and the idea of a ghost-hunt for that night was given up.

But the next night would serve as well—and meanwhile the juniors had a merry time.

In the evening, M. Cernay returned, and there were many guests at the chateau, and some of the French fellows' sisters came. It was a very pleasant evening, although—as Blake put it—Arthur Augustus sang a couple of tenor solos.

When the juniors retired to bed—at a somewhat later hour than usual—they were in the best of tempers with themselves and everybody else.

"I think we shall have a jolly stay here!" Tom Merry remarked, as he kicked off his shoes. "Cernay is ripping!"

"So are the others!" said Blake. "They're rather kiddish for fellows of fifteen or sixteen, but jolly decent!"

"And I wathah like Fwench gals," said Arthur Augustus pensively. "They are weally vewy charmin' young ladies."

"Patient, aren't they?" suggested Lowther.

"I didn't know that they were particularly patient, Lowthah!"

"Oh, I did! I saw one of them talking to you for a good quarter of an hour!"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Hardy, too!" said Digby. "They smiled all the time Gasey was singing, and never uttered a cry!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"Even the top note in the 'Steuermanslied' caused no casualties," observed Kangaroo. "I was glad to see we came safely through."

"Weally, Kangaroo—"

"Cernay's proposed a snowballing contest to-morrow," said Tom Merry, "if there's any more snow. What do you think of the idea?"

"Jolly good!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wathah fancy myself as a snowballah!"

"Well, it will be fun—though not as funny as the footer, I suppose."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Speakin' of Fwench gals—"

"I was speakin' of snowballs."

"Yaas, but I was speakin' of Fwench gals, Tom Mewwy. I have promised to wite some poetry in Mademoiselle Moncey's album."

"Phew!"

"She was so interestwed when she learned that I wote The Gem Library.—No. 93.

poetwy," said Arthur Augustus, with a modest smile. "She said she wished she could wead English, so that she could wead some of it."

"She knows not what she risks," said Lowther solemnly.

"Pway, don't be an ass, Lowthah! I was wondewin' whethah I should wite somethin' sewious, or somethin' comic."

"Try to write the one you don't want to do," advised Manners. "Then you are certain to pull it off."

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"I would knock off a few lines for you if you liked," said Blake. "You seem to have got yourself into a hole. I don't mind helping you out."

"Pway don't be an ass, deah boy! What did you think of my 'Ode to a Dyin' Cockwoach,' which was published in the last numbah of 'Tom Mewwy's Weekly' at St. Jim's?"

"Was that comic or serious?"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, it was comic!" said Tom Merry. "I remember! Didn't it run like this:

"Unfortunate cockroach, I see thee repose,
And a tear trickles down to the end of my nose—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It was nothin' of the sort!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus indignantly. "It began:

"Unfortunate cockroach, I see thee lie,
And a tear of sympathy dries my eye."

"Which eye?" asked Blake.

"You are an ass, Blake! Both eyes, of course!"

"But you said 'eye,' not 'eyes'."

"That is simply a poetic expwession."

"Oh! But if you felt very sorry for the cockroach, you surely ought to have shed more than one tear!" argued Blake.

"Ass! That is a way of puttin' it!" said D'Arcy. "You haven't the slightest poetwy in your soul! I have been told that the ode to the cockwoach was quite touchin'. But pewwaps it is too sad to wite in a young lady's album—pewwaps one of my comic efforts would be more suitable!"

"Yes, there's your 'Ode to a Lovely Girl'—"

"You ass, that's a sewious ode! There's my limewick about the New House boundahs:

"There was a gweat duffah named Figg,
Whose feet were wemarkably big—"

"Eh? What's that?" said Figgins, taking Arthur Augustus gently by the ear from behind. "Whose feet are you passing remarks on?"

"Ow!"

"Suppose you change it to something like this: 'There was a young duffer named Gus, whose ear was tweaked thus—thus—and thus!'" said Figgins genially, giving D'Arcy's ear a tweak at every "thus."

"Yow! Yoroo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Welease me! I will give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

D'Arcy jerked himself away. He pushed back his cuffs and went for Figgins, who fled for his life and locked himself in the adjoining room, where a series of cachinnations were the only reply to D'Arcy's excited demands for admission.

"I wegard Figgins as a beast!" said Arthur Augustus, coming back and finding the others in bed and the light out. "Bai Jove! It's all dark here!"

Snore!

"Are you asleep, Tom Mewwy?"

Snore!

"Bai Jove! I—ow—yow!"

Arthur Augustus "yowed" as he stumbled over a chair. He switched on the electric light, and glared indignantly at the juniors. But they were asleep, or pretended to be, and the glare was quite wasted.

Arthur Augustus turned in, but it was some time before he slept. He was still thinking out some suitable poetry for Mademoiselle Moncey's album, and in his dreams he was chasing a fugitive rhyme over a football-field, pursued by the ghost of the ruined chateau.

CHAPTER 16.

The Snow Fight.

THERE was a fall of snow in the night, and when the juniors of St. Jim's looked out of their windows the next morning, the aspect of the country-side was very like "Christmas." It was homelike to see the snow edging roofs and walls, and turning the leafless trees into white skeletons.

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Tom Merry rubbed his hands—partly with satisfaction, and partly to warm them.

"This looks like business!" he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We shall be able to get up a good snow fight with the French fellows!"

"Yaas. First, howevah, I have to give Figgins a thwashin'!" Arthur Augustus remarked, thoughtfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose I had better get it ova before bwekkah."

"Gussy!" said Tom Merry solemnly. "Gussy! You have let the sun go down on your wrath!"

"It was already gone down, deah boy."

"You are nursing envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness at Christmas time! I am surprised at you, Gussy!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"The best thing you can do is to kiss Figgins as soon as he comes out of his room—"

"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort."

"Well, at least shake hands with him. You can't fight people and owe grudges at Christmas time," said Tom Merry, with a shake of the head.

"He has tweated me with gwoss diswesspect."

"Well, heap coals of fire on his head."

"Bai Jove! I shouldn't like to do that, you know! It might injah him!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I mean do it metaphorically."

"Oh, I see! But weally, you know, I don't owe Figgins a gwudge. I was thinkin' that I would give him a feahful thwashin', weally for his own good, you know!"

"Never mind! Let him off! It's Christmas time!"

"Vewy well," said Arthur Augustus slowly; "I will ovah-look this time."

And as soon as he saw Figgins, he reassured him. Figgins had forgotten that a thrashing was due, but he received the news that he was let off with great gratitude. He threw himself into D'Arcy's arms, and hugged him affectionately.

"You're really going to let me off?" he sobbed.

"Yaas, wathah! Pway don't gwab me like that!"

"I'm showing my gratitude! You see, I was kept awake last night by thinking of it—I don't think!"

"Weally, Figgins—"

"I must show my gratitude somehow!" said Figgins tearfully hugging D'Arcy till his collar cracked under the strain.

"Welease me!"

"But—"

"You howwid wuffian! Welease me at once! You have wuined my collah, and you are wumplin' my waistcoat! Welease me!"

"But—"

"If you do not immediately welease me, Figgins, I shall lose my tempah and stwike you!"

Figgins released him.

"Gussy! Gussy! Will you turn back the flood of grateful emotion upon a tender heart? Will you nip the bud of affection in the leaf—I mean nip the flower of affection in the bud? Will you—"

"You are wottin', you wottah!" said D'Arcy. "I shall have to change my collah now! I have a good mind to give you that thwashin' after all!"

"Let's get down to brekker!" said Fatty Wynn. "I've got a good appetite this morning! I always get jolly hungry at this time of the year!"

"Pway wait while I change my collah! I shall not be more than ten minutes or so!"

"Yes," said Fatty Wynn emphatically—"I don't think!"

And Arthur Augustus was the last down.

M. Cernay was at the breakfast-table. Tom Merry asked him whether news had been heard of the bank robbers, and the old gentleman nodded cheerfully.

"The police are almost certain that they have run them to earth in London," he said. "I hope to receive certain news to-day. The leader of the gang—Maximilian Ponsac—had marks about him which it would be difficult to disguise, and the London police have a full description of him. Unless it turns out to be a false scent, he will be arrested soon."

After breakfast the juniors adjourned to the grounds.

The weather was bright and sunny, though cold, but the fall of snow during the night had been very thick, and the ground was carpeted with it.

Later in the morning Cernay's friends were to arrive, and the plan was for Tom Merry & Co. to build a snow fort and the French to attack it, the only weapons on either side being snowballs.

The juniors willingly set to work to construct the snow fort. A piece of rising ground was selected, and great blocks of snow were cut and piled up in a circular wall, rising to the height of five feet or so.

Only a narrow entrance was left, and that was to be blocked when the garrison took up their quarters within.

The fort was complete by the time the French lads arrived. They were in high spirits, and evidently expected a victory

as easy and as thorough as that they had gained upon the football field.

"Ze odds vill be on your side," said Cernay, "but zat is all right. Ve wish you to have ze odds."

"Bai Jove!"

"It vill give more esprit to ze tussle," said Moncey.

"Oui, oui, oui!"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Not a bit of it! Same numbers, or nothing."

"Mais, mon ami—"

"Rats! No odds on either side."

Cernay nodded.

"Ferry vell, zen. Ve sall get four more, to make ze numbar even. I zink zat I vill ask M. Polydor, mon tutor—zat is vun. Zen ze gardener's three garcons—zey can help us, and zat will make up elefen."

"Good!"

"Affair ve have take ze fort—"

"Eh?"

"Affair ve have take ze fort, ve holds it, and you take it," said Charpentier.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Oh, good!"

The juniors of St. Jim's retired within their walls, and blocked up the entrance with snow. The fort was strong and compact, and big piles of snowballs lay within, ready for use in repelling the attack.

The French party were making snowballs, too, and chattering away at express speed, at the foot of the slope.

"They're mighty cocksure about it," Jack Blake remarked.

"They're decent chaps, but I really think we shall have to lick them this time, or they'll be in danger of getting swelled heads."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"They've got no chance, as a matter of fact," grinned Kangaroo. "Why, we should find it difficult to take this fort with the French chaps in it. And as it is—"

"They'll meet with a surprise."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah, deah boys!"

Cernay et Cie. having been joined by the tutor and the gardener's boys, making up the number of the assailants to eleven, to equal the juniors of St. Jim's, they prepared for the attack.

Tom Merry had hoisted a handkerchief on a pole in the centre of the fort to serve as a flag, and the hauling down of the flag was to be the sign that the fort had been captured.

Cernay waved his hand to the defenders.

"Mes amis! Is it zat you are retty?" he called out.

"What-ho!" shouted back Tom Merry.

"Zen ve are coming!"

"Come on!"

There was an excited yell from the French party, and they charged up the acclivity towards the snow fort.

The juniors of St. Jim's were ready for them.

"Fire!" shouted Tom Merry.

And the snowballs flew!

Right upon the attacking party they crashed, with deadly aim and with amazing swiftness, and the effect was very telling. The assailants fell, and reeled, and rolled right and left, and in a few seconds half of them were rolling down the slope.

M. Polydor was bowled over by a snowball under the chin, and Charpentier rolled over him, and Moncey and Cernay sprawled upon Charpentier.

Gasps, and yells, and shrieks rose from the French youths.

Blinded and bewildered by the whirling snowballs, such of them as were still standing turned and fled, with the snowballs buzzing after them.

They did not stop till they were out of range, and there they halted, panting, bewildered, leaving half their number squirming in the snow on the trampled slope.

And from the snow fort came a cheer of victory.

"Hip, hip, hooray!"

CHAPTER 17.

Taking the Fort.

"H OORAY!"

"Hip-pip!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I wathah think they are licked, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, adjusting his eyeglass and gazing after the flying and squirming assailants.

"What-ho!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The St. Jim's juniors yelled with laughter.

After the amount of "gas" from Cernay & Co. the sudden defeat and flight of the attacking party was very comic.

But the French youths were not quite beaten yet.

"Look out!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "They're coming on again."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Fire!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Augustus Cernay was upon his feet, waving his hands wildly to his followers, and yelling encouragement at the top of his voice. He bade them remember how they had carried everything before them at "football," and to follow their own glorious example for the honour and glory of France. They responded with a chorus of excited shrieks, and came charging up the slope once more.

"Go it, ye cripples!" murmured Blake.

"Fire! Sock it to them!"

The snowballs were hurled with splendid aim and surprising swiftness. They smote the assailants all over, and dazed and bewildered them. Cernay & Co. were hurling snowballs, too, but they hurled them wildly, and wide of the mark.

Crash! Biff! Bump! Clunk!

The snowballs never ceased from troubling, and the weary French youths had no rest.

Clunk! Biff! Clunk!

"Ha, ha, ha! Go it!"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was wildly excited. He grabbed up fresh handfuls of snowballs from the ready-made heap and hurled them wildly.

"Keep cool, deah boys!" he gasped. "Keep cool! Pway don't lose your heads!"

"Ow!" gasped Blake, as a snowball hurled by the elegant junior caught him behind the ear. "Ow! Yow!"

"What is the matter, Blake?"

"Ow! You ass!"

"I wefuse—"

"What do you mean by snowballing me?" roared Blake.

"Bai Jove! Did that one stwike you? I was wondewin' where it went."

"You—you frabjous ass—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Oh, look out!" roared Kangaroo. "Who's that biffing me in the back of the neck?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Look here, Gussy, don't you start being funny in the middle of a snow fight!" roared the Cornstalk chum excitedly.

"It—it was an accident—"

"There'll be an accident happen to you if you have any more of 'em!"

"Weally Kangawoo—"

"Fire—fire!" shouted Tom Merry. "They're gaining!"

"Bai Jove! Pway don't waste time in talk, Blake—and you, too, Noble! Why don't you keep your eyes on the enemy, you know?"

The enemy had rushed desperately up to the very walls of the snow fort.

They were trying to scramble over them, but so close at hand they offered fair targets to the snowballs from within, and they were fairly bowled over.

They rolled in the snow, and in five minutes not one of them was upon his feet, and then, as they went squirming down the slope, Tom Merry & Co. sallied forth and assailed them, driving them helter-skelter down the hill.

With shrieks and gasps the assailants fled, and the English juniors returned to the snow fort, where they hurrahed again and again, till the woods rang with the shouting.

Auguste Cernay and his friends gathered in a rather dilapidated state at the foot of the slope, and looked dismally towards the snow fort.

The flag was still waving in the breeze, and the garrison stood ready for a third attack, if the French chose to make it.

But they did not choose. They were not greedy, and they knew when they had had enough. After a brief consultation with his followers, Cernay waved his hand to Tom Merry in sign of peace, and came up towards the snow fort.

"Nuff!" asked Figgins.

"Oui, oui, mon ami! It is impossible zat ve take ze fort, for ze task is too mooch. It is zat you try your fortune now."

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry.

"Ve vill form ze garrison, and you vill sharge ze fort and capture it if you can. I zink zat ve take a rest, and zen you come on."

"Good enough!"

So the parties changed places, the French occupying the fort and Tom Merry & Co. going down the slope. The flag was now a French flag, and every fellow in Tom Merry's party was determined that it should be hauled down.

Cernay and his comrades filled the fort, and manufactured heaps of snowballs for the defence, determined to wipe out their defeat by showing that it was impossible for any attacking force to capture the fort.

Tom Merry waited till Cernay made a sign that he was ready. The French were pretty well winded by their efforts in the attack, and a rest was necessary.

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"It won't be easy to take the fort," Tom Merry remarked; "but we've got to do it, or they will be in danger of getting awfully swelled heads."

"Yaas, wathah! I shall be vewy pleased to lead—"

"Go hon!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, what is wequired undah the pwsent cires, is a fellow of tact and judgment, and—"

"Rats! Now, we won't follow the bull-at-a-gate tactics, like our friend Cernay," said Tom Merry thoughtfully.

"We'll divide into two parties. I'll lead one party up this side—"

"Bai Jove! And I'll lead the othah—"

"And Blake will lead the other on the other side," said Tom Merry serenely.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Don't interrupt, Gussy. Now, we won't separate at first, and show them what the game is," the hero of the Shell went on sagely. "We'll all start rushing up together, and while they are busy with us, Blake and Figgins and Kangaroo and Manners can drop behind, and get out of it—sneak round to the other side, and come in there. The chances are that the French chaps will be too excited to notice anything."

"Jolly good!"

"Even if they do, they'll be taken between two fires, which will give us a better chance. If they don't, Blake's lot will take them by surprise, and attack them in the rear; and then it will be all over, bar shouting."

"Bai Jove, you know, I wogard that as an awfully good scheme! It weally does cwedit to your genewalship, Tom Mewwy."

"Thank you, Gussy! If you pass it, it must be all right."

"There is only one point I am doubtful about, deah boy."

"What's that?"

"It seems to me that I ought to lead one of the parties."

"Oh, rats!"

"Well, I was thinking myself that a New House chap ought to lead one party," said Figgins thoughtfully.

"Now, don't start a House row now, Figgy!"

"Certainly not; but—"

"There's Cernay waving his hand. We're ready—"

"I'm thinking of the general good," explained Figgins.

"You see—"

"Yes, I see. Ready, you chaps?"

"Look here, Tom Merry—"

"I'm looking at Cernay. Come on!"

And Tom Merry led the way.

Carrying their ammunition in their left arms, the juniors charged up the slope, not at a wild and frantic rush, but with a steady pace that did not slacken. There was a yell of excited defiance from the fort.

With shrieks and gesticulations the French opened fire, and a storm of snowballs swept down upon the assailants.

They advanced steadily, however, and returned the fire as well as they could. Half-way up the snowy slope, Blake, Figgins, Noble, and Manners pretended to fall, and roll down the hill, and they squirmed away actively in the snow, round the slope, to the other side of the fort. Tom Merry & Co. rushed on, charging right up to the snow walls, and hurling their missiles with loud shouts.

The ruse succeeded completely.

Cernay & Co., with shrieks and yells, devoted their whole attention to the frontal attack, never dreaming that a fresh party were creeping round to take them in the rear. They had no eyes in the backs of their heads, and they never thought of looking round.

Tom Merry and his comrades kept them busy enough in front.

In the face of the whizzing snowballs it was impossible to clamber over the snow walls, but the juniors charged again and again, coming on as fast as they were bowled over, and they kept the French extremely busy.

It could not have lasted long, because the fellows behind the walls, with piles of missiles at hand, had every advantage; but Tom Merry made it last long enough for Blake's party to get their blow in.

There was a sudden yell from the other side of the snow fort.

"Rescue, St. Jim's! Sock it to 'em!"

"Ciel!"

"Mon Dieu!"

"Helas!"

The French garrison whirled round in alarm and surprise. Blake & Co. were coming over the wall!

Before Cernay's followers could stop them, Blake, Manners, Kangaroo, and Figgins were in the fort, and rushing on to the attack. The French faced them gallantly, but in doing so left the front open to Tom Merry & Co.

"Come on!" roared Tom Merry.

And he hurled himself headlong over the wall.

With a yell, his comrades followed him, and one after another they rolled over the snow walls into the fort.

Cernay & Co. resisted desperately, but they could no longer keep the walls, and they gathered for a last stand round the flagstaff.

The fort was not captured till the flag was down; but Tom Merry & Co. were determined that that should not take long. They grabbed up missiles from the heaps of snowballs piled up for the defence, and hurled them thick and fast.

The French, gathered round the flag, were not within reach of their ammunition, and as soon as they had hurled back the snowballs they had in their hands, they could hurl no more.

Shouting and laughing, the English juniors pelted them with their own snowballs, till they reeled right and left, blinded and bewildered, round the flagstaff.

Then a sudden rush sent them staggering to and fro, and Tom Merry and Blake laid hands on the flagstaff.

A powerful wrench, and it came up, and the flag went to the ground, the staff after it, and Arthur Augustus yelled as it fell across his head. But the flag was down, and Arthur Augustus's head did not matter.

"Hurrah!" yelled Jack Blake.

"Hip-pip!"

"Hurrah!"

Cernay squirmed out of the snow, and scrambled to his feet. The flag was down, and the tussle was over. Cernay blinked at the flag, and blinked at Tom Merry.

"Ciel! It is zat you have done eet," he said. "It is ferry strange; but ve are ze sportsmen. Comrades, zey have won! It is us zat are ze best at ze football, but ze Anglais are ze best viz ze snow-fight."

And so it was agreed to be a case of honours divided.

CHAPTER 18.

A Question of Marksmanship.

"RATS!"

"Bosh!"

"Look here——"

"Br-r-r-r-r!"

"You School House ass!"

"You New House dummy!"

"I'll jolly well——"

"Yah!"

"I—I——"

"Peace, my sons!" said Tom Merry, hurrying up as the voices of Blake and Figgins grow warm and excited—peace, pretty creatures—peace!"

"Yes; but——"

"Yes; but——"

"The silly ass says——"

"The howling duffer has the cheek to say——"

"Look here——"

"Rats!"

"By Jove, I——"

Tom Merry pushed in between the excited juniors.

"Now, look here, you pair of asses," he said, "you're not going to have a House row under another fellow's roof!"

"We're not under a roof," said Blake; "we're in the blessed garden!"

"It amounts to the same thing. What's the row about?"

"Why can't you kids be quiet?"

"Who are you calling kids?"

"You Fourth Form duffers!" said Tom Merry severely.

"Why, here's young Wally, of the Third Form, and he's behaving himself quite decently!"

"Thank you!" said Wally cheerfully. "I want to show the French chaps that we're not all howling outsiders at St. Jim's, you know."

"Look here, you young imp——" began Blake.

"More rats!"

"Why, you——"

"Never mind Wally," interrupted Figgins. "You were saying——"

"Yes, so I was, and you——"

"I said you couldn't do anything of the sort! I——"

"But what's the row?" almost shouted Tom Merry.

"Why, the ass had the cheek to say that he could chuck a snowball at a moving object straighter than I could!" said Figgins excitedly. "Of course, I don't want to blow my own trumpet! It's a question of facts!"

"Lot you know about facts!" snorted Blake. "I don't mind you New House chaps being conceited. I know you can't help it. But when it comes to a matter of denying a thing that's perfectly plain——"

"You ass!"

"You duffer!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry. "If you want to settle it, y not put it to the test, instead of slanging each other and wing your breath?"

"Well, that's not a bad idea," said Figgins, calming down a little. "I suppose if Blake sees me do it, he won't have cheek to say——"

"Yes; I can see you hitting anything smaller than the side of a house!" said Blake. "I don't think! Still, I'm willing to try, though, of course, it won't alter the facts. It will only make you own up that you are a chump."

"We want a moving object at a certain distance," said Figgins, gathering up a handful of snow, and beginning to knead a snowball. "Suppose Tom Merry walks slowly past at a distance of twelve yards, and we take three shots each in turn. The chap who knocks his cap off first is the winner."

"Good!"

"Oh, jolly good!" said Tom Merry. "But you'll have to find some other target. Young Wally might not mind."

"But he might," said young Wally. "Try Lowther."

"No fear!" said Lowther.

"Well, I don't think a good thing ought to be put off because you chaps are afraid of a snowball or two," said Blake. "I'm surprised at you!"

"I'll tell you what," said Wally. "Blake can take three shots at Figgins——"

"Good!" said Blake.

"And then Figgins can take three shots at Blake."

"Oh, don't be an ass, young Wally!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lowther. "Gussy to the rescue, as usual!"

"Eh?"

"There's Gussy—in his top, too—just in time!"

There was a general grin of approval. The juniors were in the garden at some distance from the house, and Arthur Augustus was taking a stroll down a garden-path at a distance of ten or twelve yards from them. He seemed to be deep in thought; probably thinking out a verse to be written in Mademoiselle Moncey's album, and he did not glance towards the group of juniors.

Arthur Augustus was in his most elegant attire, and he was sporting a silk top, as usual. The sight of that silk top simply made the juniors yearn to put their snowballing to the test.

"Well, that's not a bad idea," grinned Tom Merry. "You take the shots in turn, and the chap who brings down the top is the best shot."

"Agreed!"

"Here, I'm going to be in this!" said Lowther, gathering up a double handful of snow. "Make it a general test—one shot each all round. If the top isn't brought down, start again from the beginning."

"Good! Blake and Figgins can begin."

"Oh, all right!" said Figgins. "Say when."

"Get the snowballs ready," said Tom Merry. "Better not say anything to Gus; he might raise some silly objection."

"Ha, ha! Very likely!"

"Fire in order—Blake, Figgins, myself, Lowther, Wally."

"Good!"

"Ready?"

"Yes!"

"Go it, Blake!"

Jack Blake took careful aim. Arthur Augustus, strolling by, deep in poetic thought, was just abreast of the group of juniors. His eyes were fixed on the ground, and there was a shade of reflection on his aristocratic brow.

Whiz!

The snowball flew, with careful aim—and missed Arthur Augustus's nose by a quarter of an inch. The swell of St. Jim's gave a violent start.

"Bai Jove!"

"Figgie—quick!"

Whiz!

Right on D'Arcy's chin crashed the snowball, as he turned towards the group of juniors in amazement and indignation.

"Your turn, Merry."

Whiz! Crash!

Tom Merry's snowball went truer to its aim.

It crashed full upon the glossy silk top, and lifted it from its wearer's head, and carried it sailing through the air for several yards.

"Bravo!"

"Tom Merry wins!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

Arthur Augustus stared blankly at the juniors for a moment, and then he rushed towards them. Lowther and Wally, not to be deprived of their turns, though the target was now demolished, hurled their snowballs, and one caught D'Arcy on the nose, and one on his fancy waistcoat. The swell of St. Jim's gasped, and came on furiously.

"You—you feahful wuffians——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you wuff beasts—you have wuined my toppah——"

"Sorry, Gussy! It was strictly necessary——"

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"Pway put up your hands, Tom Mewwy! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'."

And Arthur Augustus danced up to the hero of the Shell, waving his fists in the air, his usually calm countenance aflame with wrath.

CHAPTER 19.

The Scarred Man Again.

TOM MERRY retreated.

"Hold on, Gussy—"

"I wefuse to hold on. You have thwown me into a fluttah, and wuined my toppah. I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'."

"But—"

"Pway put up your hands, deah boy—"

"But—"

"I wefuse to listen. I am goin' to thwash you."

"Gussy! Gussy!" said Lowther solemnly. "Suppose M. Cernay should come along and see you fighting! Gussy! Are you going to bring down our ginger whiskers in sorrow to the crematorium?"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Keep the peace, Gussy," grinned Tom Merry. "We weren't snowballing your topper as a topper, but as a target. Therefore—"

"It is wuined all the same."

"That is a detail. You see—"

"Undah the cires, Tom Mewwy, as it would be wotten bad form to wow in anothah fellow's quawtahs, I will not thwash you."

"Oh, thanks, Gussy! You make me breathe again!"

"But undah the cires, also, I cannot wegard such a set of wufians as my fwiends," said Arthur Augustus, jamming his eyeglass into his eye, and surveying the grinning juniors with indignant scorn. "I wefuse to speak to you again."

"Oh, Gussy!"

"I have always endeavahed to keep my circle of fwiends select, not to say swaggah. I have weally depawted from my wules in admittin' you boundahs to my fwiendship. I wefuse to know you any longah."

Blake leaned on Tom Merry's shoulder and wept. Monty Lowther took out his handkerchief and sniffed violently.

The swell of St. Jim's surveyed them wrathfully.

"You—you wottahs! I wegard you with feahful scorn and contempt."

"Oh! Boo-hoo!"

"If we were at home at St. Jim's, I would give you a feahful thwashin' all wound. As it is, I have no wresource but to drop your acquaintance."

And Arthur Augustus walked off, picked up his topper and brushed it with his handkerchief, and then walked away with his head very high in the air.

He walked away to one of the park gates. He was just going out when he felt a tap on the shoulder, and turned his head. It was Tom Merry.

He fixed a haughty glance upon the hero of the Shell.

"I say, Gussy—"

"Pway do not address me, Tom Mewwy. I no longah wegard you as a fwiend."

"But—"

"I shall be glad if you will wetire."

"But where are you going, Gussy?"

"I wefuse to discuss that with a chap I have ceased to know."

"But it will be time to dress for dinner in an hour."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Come in, my son, and—"

"I decline to come in."

And Arthur Augustus strode away. Tom Merry chuckled. He had little doubt that the swell of St. Jim's would turn up in time to make an elaborate toilet for dinner.

And about half an hour later there was a fresh fall of snow, which drove the juniors indoors, and they adjourned to the billiard-room of the chateau, where they were soon too busy to think of what D'Arcy might be doing.

Meanwhile, Arthur Augustus walked on.

He was simmering with wrath; but D'Arcy's wrath never lasted long. He calmed down; but though his wrath was dissipated, his "dig" was as invincible as ever. His brow was clouded as he strode on through the dusk.

The fall of snow was sudden, and it found him a considerable distance from the house. He had not brought out either a coat or an umbrella, and he was dismayed. He was thinking not of himself, but of his clothes.

"Bai Jove! I shall have to get shelter," he murmured.

He looked round at the dusky landscape.

Through the gloom of gathering night loomed up the massive remains of the ruined chateau. Arthur Augustus's eye gleamed behind his monocle.

"Bai Jove! Just the place."

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He strode swiftly towards the ruin. There was shelter there—and Arthur Augustus, too, was curious to look over the place. He had an idea that he could penetrate the mystery, and discover what trickery was being played there, and it would be a good joke on Tom Merry & Co. to inform them that the mystery was solved, and that their intended night expedition was not needed.

"Yaas, wathah!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

He walked on quickly towards the ruin, and broke into a run as the snow fell more thickly. His footsteps made no sound upon the soft carpet of snow.

As he neared the ruin he gave a start.

Through the thickening dusk he caught sight of a red point of light.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured.

It was a small point of red, and the swell of St. Jim's was puzzled to account for it. It certainly did not proceed from a lamp or lantern, nor from a match.

D'Arcy came through the ruined hall, and reached the doorway of the sheltered apartment in which the juniors had camped two nights ago, and from which they had been scared by the unearthly manifestations.

He had lost sight of the red glow for a moment; but now, as he entered the sheltered room he caught it again.

Then he grinned.

The red glow proceeded from the lighted end of a cigar!

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "So the ghosts smoke cigahs here, do they?"

He stopped, and looked into the room. The dusk was thickening, and the interior of the room was of course darker than the outer air, and for some moments he could see nothing. Then he slowly made out the form of a man, with a cigar in his mouth. And as his eyes became more used to the gloom, he discovered the rather startling fact that the man's eyes were fixed upon him, with a glitter of surprise and alarm in them that rather alarmed D'Arcy in his turn.

A low, savage voice came through the dusk.

"You! You once more!"

D'Arcy gave a jump.

He knew the voice—and now he looked again he knew the face, with that scar across it. But the black beard was gone—and its absence changed the face strangely.

A thrill ran through the swell of St. Jim's.

It was the disagreeable passenger of the train—the scarred Frenchman the juniors had run against in the lane at midnight. What was he doing here?

D'Arcy gazed at him guardedly.

At the slightest hostile movement from the scarred man he was ready to stand on the defensive, or to retreat, as might be needed.

"Bai Jove!" he ejaculated. "Fancy meetin' you!"

"Cochon! Spy!"

"I wefuse to be called a cochong! I—"

"Pig!" growled the scarred man. "So you must come again! You—"

"Yaas, wathah."

"It is once too often, done," said the scarred man, with a savage grin. "It is your own fault, you English brat! Gaston!"

Arthur Augustus gave a start. The man's look showed him for the first time that there was another enemy to think of—but it was too late. As he whirled round, a strong grasp was laid upon him from behind.

He struggled fiercely, but he was in the grip of a full-grown and powerful man.

"Welease me!" gasped D'Arcy. "You cowardly wottah!"

The scarred man sprang forward, and lent his aid. In the grasp of the two Arthur Augustus was quite helpless.

The scarred man gave him a bitter look.

"Your own deed," he said, between his teeth. "Upon your head be it"

"You wascals—"

The scarred man spoke to his comrade in French, and the junior was dragged to the flight of stone steps which Figgins had explored the previous night. The cold air of the vaults struck a chill to his very bones.

He was dragged along in the darkness, and he heard a sound as of a stone moving, and then he was thrust into a close-smelling chamber of stone, in black darkness.

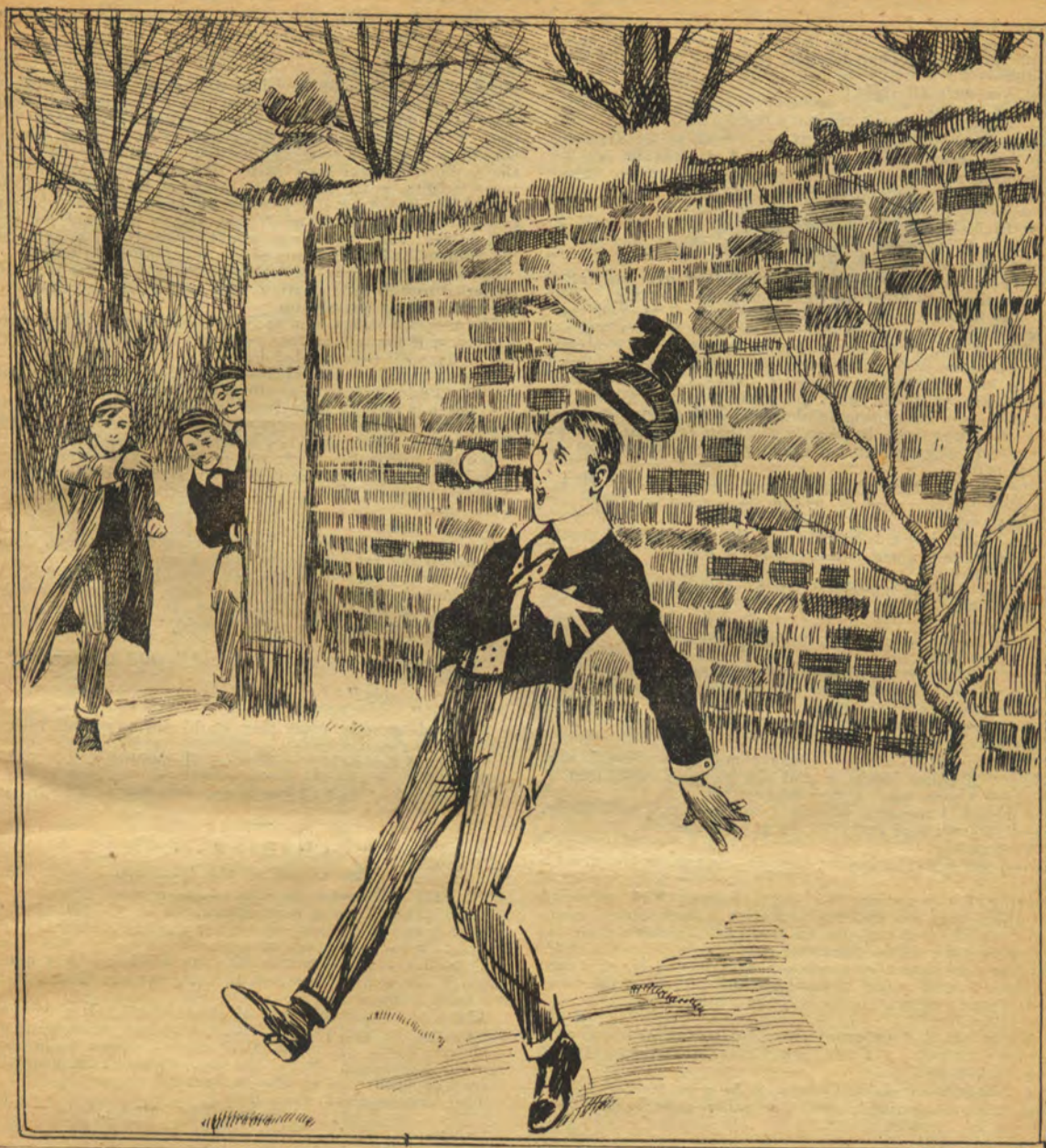
There was a sound of a click, and the junior realised that he was alone.

"Bai Jove!"

He regained his balance, and felt along the walls for the door. Cold and damp stone met his touch on all sides.

He shouted, but only the echo of his own voice answered him. He felt his way round the room. How many angles were there in the walls—how large was the room?

He had no matches, and he could get no light. He laid his hat on the floor against the wall, and carefully felt his way round till he came to it again.



The snowball flew, with careful aim, and missed Arthur Augustus's nose by a quarter of an inch. The swell of St. Jim's gave a violent start. "Bai Jove!"

The room was square in shape, about ten feet each way. It was bare, stone—floor and walls were of the same cold, chilly stone. But where the door was he could not tell—it presented no difference to the touch.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy.

What was the intention of his captors? Why was he there? D'Arcy hardly dared face the terrible truth; but he felt that he was in about the most serious fix of his life!

CHAPTER 20. The Expedition.

"HELLO!"

"Hullo! Anything the matter, Cernay?"

"It is zat I do not see Monsieur D'Arcy."

"Gussy!"

"It is zat he is not to be seen."

Tom Merry looked concerned.

They had gone up to their room to change for dinner, and D'Arcy was not with them. The French youth had

been looking for Arthur Augustus, and now he came in to tell the juniors that he was not to be found.

Monsieur Cernay had been called away by a telegram, on account of the bank robbery in Paris. The supposed clue to the bank robbers in London had turned out to be deceptive, and the police were still as wide of the mark as ever.

The absence of Cernay pere made the intended expedition that night easier. The juniors had arranged to leave the chateau on the ghost-hunt after Cernay's French friends had gone home.

"I cannot see D'Arcy, and I find no one has seen him," said Cernay. "Is it zat he has gone out for a walk?"

"By George," said Tom Merry, "he did go out, about an hour ago!"

"Zen it is zat he was caught in ze snow."

"Oh, that's it!" said Tom Merry, relieved. "I was afraid he was—ahem! It's all right. He has stopped somewhere out of the snow, and he'll be back later. Serve him right if he misses his dinner; it will be a lesson to him to be more careful."

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Cernay laughed.

"Ze dinnair vill always be retty for mes amis," he said. "I zink zat some accident happen, perhaps; but if you zink all right—"

"Oh, yes, he's all right."

"Zen it is good."

And Auguste Cernay retired.

"He's all right," said Tom Merry. "No need to worry, Blake. He went off on his dig, and I thought at first he was keeping away because of that. But it stands to reason he would put up somewhere out of the snow. He had no coat on."

Jack Blake nodded.

"Yes; he's all right, I expect."

And they went down to dinner.

Dinner was a merry meal, and it was not over till late; and then the boys filled up the evening with revelry. The snow was falling thickly all the time, and it seemed that D'Arcy would not venture home in it. The juniors had no suspicion, of course, that he had gone to the ruined chateau.

Towards nine o'clock the snow slackened, but it did not cease to fall for another half-hour. Then Cernay's French thumbs drove off home, and the juniors were left free to carry out their expedition to the ruined chateau.

The night was dark, but fine, and a host of stars glittered in the steely sky, and cast a dim light upon the carpet of spotless snow.

"It's curious that Gussy doesn't come back," Blake remarked, as they went up to put their coats on.

Tom Merry knitted his brows.

"I'm afraid it's a case of dig," he remarked. "Gussy was very wrathly about snowballing his topper."

"Yes, but—"

"I don't see how anything can have happened to him," said Manners.

"No, but—"

"What have you got on your mind, Blake?"

Blake hesitated.

"Well, it occurred to me that the young ass might have gone to the haunted chateau, you know. If he went there alone, he might get into trouble."

Tom Merry looked very grave.

"By Jove!"

"We know there's some trickery going on there," said Blake. "If Gussy has gone and put his head right into it, one never knows what might happen."

"I shouldn't wonder. It would be like Gus," said Wally.

"The best thing we can do is to go and see."

"Yes, rather!"

It did not take the juniors long to prepare for the expedition.

During the previous two days, Cernay had prepared everything that was needful, including a dark-lantern each, and a set of stout cudgels, in case enemies more material than ghosts should be encountered.

The juniors descended, and found Cernay in his coat and cap, lantern and cudgel in hand, awaiting them at the door.

"Is it zat you are all ready?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!"

"I zink zat D'Arcy excuse us if ve go vizout him," said Cernay anxiously. "I not zink I like him to zink zat ve neglectful, hein?"

"Oh, that's all right, Cernay. As a matter of fact, I think it's quite possible that Gussy has gone to the ruin, and got into trouble there."

"Mon Dieu!"

"He might have taken shelter there from the snow," said Kerr.

"Possibly," said Cernay. "If he is zere ve vill find him. Come on!"

"Wait a bit. Where's Fatty?"

Fatty Wynn had disappeared.

"Fatty!" called out Figgins. "Fatty! Where are you?"

"I'm coming."

Fatty Wynn returned, with a pink face, and a parcel in his hand.

"It's all right," he said, blushing guiltily as he met Figgins's accusing glance. "I—I thought I'd better bring some grub along, in—in case of accidents, you know. Accidents will happen, and it would be an awful thing to go hungry in this weather."

Figgins grunted.

"Oh, come on, porpoise!"

And they left the Chateau Cernay.

Outside, the night was cold and clear. On all sides sheets of spotless white stretched away into the gloom.

Their feet left deep tracks in the soft, new-fallen snow, and a long trail followed them as they tramped on.

They walked mostly in silence.

Determined as they were to discover and solve the mystery of the haunted chateau, the juniors realised that they were

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not engaged in mere fun now; there might be an element of danger—and serious danger—in their enterprise.

That the place was really haunted by visitants from the other world they refused to believe, in spite of the inexplicable manifestations they had witnessed. But if trickery was at work, there must be some motive for it; the tricksters were not wasting their time playing such a game for fun. There was something they had to hide, some reason why they wished to keep visitors away from the ruin. And the explorers might very easily find themselves on hostile terms with a gang of ruffians—perhaps footpads, perhaps housebreakers—it was impossible to guess. It was barely possible that the whole affair was due to practical jokers; and in that case, too, there would probably be a fight, as the juniors had their panic of the other night to avenge.

Cernay led the way, and they followed him steadily, till at last through the starlight the ruins of the haunted chateau loomed grimly up.

There was a pause now to light the lanterns. They were ignited, and shut off, so that no gleam of light should betray the juniors till they needed it.

Gloomy and dark looked the ruins of the old stone chateau as the juniors advanced cautiously towards it.

There was enough light from the stars to enable them to pick their way over the rugged heaps of masonry, towards the room in which they had camped two nights ago.

Within, under the roof, the darkness was intense, and Tom Merry gave the word for the light to be turned on. A dozen lanterns glimmered out, and the room was flooded with light.

It was empty.

On the stone floor was a heap of blackened embers, showing where the fire had burnt out. That was all.

Tom Merry looked at the remains of the camp-fire.

"Somebody has been at work here," he said quietly.

"The rest of the fuel—where is it? It has been taken."

"The ghosts must have been cold," murmured Monty Lowther.

"Ze peasants—zey need firewood," said Cernay. "It might be zem."

"Yes, possibly."

"Hark!"

A sound—exactly what they could not say—had become audible in the silence.

"Shut off the light!" whispered Tom Merry.

In an instant all was dark.

The juniors waited—silent, tense, with fast-beating hearts.

CHAPTER 21.

The Ghost of the Chateau.

GRIM silence—stillness as of the grave.

It had lasted several minutes, which seemed to be hours to the juniors. What was the sound they had heard? What were they to see?

Tom Merry was about to give the word for light again, when Blake gripped his arm in the gloom hard and tight.

"Look!" he muttered.

There was a pale glimmer of ghostly light. It glimmered through a doorless portal, from the ruined room beyond—a large room, of which the massive stone walls alone remained standing. It was the room in which the unearthly form had been seen by the juniors.

They drew a quick, deep breath.

"The—ghost!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Quiet!"

But Tom Merry, in spite of his nerve, felt a strange eerie thrill as a dim figure in white loomed up out of the gloom in the distance. He remembered how he had hurled a stone at the ghostly form, without hurting it. What did it mean?

In the dark he stooped for a missile.

"Quiet, you chaps!"

He rose again, a jagged stone in his hand. With deadly aim he hurled it through the opening in the wall at the ghostly figure beyond.

Crash!

The impact of the stone upon the stone wall seemed like thunder, to the straining nerves of the St. Jim's juniors.

A thousand booming echoes rolled through the recesses of the ruins.

The ghostly figure did not stir.

Tom Merry felt the perspiration start out on his brow. There was no mistake. Twice it had happened. What in wonder's name did it mean?

"I—I—I think we'd better be off," murmured Fatty Wynn.

Figgins's grip closed like iron on his arm.

"Stand where you are, Fatty!"

"But—"

"Shut up!"

"Turn on the light!" said Tom Merry resolutely. "I'm going to see this through."

The light blazed out. At the same instant the figure vanished.

"Come on!"

They followed Tom Merry with beating hearts, but with undaunted courage. They scrambled over the rough stones and bricks into the great roofless chamber, flashing their lights on all sides.

They were ready for any foe; but there was no foe to be discovered.

The place was empty—silent.

Tom Merry plunged on through stones and snow towards the wall where his missile had struck. Upon the stone wall was a mark where the impact had been. The stone lay broken in the snow at his feet.

"I—I say, Tom," said Manners, in a low voice, "look at the snow."

"What about it?"

"There's no footmarks in it—none but our own."

The startled juniors looked at the white carpet of snow. The floor was covered with it, in the roofless chamber, to a depth of eight or nine inches. And there was no trace of a footprint there, save the traces left by the boots of the juniors themselves.

The juniors exchanged startled looks, and hurriedly retreated to the adjoining room. Their faces were pale now.

"Hang it all!" muttered Tom Merry desperately. "What does it mean? What can it mean?"

"Is—is it possible—" began Manners.

"Is what possible?"

"That it's a g-g-ghost?"

"Rats!"

"B-but—"

"I—I think we may as well clear," murmured Fatty Wynn. "Of course, I don't believe in ghosts, b-but it's jolly cold here, and—"

"I'm going to stay!"

"Yes, but—"

"Put the lights out, and see if it appears again," said Tom Merry.

There was a general hesitation. After that experience the juniors were naturally loth to stand there in the darkness, but the hesitation was brief. One by one the lanterns were shut off, and darkness reigned once more in the ruined chateau.

With beating hearts the juniors watched.

Some minutes elapsed, then came the glimmer of ghostly light again, and then, outlined in the gloom, appeared the ghostly figure.

It was moving now—slowly moving along in the gloom.

"Good heavens!" muttered Lowther. "Let's get out! Tom—Tom! What can it be, that leaves no footprint in the snow? Let's go!"

"Come on, Tom!"

"Oui, oui!" Cernay's teeth were chattering. "It is not of ze earth! Let us go! Mon ami, mon ami! Allons!"

Tom Merry did not stir.

"You fellows stand here," he said. "I'm going to see what it is."

"But—but—"

"It's no good turning on—the lights; I'm going in the dark!" said Tom, whose face was pale but determined. "You fellows stand here—"

"You—you sha'n't go—"

"I shall!"

"Not alone, then," said Lowther.

"Yes, yes! Two make more row than one. I want to take the rotter by surprise, whoever and whatever it is."

"But—but—"

"Let me have my way, Monty. Keep where you are."

And Tom Merry laid down his lantern, grasped his cudgel firmly in his hand, and stole silently towards the doorway.

The figure was still now.

Strange and unearthly it looked, and it did not move as Tom Merry entered the roofless chamber, where it glimmered through the darkness.

On the thick snow his feet made no sound.

With a thumping heart but a cool head the junior advanced steadily towards the ghostly figure.

Closer—closer—closer!

His breath came thick and fast—the form did not move.

Closer—till by stretching out his hand he could have touched it.

And then Tom Merry could have burst into a laugh, for he could see now—what the juniors could not see from a distance—that the ghostly form was simply a lighted reflection upon the wall.

No wonder it had disappeared when the lanterns were turned on.

It was a magic lantern effect, startling enough in the gloom, the darkened wall answering the purpose of a screen.

Tom Merry remained silent. He turned round and looked back, and caught the dim bar of light from the point where the tricksters were.

In the stone wall of the roofless chamber was a small opening, where a block of stone had been moved, and there Tom Merry caught a glimmer of light. It was in the wall opposite the apparition, and just over the doorway, and Tom guessed at once that it was a secret passage in the thickness of the wall.

He raised his hand slowly, holding the heavy cudgel in it, the darkness of the place concealing him and his movements. The rascals evidently had no suspicion that any of the explorers would be bold enough to venture into the room in the dark. Tom Merry took careful aim, and the stick went whirling through the air.

There was a sudden yell.

The light disappeared instantly, and the ghostly figure vanished. There was a trampling of feet as the juniors rushed madly through the doorway, and a flashing of lights.

"Tom, Tom!"

"Tom Merry!"

"It's all right!" called out Tom.

They gathered round him.

"I—I thought it was you that called!" gasped Lowther.

"What has happened?"

Tom Merry picked up his stick from the snow where it had fallen.

He flashed his light upon the stone wall above the doorway. The opening had disappeared. The stone had been closed.

"It was a trick," said Tom Merry. "We're hardly to blame for being taken in by it, and if any of the country folk here have seen it at work, no wonder they have taken the chateau for haunted."

"But what happened?"

Tom Merry explained.

"My hat!" said Lowther. "It was a deep game! Well, I think it's pretty clearly established now that we have ghosts of flesh and blood to deal with."

"Yes, rather!" said Figgins. "Let's get down the stairs and run them down. They can be hunted out if we look long enough."

"Hold on!" said Fatty Wynn. "Suppose we have a snack of grub first? You see—"

"Rats!"

And Tom Merry & Co. made their way to the stone steps that led down to the vaults below the ruined chateau.

CHAPTER 22.

The Secret Passage.

THE discovery of the true nature of the trickery at the haunted chateau had relieved the St. Jim's juniors of any supernatural fears, but it placed them more than ever upon their guard. They knew now for certain that they had earthly foes to deal with—and foes, too, who would not be taking so much trouble for nothing. What was the secret of the ruined chateau?

"Ciel!" said Auguste Cernay. "Zis is my father's property, and ze rascals—ze coquins—are trespassers here! Zey are rascals, and I zink zat mon pere he very please if ve show zem up, and prove zat ze chateau not really haunted."

"Yes, rather!"

"I zink, too, zat ze trick's very dangerous, and zat a weak-minded person might be scared into ze fits."

"Very likely."

"Zen you fellows might have had to pass ze whole night in ze snowstorm zat night, if you had not found ze barn."

"What-ho!"

"Zerefore, if zey are practical shokers here, ve giffs zem licking, and if zey are some rascals ve shows zem up."

"Exactly!" said Tom Merry.

"Only look out where you're going," said Wally. "If they're footpads or anything of that sort they may show fight."

"They're very likely to do so," said Tom Merry; "but there are a dozen of us, and there can hardly be as many of them."

"Zat is not likely."

"Anyway, we're going for them," said Blake; "and if it's a practical joke we'll give them some jokes of a still more practical nature."

"Zat is so."

"Careful here!" said Tom Merry. "The steps are slippery."

"Right-ho!"

They trod carefully down the steps. They entered the dark, damp vaults, flashing the lanterns round them to right and left.

"Hark!" said Kangaroo suddenly.

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A deep groan sounded from the stillness of the vaults. Tom Merry smiled contemptuously.

"They can't frighten us with that now," he remarked.

"No. It's a bit out of date after we've found out the magic lantern business," said Monty Lowther. "Give 'em a groan back."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Zat is funny!" said Cernay. "It is a good idea. Ven zey groan again, give zem ze groan back again for zem-selves."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Hark! exclaimed the Cornstalk. "There it is again!"

Groan!

It was a deep, awe-inspiring sound, and, even though they knew it was trickery, it gave some of the juniors a feeling of uneasiness, but they did not hesitate to reply to it in kind.

They gave a groan in chorus back again, and that groan rang and echoed through the dim vaults of the old chateau. Then they listened for a repetition of the sound.

But the groan was not heard again. The explorers' reply had convinced the tricksters evidently that their tactics were of no further use.

Jack Blake gave a chuckle.

"I fancy we've got to the end of the ghost business," he remarked, "but we may have something a bit more serious to tackle next."

"They'll find us ready for them."

"Zat is so, mon ami!"

"Come on!" said Tom Merry. "We're going right through these vaults from end to end. Keep the light well about you, and clubs ready."

"What-ho!"

"Oui, oui!"

The juniors, keeping close together, pressed on through the gloomy vaults.

The dozen lanterns made the place almost as light as day wherever they moved, and made it impossible for any lurking foe to escape their sight if they should come near him, but no one appeared. They followed the series of vaults to the extremity, and then returned the way they had come to the stone stairs without coming in sight of any living thing.

They gathered again at the foot of the stairs.

"Zere is no vun," said Cernay; "but I have heard mon pere say zat zere are secret passages in zese old ruins."

"It's pretty certain," said Tom Merry. "They were working that ghost business fro— Hark! What is that?"

Tap! Tap!

"Someone tapping!"

"Listen again!"

Tap—tap—tap!

They strained their eyes into the darkness on all sides. As far as the radius of light from the lanterns reached there was nothing to see but damp floor and damp walls, all of solid, chilly stone.

"It's another game of the rascals!" said Tom Merry. "I remember at St. Jim's that chap who played the ghost tapped on the wall from a secret passage."

"Yes, rather!"

"Tap back again!" grinned Kerr.

"Good wheeze!"

And Tom Merry tapped on the nearest wall with his cudgel.

Tap—tap—tap!

They listened for a reply. It was not long in coming.

Tap—tap!

From what direction the sound proceeded they could not tell.

"There's a blessed secret passage somewhere!" said Blake.

"But where?"

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation.

"Follow me!"

He ran quickly up the stairs.

The juniors followed him, wondering what he had in his mind. Tom Merry stopped by the ashes of the old camp-fire. He flashed his lantern down upon the blackened flagstones.

"What's the game?" demanded Digby.

"You remember they groaned quite close to us the night we camped here, and we couldn't tell how it could be so close?" said Tom Merry excitedly.

"I remember."

"Well, I should say the secret passage runs under this floor."

"My hat!"

"And these big, flat stones look as if they could be prised up," said Tom Merry. "Let's try—and see."

The idea caught on at once. The juniors set keenly to work. The cement between the stones had long rotted away, and by using their sticks as levers, they prised up one of the big flags.

Stony earth was beneath.

"Not much there," said Kerr.

"One swallow doesn't make a summer, my dear fellow."

"Well, try the next," said Kangaroo.

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Next

Week:

The next stone was easier still to raise, as one edge was uncovered. It revealed nothing but fresh stones. But the third flagstone turned over by the juniors, disclosed a dark, wide cavity, rimmed round with stone.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"What do you say to this, my sons?"

"Jolly good!"

The juniors were wild with excitement now. They were evidently on the track of the "ghosts" of the ruined chateau at last.

"We've got to get down there," said Blake.

"Better see what it's like first. Anybody got a string?"

Digby had a long piece of twine. It was tied to one of the lanterns, which was lowered into the opening. The lantern descended about eight feet, and clinked upon a stone floor. The light revealed the floor and walls of a passage built in the stone.

"Come on!" said Tom Merry.

He swung himself over the edge of the aperture, and dropped lightly into the passage below.

He picked up the lantern there, and led the way onward. One by one the juniors dropped down after him and followed. Behind them the passage extended into blackness; before them the same.

The passage was about three feet wide, and the juniors walked in single file. Tom Merry held his lantern up before him, the rays gleaming ahead.

Suddenly the light was crossed by another light, and a dark form loomed up behind a lantern, and two fierce eyes gleamed for a moment.

Tom Merry caught sight of a face.

He uttered a cry:

"The man with the scar!"

There was a muttered oath in French.

The next instant the second light had flashed away—the scarred Frenchman was gone.

Tom Merry halted, breathing hard in his amazement.

"Who was it?" cried Blake.

No one but Tom Merry had seen more than a flashing light and a flitting shadow.

"The scarred Frenchman—the man in the train."

"Ciel!" exclaimed Cernay, who had been told about him—"ciel! And vat is he doing here?"

"Some rascality, I'll be bound!" said Tom Merry. "Anyway, we're going to see the end of this now. Come on!"

And he pressed forward along the secret passage.

CHAPTER 23.

The Bank Robber.

FORWARD!

That was the word now. Strange thoughts were in Tom Merry's mind as he pressed on. He remembered the incident of the Frenchman in the railway-train—of the strange meeting in the dark lane. Then, it was the scarred Frenchman for whom those flashing signals had been made that night—the scarred Frenchman who was at the bottom of this trickery at the haunted chateau?

Who was he? What was he?

He looked to the juniors like a man from the city—not by any means like a country footpad, at all events; yet he was the man who was hiding here.

Some criminal—a fugitive from justice, hiding from the police. Some robber, who found the ruined chateau a safe hiding-place for his plunder?

It was very probable.

"Halt!" exclaimed Tom Merry abruptly.

His meditations were interrupted as he came face to face with a stone wall, which blocked up further progress.

The juniors came to a stop.

They flashed the light up and down round them, but it shone only on bare walls built of greystone blocks.

Where had the scarred Frenchman gone?

He had certainly not passed the juniors in the narrow passage, and here they were, at the end of a blind alley, empty save for themselves.

"A door of some sort," said Blake.

"There must be!"

"Look for it—the stone's damp and mouldy—there may be a trace where the fellow had touched it," said Jack Blake sagely.

"Good for you!"

Tom Merry examined the stones inch by inch. As Blake suggested, a touch would probably have left a mark in the damp fungus that covered the old stones.

"Eureka!" exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly.

"Have you found it?"

"Yes!"

They pressed forward to see. There was the plain mark where a heavy push had been given upon the stone, and the damp surface had been rubbed. Tom Merry put his hand in the same place, and pushed.

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The stone slid away.

Beyond, all was dark; but the lanterns showed the passage extended into a chamber built in the stone.

"Careful how you go," said Blake.

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry led the way. He flashed the lantern-light on the floor as he went—and it was well that he did. For a few feet from the opening a gap yawned in the stone—a gap three feet wide and bottomless, as far as Tom could see by looking.

The boy's face went white.

"Stop, you chaps!"

"What is it?"

"A gap in the floor."

Even Tom Merry was unnerved for a moment. A single incautious step would have hurled him down to certain death. And the man they were following had known that this fearful peril was in their path—he had been willing that they should go to their death, if so it chanced, in the gloom!

Tom Merry's eyes burned.

"Take care, you fellows," he said. "This isn't too wide to jump over, but be careful."

"Lead on, Macduff."

Tom Merry jumped the gap. On the other side lay three or four huge flagstones, and they had evidently been recently moved. This deliberate death-trap had been laid for the pursuers, there could be no doubt of that.

The juniors advanced into the stone chamber. There was no apparent exit from it. As they moved round it, tapping here and there on the walls to feel if they were solid, there came suddenly an answering sound that made them start. Tap!

"My hat!" said Blake. "The cheek! He's tapping back at us!"

Tap, tap!

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"It's the same tapping we heard when we were in the vaults," he said. "I wonder——" He did not finish, but searched out the spot where the tapping sounded most clearly, and there tapped in return.

Tap, tap, tap!

Back at once came the reply.

Tap, tap!

"That can't be the scarred man or his friends," said Tom Merry. "It's somebody else—somebody who's got shut up here somehow."

"My hat! Can it be——"

"Gussy?"

"I shouldn't wonder!"

"Ciel! Zat would be strange!"

Tom Merry tapped on the stone wall again, and then put his lips close to the stone blocks, and called out:

"Who is it?"

His voice rang and echoed through the cell, but he heard no reply. He shouted again, and then he thought he caught a voice through the stone.

"Somebody's there," he said; "but a tap sounds through the stone, and a voice doesn't. I can't make out a word, or be sure if it is a voice."

"There may be a door there."

"It doesn't look like it."

They searched the wall for a trace of a door, but in vain. The stone blocks were immovable. Then they searched the other walls. It was equally in vain, and at last they ceased, angry and baffled.

"Ciel!" said Auguste Cernay. "Vat does it mean, mes amis? Ze man came zis way, zat is certain."

"And he got out somehow," said Figgins.

"Oui, razer."

"Try the floor," suggested Blake. "There may be another blessed stair!"

"Good!"

They scanned the floor. And there they found a flag from which the damp had been rubbed, and which showed plain traces of recent touching. But it refused to move. They pressed and twisted at it without avail.

"It comes up, I expect," said Tom Merry. "But it's fastened underneath."

"Then we can't raise it."

"Only by prising it up. Let's get to work!"

The stone was immovable. But another flag near it was prised up—then another, till the flags round it were all up, and the obstinate stone was left alone. Then they were able to get the thick cudgels under the edge of it, and the leverage gave them an advantage. With a dozen strong arms levering, the stone yielded.

There was a crack below, as if some fastening had broken, and the stone shot up so suddenly that two or three of the juniors rolled on the floor.

The stone up-ended, and remained motionless.

"Ow!" gasped Lowther, as he sat down, and the back of Digby's head gave him a crack on the chin as Dig sat down, too. "Ow! Ass!"

Dig rubbed the back of his head.

"Oh! What did I knock my head against?"

"My chin, you dummy!"

"Ow! Why couldn't you put your silly chin somewhere else?" grunted Dig. "You've made my head ache."

"D'you think you haven't made my jaw ache?" howled Lowther.

"Oh, hold your jaw!" said Blake humorously.

"Look here, Blake——"

"Scat! Come on!"

"Yes; shut up, you chaps, and come on!" said Tom Merry. "There's a stone stair here, and I rather think this will be the finish."

"Mon Dieu! I zink so."

"That's all very well. My jaw's nearly broken."

"But not quite, worse luck," sighed Manners. "How nice the study would be, when we get back to St. Jim's, if it had been really broken!"

"Well, you chaps can stay here and jaw, if you like," exclaimed Tom Merry. "I'm going on."

And he stepped into the opening, his lantern flashing ahead.

"Halt!"

It was a sudden shout from below. A dark figure stood in the lantern-light—a savage face looked up from below. It was the scarred Frenchman again—without his beard. The scar ran in a livid line across his white cheek.

"Stop!"

His right hand flashed up—there was a glimmer of steel in the light. A strange thrill ran through Tom Merry as he realised that a firearm was pointed at him.

"Go back, or I'll shoot!"

Before Tom Merry could reply there was a wild cry from Auguste Cernay, over his shoulder. The French lad was staring blankly at the scarred man.

"Ciel! It is he—c'est le coquin! It is Maximilian Ponsac!"

"What?"

"It is ze bank robber!"

CHAPTER 24.

Captured!

"THE bank robber!"

The juniors echoed the words in blank amazement.

Across the scarred face of the Frenchman flashed a look of almost demoniac rage.

The hand that held the revolver trembled.

"Ah! You know me! Then death—death——"

Crash!

Jack Blake acted promptly. In his blind rage—and terror, too, for there was as much fear as fury in his face—the scoundrel had been pressing the trigger—but Jack Blake hurled his lantern with lightning swiftness.

The missile struck the scarred man full in the face, and flame and smoke and the crashing blow blinded him for the moment. His arm dropped—the pistol exploded, and the ball flattened on the stone floor.

The next moment Tom Merry had leaped down the steps, and a crashing blow of his cudgel fell upon the villain's right arm, numbing it, and the revolver dropped to the ground.

The scarred man gave a yell of pain.

"Collar him!" shouted Figgins.

But he was running.

The juniors were tearing after him, but Tom Merry shouted to them to be careful.

"Hold on! Take care! There may be pitfalls—take care!"

"Right-ho, my son!"

"Zat ve follow him!"

"Wait a bit! Blake, old man——"

"Hullo!"

"They may have another way of getting out," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "You and two or three more go back the way we've come, and guard the opening at the top of the vault steps—see? Knock down anybody who tries to get out."

Blake chuckled.

"Good."

"Take Kerr and Wally and Kangaroo."

"Come on, kids!"

And the four juniors hurried back the way they had come, and in a few moments were in the open air again, and on guard at the top of the vault steps.

Tom Merry & Co. pressed on. They were in a wide passage now, evidently on a level with the vaults below the old chateau.

They were all intensely excited by the strange news Cernay had given them. Auguste Cernay himself was bubbling over with eagerness.

"You're sure it's the bank robber?" asked Tom Merry.

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"The one who robbed your father's bank, you mean, of course?"

"Oui, oui!"

"Have you seen him?"

"No, but the police have his photograph—he is a well-known criminal—and they sent one to my father. I have seen it. I know every line of his features. And besides, the scar—there is that he cannot disguise."

"Good!"

"But how on earth did a Paris criminal come to hide in a ruin in this part of the country?" exclaimed Lowther.

"Ah! I know zat too—his confederate, Vinol—"

"Ah! I remember your governor saying—"

"Oui, oui, Vinol is a native of this district, and was in my father's employ once," Cernay explained. "Gaston Vinol—"

"Gaston! That settles it—the scarred man's friend here is named Gaston, as we know."

"Oui, oui! Gaston Vinol was on this estate for years—and he undoubtedly had then discovered the secrets of this old chateau," said Cernay. "Then when the bank robbery had made Paris too hot for zem, it must have been Gaston Vinol who sought of zis place as a safe refuge."

"By Jove! Yes, and I suppose he came here first, to see if it was safe, as he was a less conspicuous personage than the chap with the scar," Tom Merry remarked. "It was he who was making the light signals for his confederate the night we chanced here."

"Zat is so."

"And he knew that the chateau is supposed to be haunted, and he had the fixings all ready to keep up the game, in case the chateau should be visited," said Figgins. "It was a jolly deep game."

"By Jove, yes!"

"And Vinol was a violinist, as I remember," said Cernay. "He was doubtless playing for his own pleasure ven you heard him first, zat night."

As they talked, the juniors were slowly and cautiously following the stone passage. It led them, as they half expected, to a blank wall of stone.

But this was not likely to baffle them now.

Tom Merry groped over the wall till he found a stone that yielded to his touch, and as it rolled back a gleam of light came through.

The juniors pushed on through the opening, and found themselves in a small stone chamber, furnished with a wooden bench, a couple of stools, and beds made up on the floor.

An oil-lamp was burning on the table, and close beside it a pack of cards was scattered, and there were several silver and gold coins among the cards.

Two or three bottles of wine and a couple of glasses, and a half-burnt cigar, gave additional evidence of the haste with which the occupants had left the place.

The room was closed in on all sides, yet the air was pure enough, showing that there was some hidden means of ventilation in the stone walls.

On the opposite side of the room a stone was partly closed, showing where the bank robbers had made their exit.

Tom Merry glanced quickly round the room.

"This is where they lived," he remarked. "We seem to have interrupted a little game by coming here to-night."

"Ha, ha!"

"And this is the way they've gone," said Figgins, pulling the stone door wider open. "I wonder—why, here we are in the vaults again!"

"By Jove!"

It was true—they were in the vaults, close by the stone stair that led to the upper air. Tom Merry felt glad that he had thought of detailing Blake to guard the top of that stair from outside.

For even as the juniors emerged into the vaults there came a sound of strife from the stairway.

There was a yell, a curse, and the sound of a body rolling down the stairs.

Then a shout from above.

"Come on, you bounders! Have another try."

It was Jack Blake's voice.

Tom Merry chuckled gleefully. Blake and his comrades were on guard, and the bank robbers were not likely to escape that way.

"We'll take the rotters behind," said Manners.

"Yes—come on!"

The juniors ran towards the stair. At the foot of it lay a

man, evidently half stunned. He had been knocked down by a cudgel blow as he tried to emerge from the stair into the open air, and the roll down the stairs had knocked out of him what little sense the blow on the head had left.

The juniors seized him instantly.

He began to struggle savagely, but blindly; but it did not avail him. It was not the Paris crackman; but a man the juniors had not seen before; but Auguste Cernay knew him at a glance.

"It is Gaston Vinol!" he said.

"Good!"

A couple of handkerchiefs were twisted up, and tied fast round the man's wrists and ankles. He lay muttering curses as the juniors left him.

There was a sound of more curses on the stairs. Then the voice of Maximilian Ponsac was heard, in parley.

"Let me pass—let me pass!"

Blake's voice was heard in reply.

"You can pass, if you like; but you'll take a cracked napper with you. Come on—no extra charge for postman's knocks!"

"I—I—"

"Hear, hear! Come on!"

The bank robber ground his teeth savagely.

The four juniors above had it all in their hands. Gathered round the small square opening at the top of the steps, they could knock down anybody who tried to get out, without exposing themselves to anything in return. If the bank robber had still had his revolver, it would have been useless to him.

"Let me pass! Mon Dieu! Let me pass, and I will make you rich!" he cried hoarsely.

"Go hon!"

"A thousand francs—"

"A thousand rats!" said Blake.

"Ten thousand francs—"

"Ten thousand rats!"

The man gritted his teeth.

With gleaming eyes he rushed up the steps once more, and emerged head and shoulders into the open, and then dodged back as four cudgels crashed downwards.

And as he dodged down, mad with rage, but not daring to face the blows, there was a rush up the stairs behind him, and several strong hands fastened upon him, and he was dragged headlong down. With a yell of rage, he turned upon his new foes, struggling and fighting like a wild cat, and the bank robber and the juniors rolled down to the bottom of the stairs in a struggling heap.

CHAPTER 25.

A Million Francs.

PONSAC fought fiercely, but the odds were too great. The juniors simply piled upon him, and he was overwhelmed. A yell from Tom Merry brought Blake and his comrades upon the scene, and they added themselves to the scrimmage. The furious struggles of the Frenchman were quieted at last. He lay gasping and exhausted under their weight, and his hands and feet were tied as those of his accomplice had been.

Then the juniors released him.

He lay gasping, his eyes mad with rage, his teeth grating. A torrent of curses in French streamed from his lips, till Kangaroo slapped him upon the mouth, and told him to be silent.

"By Jove!" gasped Tom Merry. "We've got them—the ghosts of the chateau."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Auguste Cernay's eyes were beaming.

"Ve have got ze bank robbers," he cried. "Vat news for mon pere! My father he will be delighted! Zey vill have ze stolen banknotes viz zem."

"By George! Of course."

A spasm of terrible rage crossed Ponsac's face. His look alone was enough to tell that the thieves had the loot about their persons.

The invasion of their retreat, and the discovery of the secret passages by Tom Merry & Co., had made it impossible for them to hope to lie hidden longer at the haunted chateau. They had attempted to flee—and had not Blake been on the watch at the top of the stairs, they would have escaped into the night—and might have cleared away for good, plunder and all!

But now—

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Wally was clawed out of his goal by one forward, while another ran in with the ball in his hands and tossed it into the net.

Tom Merry stooped over the bound bank robber, and calmly and methodically went through his pockets.

There was a bulky package in the man's breast, next to his skin, and Tom Merry was not long in finding it and dragging it out into the light.

He opened the package, the bank robber watching him with burning eyes. A huge roll of Bank of France notes was revealed.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Zey are ze notes."

"Look!"

Cernay eagerly took them, and began to count them.

"How many were taken from the bank?" asked Tom Merry.

"A million francs in notes—mon pere's loss alone would have been fifty thousand francs," said Cernay. "I zink zey are not all here."

"Some on the other chap, no doubt."

Gaston Vinol was searched, and a smaller bundle of notes came to light.

"Ah! Zat is zem!"

"C'est bien!" It was Ponsac's voice. The Paris cracksmen was cool again now; he seemed to have quite recovered

his sang-froid. "They are all there, garçons—all, excepting five thousand francs already sent to a friend of mine to pass—which you or anybody else will never see again."

"Five thousand isn't much out of a million," said Tom Merry. "This will be a ripping Christmas present for your father, Cernay."

"Oui, oui, razer!"

"Et moi?" said Ponsac. "I am of no further use to you—let me go!"

Tom Merry's brow darkened.

"We are not likely to let such a scoundrel loose again!" he exclaimed.

Ponsac shrugged his shoulders.

"You have robbed me of a fortune, little monsieur—is that not enough! And there is your friend—what of him?"

Tom Merry started.

"Whom do you mean?"

The bank robber smiled grimly.

"Your friend with the eyeglass."

"It was Gussy we heard tapping," said Blake, in a low voice.

Tom Merry nodded.

"You may have heard him tapping," said Ponsac, who had

caught the words, "but you will never find his cell without my assistance. Let us both go and find your friend. Peste! You have recovered a million francs. What more would you have?"

"A scoundrel punished!" said Tom Merry.

"Then give up the hope of ever seeing your friend again."

"At all events, we shall search before we come to terms with you," said Tom Merry.

Ponsac gave another shrug of the shoulders.

"Search, then!"

"Stay here with them, one of you, and see that they don't get loose," said Tom Merry. "The rest of you help me hunt for Gussy."

"Good!"

Digby stayed to watch over the bank robbers, though they were too securely tied for there to be much risk of their getting loose, then Tom Merry & Co. hunted for Gussy. They tapped on the stone walls, and were soon rewarded by hearing answering taps.

They gathered in the place where the tapping was loudest, but never a sign of a door could they find. The tapping continued from within. If there was a door—and undoubtedly there was—it was of a kind different from the others they had encountered.

They felt over the wall. It was of massive blocks they could not hope to prise open.

Tap—tap—tap!

"This is rotten!" said Tom Merry, in a low voice. "There's Gussy on that side of the wall, and us on this side, yet—"

"There must be a door!"

"We can't find it!"

"We could get workmen here to wrench the whole wall away to-morrow morning," Blake remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, but Gussy! Think of him shut up there! He may have been there hours already, without light, without food—"

Fatty Wynn shuddered, and left off nibbling a sandwich.

"We'd better make terms with the rotter!"

"I suppose so! You stay here, Wally, and go on tapping, to show Gussy we haven't deserted him."

"Right you are! Poor old Gus! What a state his clothes will be in!" said Wally, with great feeling.

Tom Merry returned to the bank robbers. Ponsac looked up at him with a mocking smile.

"Have you found your friend, monsieur?"

"No!"

"You want my help?"

"Yes!"

"You know the terms."

"I accept them!" said Tom Merry shortly. "You release my chum and we set you free, but no more than that. The police will be on your track."

Ponsac looked at him keenly, and nodded.

"C'est bien! Untie my legs, and let me walk."

They untied his legs, Figgins and Kangaroo taking one each of his arms as a precaution. They led him to the spot where the hero of the Third was still tapping. Ponsac grinned. He scanned the floor, and pressed his foot upon a spot that was not, to the eyes of the juniors, marked out from the rest of the damp, grimy floor.

But as he pressed a stone sank away, taking a portion of the wall with it, and the lanterns gleamed into a dark stone cell.

There was an exclamation from the darkness within.

"Gweat Scott!"

"Gussy!"

CHAPTER 26.

Arthur Augustus is Quite Satisfied with Himself.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY came out of the cell. The elegant junior of St. Jim's was in a shocking state.

His clothes were covered with dirt and slime, his hat was missing, his collar was torn out, and his face and hands were about as "grubby" as they could well be.

Where the slime did not conceal his face it was very pale.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "Is it weally you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "I think we have more right to ask that question! Is this the one and only Beau Brummel of the School House?"

"You have catchahed the wascal?"

"Yes, and he's ransomed himself by showing where he had shut you up," said Tom Merry. "Otherwise, you'd have stayed there till to-morrow."

"Bai Jove!"

"So he's going, but I expect the police will soon have him."

"I twust so," said D'Arcy. "He has tweated me with the

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greatest possible disrespect. Before he goes, I think I had better give him a faithful thwashin'."

"Oh, never mind that now," said Tom Merry, releasing the bank robber. "There you are, you rascal! Scoot!"

Blake released Gaston Vinol at the same moment.

The two rascals looked at one another, and then at the juniors. It was quite plain that it was in their minds to attack the lads, and try conclusions once more for the possession of the million francs.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Come on!" he said. "I'd be glad to take you to prison, after all!"

But it was too hopeless. The rascals were unarmed, and the juniors were six to one. With a shrug of the shoulders Ponsac turned away, and Vinol followed him.

The juniors followed them into the open air.

"Adieu, messieurs!" said Maximilian Ponsac. "We may meet again."

"When you are arrested!" said Tom Merry.

Another shrug of the shoulders, and the bank robber disappeared into the gloom. The snow had begun to fall again. In the falling flakes the forms and footsteps of the two thieves of Paris faded away.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, as he heard the story of the recovery of the banknotes. "Bai Jove, that's wippin'! You see now, Tom Mewwy, that I was wight."

"Eh?"

"You will wemembah my suggestin' offewin' my services to M. Cernay as an amateur detective, to wun down the bank wobbahs!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Well, we have wun them down," said Arthur Augustus. "I was the first to do so—"

"And to get shut up in a cell," said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the St. Jim's juniors were still chuckling when they reached the Chateau Cernay. They found that Monsieur Cernay had returned, and was very much perturbed by their absence. He greeted them with great relief when they came in, tired, and muddy, and snowy, but in great spirits.

"My dear boys—"

"We have news for you, mon pere!" cried Augustus, his eyes dancing. "We have been to find the ghosts of the ruined chateau."

"Mon fils—"

"And we have found them!" said Blake, with a grin.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What?"

"And they have turned out to be ze bank robbers of Paris!" exclaimed Cernay.

"Quoi?"

"It is true, mon pere—it is true!"

"You surely jest?" exclaimed M. Cernay, in amazement.

"Non, non, for we have recovered ze banknotes!"

"My son!"

"Look, then!"

And Cernay spread out roll on roll of Bank of France notes on the table before the astounded eyes of his father. M. Cernay gave a cry.

"Ah! I am amazed! It is a miracle! Tell me all!"

And they told the story of the night's adventure, M. Cernay drinking in every word with ejaculations of amazement.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, at last. "You are brave boys, but you should not go into such danger. You must not do so again. But I am glad—glad! This will save me from much loss—it will save some from ruin. Mon cher Merry, it was a lucky thought when my son invited you and your comrades to spend a Christmas holiday at the Chateau Cernay!"

It was a happy party in the Chateau Cernay after that—as, indeed, it had been before, but now the juniors had additional reasons for satisfaction. Monsieur Cernay telephoned news of the bank robbers to the police, but the two rascals got clear away. Their loot, however, was in safe hands, and it was returned to the bank whence it had been taken. Tom Merry & Co. spent many more pleasant days at the Chateau Cernay, and they parted at last with their French friends with equal regret on both sides.

And as Auguste Cernay stood on the platform, watching their train depart, he waved his hat and shouted:

"A merry Christmas!"

And with stentorian tones Tom Merry & Co. shouted back that time-honoured wish:

"A merry Christmas!"

And with what more fitting words could we close our story of Tom Merry's Christmas party?

THE END.

(Another splendid, complete tale of Tom Merry & Co. next Thursday, entitled "Tom Merry's Homecoming," by Martin Clifford. Order in advance. Price One Penny.)

Big Game.



BY
**LEWIS
HOCKLEY.**

CHAPTER 1. A Lion Hunt.

THE tracking of a wounded lion is a more serious, as well as a more exciting business than, say, the finding of a lost dog. Also, it is a deal more dangerous—but, then, it is the spice of danger that lends a zest to so many of a Britisher's pursuits. Moreover, the two hunters engaged in the following up of this particular lion were so accustomed to danger that they gave but scant thought to it. Danger to limb and life was part of their common daily existence, and they risked their health with as little apprehension as does a football-player risk the injury of bruised shins. It was habitual to them, and habit is second nature. A man may be nervous when he fires his first dynamite charge, and he may have expectations of appearing later on in a shower of fragments, but when he has set a light to a fuse a hundred times, he lights his hundred and first with as much equanimity as does an ordinary man his pipe.

Jack Raymond and Hugh Turner were no ordinary big game hunters, touring Africa to see how many lions, elephants, and hippopotami they could crowd into their list of victims. When they killed an animal—a dangerous one or otherwise—it was for a sound purpose. Either they were getting rid of a brute who had already done some damage, and would do more if it got the chance, or they killed to fill the stomachs of themselves and their men.

The lion they were engaged in tracking upon this occasion had done some damage. He had paid a visit the night before to their encampment, killed and walked off with one of their outspanned oxen, and then retired to cover to make his dinner and supper off the unfortunate brute.

Naturally, the occurrence had caused some disturbance. Sixpence, the Hottentot voorlooper—the man who walks alongside the leading pair of oxen—had awakened immediately he heard the dying bullock's bellow. He knew well enough what was happening, and, of course, he went to where his masters were sleeping. They, too, had been awakened, and were shoving cartridges into their rifles when Sixpence rushed up. They guessed what had taken place, and they followed the voorlooper to where the oxen were. But they made no attempt then to follow the hungry King of Beasts—they had no wish to commit virtual suicide. It is only the man who is tired of his life who would attempt to follow a lion under such circumstances, and neither Jack Raymond nor his chum had reached that hopeless stage.

The remainder of the night they passed sitting beside a fire kindled in the near vicinity of the frightened and trembling oxen. The same lion would not pay them a second visit they knew quite well enough—the brute had got sufficient to content his royal appetite for a while—but he might have a mate with him who might be desirous of emulating her consort's exploit; or, though this was not likely, since lions but very rarely indeed hunt in couples, there might be another lion afflicted with hunger.

There was no second alarm, but the next morning, after a hasty cup of coffee, the two Britishers left the camp to seek vengeance on the lingly raider. They had another object, besides vengeance—they intended remaining at their present encampment for two nights, and they were well enough acquainted with the habits of lions to be aware that the brute who had visited them, appreciating his supper, might make another attempt to get a meal of fresh trek-ox beef, and this they really could not afford. The loss of one ox was bad enough—to lose another quite out of the question, if such were to be prevented.

They found the spoor of the retreating lion readily enough. There was plenty of grass near the camp, and the brute's footprints were easily distinguishable. Also there was plainly shown the track where the ox had been dragged along. Mighty as is a lion's strength—his body is about equal to that of an ordinary donkey in mere size—it is not equal to picking up a thousand-pound bullock as a dog will lift and carry a rat. As a rule, the lion, having killed his prey—generally by a smashing blow on the head with his great paw—will take it by the neck, or throat, and march off with it at a fair pace, the hoofs and hindquarters trailing along the ground.

The trail found, the hunters followed it for half a mile or so, their rifles loaded and ready for action. Not that they expected any immediate use for their weapons, but the lion is a cunning brute, and it is never wise to take too much for granted.

Although the ground over which they passed might have told nothing to a novice, to these men—experts in the spooring of game of all kinds—it was like a printed book. They could have explained precisely where the lion had stopped for a moment to listen for any sounds of supposed pursuit, and they could have pointed out the exact spot where, his mighty muscles tiring slightly, he had halted for a brief rest.

That it was a male, they were quite sure; a certain peculiarity in the tracks, and the distance between them, was

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sufficient to denote as much to their trained eyes. By the same means, either would have judged the probable size of the maned marauder, and it would have been afterwards found their estimate was astonishingly correct.

Their half-mile tramp brought them to the neighbourhood of several extensive clumps of fairly high, exceedingly close and prickly bushes, and here they began to exercise a greater caution and watchfulness. This was a likely hiding-place for the lion. Here, having disposed of his supper, he might be expected to stretch his powerful limbs and indulge in a well-earned slumber. They separated, and their further progress was slow.

They had judged correctly. As they entered cautiously the bush-strewn ground, there suddenly arose from a clump thirty yards away the massive head of a grandly-maned lion. Cautious as had been their approach, it had not escaped his hearing. Steadfastly he watched them for a few moments, then he turned to be off—not hastily, but in a fashion befitting one of royal lineage.

At that moment a sharp roar broke the silence—it was the discharge of Hugh Turner's Express rifle, and with its intonation there mingled an angry roar of pain from the animal. Though hidden from Raymond so much that to him only the top of its noble head had been visible, something of the upper part of the chest and shoulders had been apparent to Turner, who was about twenty yards to the left, and a little in advance of his chum. It was not a first-class shot that was offered, but Turner took the chance. The lion disappeared immediately.

"Got him?" sung out Raymond to his partner.

"Think so," was the answer.

"Where?"

"In the chest, I think—but it was a bit sideways."

"Then we'll have to keep our eyes skinned, for he won't be dead, and one can't afford to play tricks with a wounded lion!"

"Not much!" Turner assented.

With forefingers crooked around the triggers of their rifles, in readiness for immediate shooting, the pair of hunters crept towards the dense clump, from where the animal had arisen. There was no assurance what the lion might have done. He might have simply dropped back into his lair in grim anticipation of the man who harmed him getting within reach of a spring, and then, hey for revenge!—or he might have crawled away, belly to ground, unseen, to some fresh cover, there to lick his wound, to lie perdu if might be, or to rise in his wrath if disturbed.

To find out which idea was in his brute-mind was ticklish and exacting work.

To either hand the hunters began to widen out, intending to make a circuit. This they did, and began to draw near where the lion had been. Nearer and nearer they came, until they were so close that Raymond was able to toss fairly into the bush a clod of earth and grass he had lugged up.

There was no response to the challenge—no sudden up-rearing of a giant head, no air-shaking roar. A second, and then a third and fourth missile followed, with like result. For a few seconds both waited, and then Jack Raymond—it was very much like balancing his life on a pin-point—slipped boldly up to the bushes, to find them empty. The lion had made off.

But there was sufficient proof that Turner's bullet had taken effect. There was blood in spots upon the spiny, tough, dark-green thorn leaves, and a great splash of dark-red moisture on the ground.

"Given him something he don't like, Jack!" observed Turner, in a satisfied voice.

"Something that'll make him jolly mad!" returned Raymond. "It won't do to get too close to him when we do locate him, or it may be a job for the coroner!"

"Well," observed Hugh suddenly, "if it happened to be me, I'd rather it was a coroner's job straight away, instead of being a cripple like poor Livingstone, with only one sound arm, or like that native chap we saw three weeks ago—the one who had his face crushed in, and the sight taken from both eyes. Days of such awful lingering pain, let alone weeks and months, I don't think I could put up with."

"No need to!" his partner answered briskly. "We're going to polish this chap off without any catastrophe at all."

"I hope so."

The trail of blood that had dripped from the lion's wound as it crawled away made his path of progress easy to follow, but the partners were taking no risks, and moved along with great caution. Hurry and slap-dash methods rarely pay when it comes to pursuing big game—particularly so when the said big game is badly wounded. Like the wounded Lord of Colonsay, in Sir Walter Scott's poem of the Bruce, a wounded lion or tiger is always anxious to get in one good return blow at his assailants; having done this, he probably dies more happy than he would be otherwise.

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Five yards, ten yards, twenty the hunters advanced, their eyes on all sides of them—eager to note the slightest movement of leaf or grass, or any sign betraying the wounded lion's whereabouts. Perhaps ten yards separated them. Then they halted to listen, but their keen ears caught not the ghost of a sound, and they went on.

Sixty paces they had covered, and then Turner pulled up dead, and pointed with his rifle-hand to a spot on ahead. He thought he had detected some movement, and Jack Raymond stared likewise at the indicated spot. Ten seconds passed, and then death leaped from the ground and clutched Hugh Turner.

From eight paces to his left hand, and slightly at the back of him, there rose, sudden as a streak of yellow light, the form of the wounded lion, without so much as a rustle to betray his oncoming. Through the air he leaped, his wide jaws agape, his tremendous forelegs extended, mane bristling, and, from the middle of a dark patch on his chest, a thin trickle of blood falling. Quickly—silently as Death himself—he came, and the first news of his coming was the shock as his forepaws alighted on Hugh Turner's shoulders.

Simultaneously, as Jack Raymond turned his head, a single, sharp cry escaped the stricken man as he went down with the lion on top of him, snarling and biting savagely at his victim. Not the ghost of a chance had the man.

Pivoting on his left foot, Jack Raymond raised his rifle. Horror at the awful fate come with such terrible swift suddenness to his friend did not deprive him of action. Yet even as he aimed there rose in his brain the thought that he could do no more than exact vengeance on the slayer. It was impossible Turner should not be dead or dying; and to the young man flashed the recollection of the words Turner had spoken not a quarter of an hour ago. Was it an omen that had come to him? Were not his words to be realised.

Raising his giant head from his victim, the lion faced Raymond. Motionless the creature stood, his fierce eyes steadfastly fixed on the hunter; and he growled softly to himself. A grand and terrible picture he presented—the incarnation of regal strength and regal wrath—the black mane forming a sable setting to the wide, muzzled face, from which the bared teeth showed threateningly. His forepaws were on Turner's inanimate body, but to Raymond he stood slightly diagonally.

Suddenly he raised his head in the beginning of a loud roar of challenge; but the sound never issued from the capacious throat, for at that moment—not ten seconds had elapsed since he had made his fatal spring—Raymond's heavy rifle thundered forth its discharge. The avenging Express bullet left the browned barrel. Directly in front of the shoulder it struck the brute, and pierced through the heart. Mute and nerveless, bereft of life by that momentary stunning shock, the lion dropped dead upon the body of his victim.

Dropping his rifle, Jack Raymond sprang forward. The lion's jaws were moving slightly, the mighty legs quivering, and the long tail was beating feebly upon the ground; but the hunter had no fear; he was assured that the brute was dead as thoroughly as if he had been lying still for a day. He knew that the bullet had done its work truly, and his thought was of his friend. Perhaps some life yet remained in the stricken, mangled body.

CHAPTER 2.

The Victim and the Avenger.

ACROSS the shoulders and head of Turner the lion had fallen, completely burying the unfortunate man.

Wreathing his strong fingers in the coarse mane, Raymond dragged the supine head backwards, and then, seizing one of the forelegs, he wrenched the body over sideways, and tumbled it aside, so that he might get at his partner.

To move the dead beast thus was no trifling feat of strength, for the lion is a tolerably weighty creature; but into Raymond's strong arm-muscles there seemed to be the strength and vitality of four men, and he shifted the inert carcase as easily as if it had been that of a dead cat.

Turner was lying face downwards, one arm bent beneath the body, and the other holding the rifle extended. His hat had fallen off.

"Heaven help him! He's gone!" muttered Raymond, as, with the strength of a Hercules and the gentleness of a nurse, he lifted the wretched man in his arms and laid him on his back, propping the torn head against the dead lion's tawny back.

Turner's eyes were closed, his face showing livid and grey beneath the bronze sun and wind had given to his fair skin. His lips were apart, and Raymond, kneeling beside him, swiftly detached his water-flask, and, wetting his fingers, moistened his lips. Then he poured a few drops of the liquid upon Turner's forehead.

Turner was not yet dead—Raymond had satisfied himself of

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thefore undoing the flask. The heart was still beating, and a slight and wavering pulse was noticeable.

It Raymond knew that his chum was dying. He had given a cursory examination of the terrible wounds, and he knew well enough that a man cannot survive such injuries as Turner had received. The back of his head had been injured by the lion, while the terrible stroke of the forepaw that had alighted on the shoulder had shattered the bones themselves.

For Hugh Turner there would be no to-morrow—he had lived his last day, and Raymond knew it. Also he knew how helpless he was to lessen the pain and agony of the last hours. A few simple remedies—chloroform and a few medicines—there were in the waggon, but the waggon was a mile and more away; and, having given instructions to the native boys to remain until their masters' return, they were not likely to move except their lives were endangered.

As well as water, Raymond carried a small flask of brandy. For a moment he paused, hesitating whether to administer it or not. Perhaps it was kinder not to awaken his dying pal to consciousness and the sensibility of pain. But he might have something to say—the pair had been good pals for the past two years—and at length Raymond's horror of permitting the man to pass away thus during insensibility conquered. Between the whitening lips he poured a tiny quantity of brandy, and also applied some to the forehead.

After a few applications of the spirit Turner opened his eyes—they were quite vacant, denoting that the brain had received a shock from which it had not yet recovered. Raymond administered more of the brandy, and then, tearing away fragments of his shirt, he applied them, rolled into pads, to those wounds from which the blood was issuing most freely.

Suddenly he was disturbed in this occupation by the sound of Turner's voice, weak and faint, but perfectly normal. The dying man's eyes were opened, and now they shone with the light of understanding.

"Don't trouble, Jack!" Turner was saying. "It's only waste of time, not a bit of use."

Desisting, Raymond bent over to his chum's face. He could not speak. There was nothing for him to say. Silently, he again let a few drops of brandy fall upon the pallid lips.

"Get him, old man?" Turner asked, after a pause. It was to the lion he was evidently referring, and Raymond nodded. To think that the man's first thought was of the brute that had stricken him down! Well, Hugh Turner had always been like that.

"I'm glad."

Though he spoke in a low and feeble voice, the man's words were perfectly distinct, and it was obvious he knew perfectly well what he was saying. It would be later that his mind would begin to wander.

"He got me first, though," Hugh went on. "Well, mustn't complain. All my own fault."

"But I dare say you'll be able to pull round again."

Jack knew it was a lie, even while he said it. He knew perfectly well that his chum's life was merely a question of hours, maybe minutes; but there is something, some curious fear for others, which tempts one to offer such consolation. But he was sorry the next minute that he should have spoken so. A queer, faint smile tried to form itself on Turner's well-shaped lips, and he looked straight into his friend's eyes.

"No, you don't, old man," he rejoined. "You've never told a lie yet—at least, I've never heard you tell one, so don't begin to tell 'em to me now."

Raymond's left hand sought for and found Turner's left, and he held it in silent compassion, and the expression of true and sincere friendship. The gentle pressure was returned. But Raymond could not yet bring himself to speak. He had no relations, he was in a strange land, and for three years this man had been his constant companion and chum.

A brave, true, honest, and faithful a friend as man ever had. A Britisher like himself, a good sportsman, hard as nails, and true as steel. And now he was to leave him. Ten minutes before he had been in full health and strength, all that he had been for three long years. And now he was dying. In a few hours he, Jack Raymond, would be alone.

No one had ever accused Jack Raymond of being "soft." There was no need for it; but at that moment, beside his dying pal, he felt that tears were not far off his eyes. He could not speak.

Another moistening of the lips, and Hugh went on:

"I'm going, Jack," he said. "Oh, I know it. Don't speak. I know all you'd like to say, old man, but there's no need. Let me talk, and I'll forget that my arm and head are hurting. But it won't be for long. How did we come to miss seeing the beggar. But, no, it wasn't your fault, it was mine. I ought to have spotted him. Is he a big 'un, 'uk?"

Raymond turned his head away for a moment before answering. Then he steered his face, and he kept his voice from trembling.

"One of the biggest I ever saw, lad," he replied.

"One shot? I didn't hear anything," queried Hugh, and the smile, as he spoke, was terrible in its piteousness in the eyes of his pal.

"Through the heart."

Hugh's eyes closed, and remained so a long time, and, sitting beside him, Raymond's mind travelled back over the past three years. Here, there, and everywhere about South Africa the pair had been since that day when he—Raymond—had come upon Turner lying out on the open ground, about half a mile away from a trail he was following somewhere to the north-west of the country, that had been ruled over by the Matabele—King Lo Bengula. An assegai stab in the chest, and a bad bruise on the forehead, evidence of a clout with a knobkerrie would have sent Hugh Turner to kingdom come but for the fortuitous straying of Raymond to where he lay.

He was evidently the victim of an attack by natives, but when Jack had pulled him round, doctored him, and nursed him back to health and strength, Turner would say nothing as to his injuries, save that he had been set upon and left for dead. He was several years older than Raymond, the latter did not consider he had any right to demand information from the man he had saved, and he was, moreover, in no wise curious.

The two had stuck together henceforth. Sometimes in towns, more often in the open country, they had sojourned, firm friends, true pals. They had wandered, and they had hunted; sometimes they had done a bit of trading with the natives.

Such confidences as had passed between them were slight, neither was curious about the other. There was no need to be. Each liked the other, and that was sufficient. Each was to the other a true pal, what more was required? Relation of their several family histories would not have brought them closer. Of Raymond's past he had told his chum somewhat, and Turner had informed Jack that he was the son of a missionary, who had gone into the interior of Africa, had disappeared, and never since had been heard of. Both were Englishmen. Raymond had heard of the school where his friend had been educated; Turner knew a man who had been a school chum of Raymond. Alike in many ways, quite dissimilar in others, two brothers could not have got on together better than they had done.

And now it had come to this!

A slight pressure on his captive hand brought back Jack's wandering attention.

"What is it, old man?" he asked, bending down his head to Turner's face.

"How much longer d'you think I'll live?" asked Hugh.

It was no time for prevarication or compassionate evasion, and had there been such in Raymond's mind the expression of anxiety and seriousness in Turner's blue eyes would have driven them hence.

"Three, four, or six, I do not know," Raymond replied. "I haven't been able to see how bad are the injuries. Why? Is there anything you'd like done?"

"Not six hours, I think," Turner said, as if he were actually considering the point. "Four, I should think, no more. And I guess I'll be delicious for the last half. It is always so. Don't you recollect that Basuto, Jack, of ours—Tempe, I mean—when the lion got him up in Mashonaland. Well, he was mad just before he died, and I reckon I'll be the same."

Jack nodded. The expectation was only too likely to be verified.

"So I'd better tell you now," went on Hugh, "while I am able to—to get out—"

A little more brandy was poured between his lips, and his waning strength kept to him. By standing the rifles together, the butts wide apart, Jack had contrived, by placing his own hat on the muzzles to create some sort of shade for the face of his dying pal. The burning African sun was now shining in all its vigour and fierceness; its glare in Turner's up-turned face would have been intolerable. Flies had gathered, and but for Raymond's effort would have settled upon him. These little attentions Turner had noted, and thanked his chum for.

"I'd better tell you now," he went on, the brandy having revived him. "Look inside my shirt, Jack!"

Very gently Raymond unfastened and turned back the garment, revealing the signs, telling of the injuries the bones beneath had sustained, and also a long and fine-linked chain of gold. To this was attached a small locket, also of gold. More than a hundred times had Jack noted this chain, but he had never asked concerning it of his chum. As has been

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said, Raymond was not curious by nature of such things. Finding the clasp, he unfastened the chain, and held it and its pendant up before his chum.

"Is this it, old man?" he asked.

"Yes. Open it!"

Raymond obeyed, and within the locket he found two tiny coloured portraits. One was of an intellectual, but somewhat severe and stern-faced, man, about five-and-thirty years of age, the other was of a woman apparently some fifteen years younger, blue-eyed, fair-haired, and of indescribably sweet and gentle expression.

"My mother and father—when they were married," whispered Turner.

Having glanced at them, Raymond was about to place the locket in his pal's right hand—the arm was useless, and could not be moved—when Turner stopped him.

"Look at it well first," he said. "Take note of it—my mother's picture, I mean, for I want you to bear it in mind. I want you to recollect it."

It was not a face to be easily forgotten, and after a few seconds' gazing, Raymond placed chain and locket where he had intended.

"Do you recollect it?" the dying man inquired.

"Yes, I do. It is a beautiful face."

"Would you know the face again if you were to see it—living?" Turner went on insistently.

"Certainly I should. If it did not change—"

"There is no change."

For a while Turner lay quiescent, the chain and locket between his nerveless fingers. His eyes were closed, and his breathing so slow and faint, Raymond, watching him anxiously, had to bend down to be sure he was breathing at all. Presently Turner's eyes opened.

"You're sure you'll not forget, Raymond?" he said.

"Quite. What is it, old man, you want me to do?"

"She was my mother, Raymond. My father and I did not get on together very well, but I'd have given my life for my mother. And yet I didn't do the thing she would have liked me to do. My father wanted me to be a missionary, and I refused. I couldn't. I'd have been a hypocrite if I'd taken up the work, and that I wouldn't be. Whatever I've done, I've kept clear of that. But as I wouldn't he declared he would, and so he came out here with my mother and sister. I've never spoken to you about her, have I, Jack? My sister Lillian, I mean?"

"No!" Raymond answered, for his chum had stopped, as if an answer were expected.

"Well, it's because of her I wanted you to look so carefully at the portrait of my mother. Lily's like her, the very image of her, I'll swear. It's nine years ago since I saw her last. She was sixteen then, but that she's now like what my mother is in the picture I'll bet any money. Bet! Ha, ha! That's good! D'you know, Jack, it was because I did bet a little I and my father had our first falling out."

Raymond looked at his chum with anxious interest. His voice was louder, not stronger, but thinner and more shrill. His eyes were sparkling, their dullness had given place to a hot brightness, and his cheeks had flushed. In the centre of them was burning a spot of colour.

"The delirium will be beginning," thought Jack, and he used half of what was left in his water-bottle to moisten Hugh's lips and forehead.

"My people came out here, I think I told you—eh, Jack?"

"Yes, you did."

"Yes, all three of 'em—father, mother, and Lily. I came, too, but not with them. I didn't want any missionarying or anything to do with it, and so I stayed in Johannesburg. I meant to make my fortune. The 'bulls' and 'bears' had me often; never thought a lion'd finish me, though. Ha, ha!"

"Well, that was the last I saw of any of 'em. They went up-country, and about two years afterwards I heard my father'd disappeared. Gone into the wilds, and been lost. Never heard of again. But where the others went—mother and Lily—I never did hear. No one knew."

"And I've been trying to find 'em ever since."

As the dying man spoke the last words, his voice fell away to the merest whisper; his eyes closed as if from sheer weariness, and he lay still.

CHAPTER 3.

The Promise.

WHEN Hugh Turner opened his eyes again, it was to find his chum still beside him, hatless, engaged in driving the flies from him, patient and untiring.

"Not gone yet, old man," he said feebly, smiling the ghost of a smile. "Think I had?"

Raymond shook his head. He had been wondering over what his chum had been saying, what he meant by his earnest desire Raymond should recollect the features depicted in the portrait within the locket. Was it merely a delirious man's crazy fancy, or was there some more serious import?"

"No, I mustn't go yet," Turner continued, "not before I've said what I want to say. Jack, old man, we've been good pals, haven't we? Always got on well together."

"Yes; I'm sorry we've got to part."

"So'm I. I like you, Jack. You're good all through. I am in your debt, I know. You saved my life when those In—, when those black bounders nearly laid me out three years ago. I was looking for those who were lost then. I owe you a lot. Will you let me owe you more?"

"What is it? Tell me what you want, and I'll do it, if it's to be done," Raymond replied.

"I knew you would. Good man, Jack. I want you to find my sister."

"Your sister!" Jack echoed, and he looked his surprise.

"Yes; Lily. She's alive. Somewhere on this continent she's alive and well. I know it. I've dreamed it night after night. I've seen her in my dreams, and I want you to find her and take her back to England. Heavens! To think of her living and dying here! That's why I want you to remember my mother's portrait. She gave me the locket when we parted for the last time. Lily's like my mother is there—the image of her I'll swear; and if you see a girl like that portrait you'll know she's my sister Lillian. I'd give you the locket, but I want you to bury it with me when I'm gone. Will you promise you'll search for her, and when you find her take her back to England? Promise?"

"I promise!" Jack Raymond said solemnly.

Turner's weak fingers clenched with sudden strength upon Raymond's hand as he placed it in his, and an expression of satisfaction came for a moment into the now dull eyes.

"I knew it. Good-night, old man! This pain is fearful."

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and go to sleep," Turner said wearily, and he closed his eyes.

He did not sleep. Within five minutes he was wide awake in the grip of delirium, which, apparently, he had kept back by sheer will power until he had been able to communicate his strange request. He threw himself about, causing the bleeding from his wounds to break out more profusely. He talked rapidly, shouted, sang, quarrelled with some imaginary person or persons, and each paroxysm left him weaker and weaker.

Half an hour after the delirium seized him his ravings suddenly ceased, and he dropped back limp and inert, and his eyes closed.

Five minutes after he was dead, and Raymond, having placed his hat over the face of the corpse, was hurrying back to the waggon to get help from the boys to bring it back for decent and proper burial.

It was midday when the dreary business of disposing of his poor chum's body was finished, and Raymond realised that he had had nothing to eat. He called for food. One of the natives brought him something, and he ate, not knowing what it was. Then he went and sat in the waggon to indulge in one of his occasional pipes, and a dismal reflection upon the sudden change in his existence. Hugh Turner was the only chum he had ever had, and now that he was gone—though this it was not easy to realise—Raymond felt that a large share of his life had gone likewise.

Though no more than three-and-twenty years of age, Jack Raymond had succeeded in getting a deal of living into his existence. When he was eighteen years of age, his father had died, leaving Jack not only an orphan, but also a pauper. The lad had always understood his parent to be rich, but this idea had received a rude shock. Money, indeed, his father had left, but also debts and liabilities amounting to so high a total that, when they were paid out of the estate, all that remained to the heir—he was the only child—was the sum of £30.

The Army had been Jack Raymond's destination, but such circumstances as he found himself in necessitated immediate abandonment of that idea. He would have to support himself—accept a situation. What should it be? Mr. Jeffries, one of the executors, and a wholesale glass merchant, offered the lad a stool in his office. Jack declined it with thanks. The clerkship would bring him in £52 a year, which would be sufficient to keep him from starvation, and there was hope of promotion.

But that sort of thing carried no appeal to Jack Raymond. He wanted to get out into the world. Life abroad was far more fascinating to him than life in London or England. He refused the clerkship, and also an offer of the berth of a commercial traveller. Canada, New Zealand, or Africa was his choice, and in the end he decided upon the last. Thither he went with £30 clear in his pocket, and a most particular ignorance of what lay before him, and what he meant to do.

But there was grit in Jack. He was one of the right sort. He had no dislike to work. On the contrary, he was willing to turn his hand to anything that came near. Three or four preliminary tumbles he had, and then he fell upon his feet, and he did not permit himself to be knocked down again.

First he got a berth at a flour store, driving waggons. Thence he was sent to take charge of a branch department in the Transvaal. Here he made a little money on his own account, and, giving up his berth, opened a store for himself somewhere out in the wilds of Mashonaland. While there, and doing well, he heard from an old hunter that there was money in trading direct with the natives, going about with waggon and oxen, buying skins, ivory, anything that was for sale. But better than money in it was the opportunity for indulgence in a free, open-air, and entirely unshackled existence, and this was, for Raymond, the greater incentive. He sold his store at a decent profit to two Germans, purchased a waggon, span of oxen, stores, and necessary articles for trade, and bidding good-bye to semi-civilisation started in his new occupation.

It was while on this trip—which he made a very profitable one—that he had come upon Hugh Turner as has been described. On Turner's recovery he had joined his deliverer in his life, and the three years had been spent wandering together, hunting, trading, earning money and good health, which is the best wealth, and penetrating into many parts of the country of which but scant knowledge existed.

Altogether, the three years had been a period of supreme, intense enjoyment, and Raymond had enjoyed himself. Now, however, all had ended; he might continue as before, but it would not be as it had been before. A sociable young man, Jack Raymond had come to appreciate Hugh Turner's company; to lose it seemed the loss also of much that made existence worth having.

For long Raymond sat brooding; his pipe went out, and

he did not relight it. Then to his memory came the recollection of the promise he had given his dead chum, and he gave himself a mental and physical shake. Here was something to live for—the redemption of his promise, the satisfying of the departed spirit of his chum, and the releasing of the captive girl, Lilian, his sister.

Jack was imaginative, and that the girl was a captive he could not but believe, if indeed, all that Turner had said was to be taken seriously, and one granted the preliminary supposition that the girl yet remained alive.

It was a big hypothesis. Where Mr. Turner had gone and taken wife and daughter with him in his missionary enterprise, Raymond had not heard. If Turner knew, he had not said. Mr. Turner himself had been murdered. It was no unreasonable supposition that the savages who had killed him had also killed the wife and daughter. African negroes are not notorious for their clemency.

Still, it was possible that the two women had been carried away alive, in which case, they would be slaves, and in a condition worse than death. As slaves, they might be sold or transferred to tribes living thousands of miles from the neighbourhood of those negroes who had killed the husband and father. To search for Lilian Turner seemed a trifle more hopeless occupation than hunting for a needle in a haystack. But, hopeless or not, he meant to do it.

Having thus decided, Jack Raymond left the waggon, becoming aware thus of a disturbance that had been going on for some time, but in his abstraction had not been noticed. A ludicrous sight met his eyes.

Lying on the ground on his back was Sixpence, the Hottentot voorlooper, and sitting astride him, perched comfortably on his chest, was Gama, the big Matabili whom Raymond had engaged to act as hunter and assist with the waggon and oxen when necessary. Both of them, before entering the waggon, he had despatched to skin the dead lion and bring back the hide.

The two were now engaged in violent dispute about something. Sixpence, the discomfort of having a man sitting on him notwithstanding, was keeping up a perfect stream of abuse and vilification of his evident conqueror in Dutch, his own language, broken Matabili, and shattered English.

By way of answer thereto, the brawny Matabili warrior was solemnly cracking the Hottentot on the head with his knobkerrie at regular intervals, his right arm working up and down like a piece of machinery. Unmindful of this tapping—which seemed to have about as much effect on his cast iron skull as a straw whip would have on a hippopotamus—Sixpence continued his unceasing flow of wicked words.

Not until his master had peremptorily ordered him to cease and get up, did the Matabili discontinue his hammering, or the Hottentot his violent objurgating.

"What's all this about?" demanded Raymond sternly.

Quarrels between the "boys" are of frequent occurrence, and unless they be satisfactorily settled by the white master there is no peace known on the march or in camp.

Both spoke at once.

"He's got it!" declared Gama succinctly.

"Me want it!" announced Sixpence.

"What? Got what?"

"The black baboon has stolen—" began the big man gravely, when the Hottentot's shrill voice interrupted him.

"Gama, the clumsy elephant with the squint eyes and the broken teeth, whose face—" began Sixpence, and would have continued in the truly Hottentot and decidedly uncompromising strain of his burly adversary, but his master interrupted him.

"What is it? What is the squabble about?" he cried impatiently.

"The little thief—"

"He who's—"

"He would take from me that which is mine—"

"The pig whose face is ugly as—"

"Silence! One at a time, I said! Gama, speak first!"

"N'Kose, I seek but to obtain that which is mine, because I am a man and a warrior, that which was never intended by the Great Chief above for such little rats—"

The "little rat" knew it was he who was meant, and the white man's prohibition notwithstanding, his vicious temper could not allow him to keep silent.

"Baas," he yelled, "the calf who was cast off by his own mother speaketh lies! It is mine! I have it, and he would take it from me! But I—"

Raymond's patience gave way; if not checked, this cross vituperation would go on for an hour, at the end of which he would be as wise as he was now. He resorted to stern measures. Catching the loose-tongued Hottentot by the ear, he threatened him with the loss of it if he did not hold his tongue.

"Now, Gama," he cried sharply, "answer me at once and

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without chatter! What is this you have quarrelled about?"

"The lion's heart, N'Kose."

"The what?"

"The heart of the dead lion that the N'Kose told us to bring the skin of," replied the Matabili.

"Well?"

"The heart is mine," the savage said tranquilly. "He, the"—Raymond held up one hand—"him took it, stole it from me!"

Raymond turned to the Hottentot.

"Why stole you the lion's heart, black thief?"

"Not thief, baas!" shouted the almost bursting voorlooper. "The heart is mine! I took it, I did not steal; but he, the big pig, he took it from me. It was me cut it from the body, baas. The heart is mine!"

"He took it, N'Kose," retorted Gama, "while I was not looking. The heart is for brave men. It is mine, and I—"

"Why want either of you the heart?" demanded the master, scarcely able to keep from laughter.

"Eat it, N'Kose, and then, being brave, I shall become beaver."

"Keep it, baas. Sell it for charm."

The judgment of a Solomon would have been required, and then one of the parties had been unsatisfied, and Jack Raymond was no Solomon. But he did know how to handle natives. Demanding the precious bone of contention—which the Hottentot fished out from some hiding-place beneath the waggon—he declared neither should have it until proof had been given that it was deserved.

"Gama," he said, "thou art brave enough without eating a lion's heart. Sixpence, you rascal, you have already more money than is good for you. Be off, the pair of you. Fight no more."

But that evening he called the belligerents to him separately. To Gama he gave the heart, and to the greedy Hottentot a silver copy of his own name.

CHAPTER 4.

Kose-Kose!

THREE months passed since the day when Jack Raymond laid his chum in his last resting-place, and during that time he had journeyed far. Where to begin his search for Hugh Turner's sister he did not know, but he had decided to make a beginning from the spot near Matabililand where he had found Turner himself.

Of the few persons whom he had met he had asked for news of the long-back disappearance of Hugh's father; but one had heard of it, but where the missionary had been living when his death took place the man did not know.

So Jack continued his trekking North-West into Rhodesia, and at last he reached the Victoria Falls, and here he learned something. He came upon a member of the Church Missionary Society, a man who had come out to take up the work that had cost Mr. Turner his life. He knew of the disappearance nine years ago, and he gave willingly such details as he could; but as to where Mr. Turner had been, there was no record, only a vague sort of belief that it was still further into the interior, possibly into the practically unexplored region that lies beyond the Kafue River.

With so much—or so little—to guide him, Jack Raymond continued his journey. The keeping of his promise had strengthened into a conviction that to find Lilian Turner was a sacred duty; did it take all his life he would not grudge it.

A month after crossing the Kafue, one afternoon he took down his Winchester rifle, filled the magazine and his cartridge-belt, and, having given Sixpence directions to meet him with the waggon at a certain point which he indicated, Raymond started off to shoot something for the pot. Deer were plentiful, a fat youngster fell to his rifle, and he made his way to the meeting-place.

But no waggon was there, and after waiting an hour anathematising his driver and voorlooper, Jack started back on the trail the waggon should have come. Half an hour's walking, and his keen eyes caught sight of the waggon. But it was not moving, the oxen were missing, and Jack concluded the rascally Sixpence had taken it into his head to camp at what he considered a more suitable spot.

"I'll warm his rascally hide for this when I do get him!" he growled viciously, and made for the waggon standing idly beside a dense growth of thorn and young forest trees.

But when he got nearer he saw something was amiss; the oxen were straying at their sweet will, there was no fire, he could hear no sound of voices. With apprehension seizing him, he hurried forward, and presently he came upon a startling sight.

Flat on his face, an assegai sticking out from between his broad shoulders, lay Gama. He was quite dead. Thirty yards beyond—by this time Raymond had his rifle ready

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for instant action, and his eyes were everywhere—looking for pence; someone's strength of arm had proved greater than the toughness of his skull, for the Hottentot also lay dead with a wound on the head.

And yet there was no sign of an enemy around. But Raymond was not so easily deceived. The murderers must be somewhere; having killed the servants, they would lie in wait for the master, since no waggon such as his ever belonged to a native. Perhaps—

But there was no time for speculation. His face to the cover at hand, wherein a thousand enemies might be concealed, Jack retreated to the waggon. It would serve him as some means of defence if it came to a fight, and that a fight for his life was imminent he had not the remotest doubt.

Nor could he have as to the outcome of it; he, a single man, with scores of adversaries, in a remote part of Africa, an unexplored region a thousand or more miles from civilisation, what hope could there be? None, was the logical answer; but a desperate defence, a dear disposal of his life was left to him; and that in the few seconds of his retreat, he decided upon.

By the waggon-wheel lay Peter, the driver, an assegai driven clean through his breast. Raymond noticed it as he leaped on to the disselboom of the waggon to reach the loose canvas covering of the fore part. Drawing it aside, he came face to face with half a score of blacks, sturdy, well-formed men, armed with assegais and round ox-hide shields painted white. They cried out at him, raising their weapons, yet none made the attempt to transfix him with their spears.

So completely taken by surprise was Raymond that for a few seconds he remained staring into the black, repulsive faces; then he stepped backward on to the disselboom—the long pole to which the wheels of the ox team are fastened—and then to the ground. But as his foot touched, as if by magic, there came out from the nearby cover at least fifty warriors, armed as were their fellows, who had hidden in the waggon.

The surprise was complete, resistance was impossible, and Raymond made no attempt to use his Winchester. Threatening as was the appearance of the savages, they went no further than threatening; the poised assegais remained in their hands. As for Raymond, he simply stared at them.

Then one of those in the waggon spoke, and, to his surprise, Jack was able to understand what he said. With the Zulu language he was acquainted, having spent nearly twelve months in Zululand, and the language of the speaker bore a very strong resemblance to the Zulu tongue. The man was calling upon him to surrender, promising him that no harm was intended to him if he yielded.

It was Hobson's choice, and Raymond could do no more than take it. Who the men were, to what tribe they belonged, he had not the remotest idea; but he did notice a distinct resemblance to the Zulu type; the men even wore the head-ring, that distinguishing feature of the men and warriors of the Zulu races. And when he replied to them in the Zulu tongue he was understood.

Half a dozen of the warriors remained near to the prisoner—as Raymond could not but consider himself—while the bulk of the men set to work to loot the waggon and round up the strayed trek oxen. In a very short space of time their work was finished, and, with Jack in the midst of them, the driven oxen in front, the whole party set off in a north-easterly direction, under the leadership of an elderly man, whose face was minus its nose, and whose shield bore some incomprehensible device painted in black.

To Jack it seemed as if he were treated with a certain deference by his captors, but when he spoke to them, they answered but briefly. He did learn, however, that his appearance in the country had been known several days before, that he had been followed and spied upon, and his absence from the waggon was seized upon as an opportunity for getting rid of his native servants, who, as he was told, were "no use."

Later he was to learn that the coming of a white god had been foretold by the witch-doctors of the tribe, and that those who had captured him were one of several bands sent out by the king to lay hands upon the divine visitor. To be the hosts—or gaolers—of a god was to be in possession of a distinct advantage.

The tribe was named the Matangas, ruled over by a king, rejoicing in the name of Kose-Kose, or Chief of Chiefs. Tradition said that the tribe was descended from a number of wealthy Zulus who had fled from Chaka's tyranny some years before about the same period that the foundation of the Amandebele, or Matabili, was laid in the same fashion in what is now known as Southern Rhodesia.

Certainly in face and figure the Matangas retained many characteristics, physical and social, of the Zulu race, many of their customs and habits were identical with those of the

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The Britisher was too quick, for, as the huge arm descended he struck with all his force at the brute's body.

as Raymond knew them. But it was not a very numerous tribe, mustering no more than five or six hundred fighting-men, which would give a total number of about two thousand five hundred individuals. Yet, judging by the grandiloquent cognomen of their king, their power was—or was thought to be—rather extensive.

All this, and a good deal more, Jack Raymond was not to learn until many days afterwards when at the chief town of encampment of the tribe, and whereto he arrived on the eighth day after his capture, the distance travelled each day having been about five-and-thirty miles, the oxen being left to follow in the charge of half a dozen men at the disposal to which they could be urged.

With much singing and banging of spears on shields the party entered the village of the Matangas. This was merely a collection of the ordinary beehive-shaped huts of the Kaffir tribes, but as they numbered some hundreds, the appearance was rather imposing. A high stockade of twelve-foot tree-trunks embedded in the ground, and strengthened by interlacing of boughs and creepers, surrounded the whole of the place, encircling an area of eight or nine acres of ground. Within stood the huts, neatly arranged in rows, with about a yard between each.

The streets were some forty feet wide, and radiating like the spokes of a giant wheel from a central square, an open space over half an acre in extent, and flanked on one side by one enormous hut, ten times larger than any of the others, and with half a dozen smaller ones adjoining it.

This hut, and those near it, was surrounded by a high fence or paling of barked tree-trunks half as high again as the tallest man, set so closely together it was impossible to get between them. A wide opening gave entrance to the street. This could be closed by a kind of gate of strong

timbers. It was open when the party entered the village, but in the opening stood four huge warriors as guards, each armed with spears, knobkerries, and shields, these last painted white.

Kose-Kose was evidently a man of prudence, and any individual who dared venture near the gate, except accompanied by one whom the king had sent to bring him, ran the risk of being speared or knocked on the head by one of the guards.

It was with a feeling of decided apprehension that Jack Raymond had noted on the side-posts and timbers of the entrance in the outer stockade various fleshless grinning skulls, and his apprehensions were not lightened when he came to the royal enclosure and found the palings thereof similarly adorned. In this case, however, the head had been more or less recently severed.

At the outer stockade, where as many as a score of armed soldiers were gathered, the party had been met by an ancient-looking and fantastically-clad personage whom Jack judged—and correctly—to be a Matanga equivalent of the Kaffir witch-doctor. He, contrary to the soldiers on guard, evinced not the slightest surprise at the sight of the white man; but, looking extremely pleased and satisfied with himself salaamed to the captive, and, after a short colloquy with the noseless leader of the party, put himself at the head of the procession.

And a procession it was. The soldiers had opened out widely, so that although Raymond was still enclosed by their files he was easily to be seen by the Matangas, old men, lads and maidens, women and children, who thronged the sides of the streets, standing outside their huts, and gazing in awestruck and dumb wonder at the first white man they had ever set eyes upon.

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Very slowly the witch doctor led the way as if the procession were some triumph of which he was the chief figure, and Raymond and the soldiers had to accommodate their pace to his. Up one street and down another it passed until the whole town had been paraded, and then the party entered the open space, and solemnly marched towards the royal enclosure.

In dead silence, save for the dull stamping of feet, the tour had been made, not a single audible word had left the onlookers; now, as the party came to a standstill, twenty paces from the entrance where stood the guards, looking like statues carved in marble, the leader raised his spear. Immediately from the throat of the soldiers burst in thunderous deep-chested notes the cry of "Beyete!" the royal salute permitted only to the reigning chief of the Zulu people. It was to Raymond another proof of the Zulu origin of the tribe.

As the shout crashed through the silence of the square, each man stamped the earth with his right foot, and struck a resounding blow with his assegai shaft on his round shield. Three times thundered forth the royal salute, accompanied by the shield striking, and then the warriors fell into an attitude of attention, erect and immobile.

Raymond looked about him with interested curiosity. He was beginning to think he must be regarded as some personage of importance if so much pomp and circumstance were necessary for his introduction to the king. Of fear he had none, being something of a fatalist and a philosopher; also he had a happy belief in himself. He could not believe any harm was intended, immediate at least; and if any were threatened, he relied upon his courage and native wit to pull him through.

For a few minutes the party waited, and then from the enclosure came a low, sing-song voice inquiring, as Jack had no difficulty in understanding, who was this who had come to disturb the slumbers of the Chief of Chiefs.

The witch doctor answered, and then demanded the sing-song voice again:

"Is he here?"

"That's me," thought Raymond to himself. "Evidently, I am expected."

"He is here, O Shaker of the Earth," rejoined the witch doctor.

"Who is here?"

"Him who hath come in the form of a man, but white as the elephant tooth in colour, even as Ilonga, the unworthy servant of the awful gods did foretell," answered the witch doctor.

"Judging by his voice," muttered Raymond to himself, "the unworthy Ilonga is pretty well-pleased with himself. My coming he seems to consider evidently as a feather in his own cap."

Later he learned that this Ilonga, and the man whom he had succeeded as the principal magic man and chief counsellor of the king, had foretold regularly every year the coming of a white god, and that once a year at periodical dates a party had been sent out to find the expected divinity and lead him to the town of the Matangas. How the men had explained away their previous failures of prophecy and had contrived to remain alive, was a matter that Raymond never had the opportunity to find out. But he did learn that Ilonga had held his exalted, if dangerous situation, for but a few months before his own coming, so he concluded that the predecessor had ultimately fallen a victim to the chief's annoyance at the successive error of his magician.

Nor did Raymond ever understand whether Ilonga had actual knowledge of his, Raymond's coming, or had drawn a bow at a venture, taking the risk of the fate that had probably at last come to his predecessor.

Meanwhile, Ilonga had been singing some gibberish to himself in a low voice when Jack Raymond was suddenly startled by observing every man around him, and those curious sightseers who had thronged to the outer edges of the open space, fall flat on their faces. The cause of this was the appearance at the doorway of the royal hut of a man whom Raymond had no hesitation in presuming to be the king himself.

And well did the king himself deserve the name the witch doctor had given him. A veritable Shaker of the Earth he was; the title was fairly applicable to him. Raymond had seen Dinizulu, the huge and corpulent chief of the Zulu nation, but Dinizulu, big as he was, was small compared with Kose-Kose.

Forward came the king to the gateway, and there he stood, quietly and contentedly surveying those who were doing him homage. Tremendous was he both in stature and bulk. Six-foot-six Raymond judged him to be, and he could not have weighed less than thirty stone. The very earth trembled as he passed over it. A magnificent specimen of hugely-formed manhood he must have been in the days before the accumulation of fat had come upon him; now he was as tremendously gross. His huge calves were bigger round

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than Raymond's thigh, and Raymond was a twen-ty man; his ponderous arms were as big, both upper and lower, as the white man's legs. One and a half times Sandow's chest measurement would not have enclosed his grossly fat and naked breast; and lower down his dimensions would have surpassed the compass of an ordinary but-terfly.

Yet despite his enormous weight the man moved forward without trouble. Behind him came four slaves bearing a enormous chair or stool, built with four legs, and of strength proportionate to the weight it had to sustain. And in the rear of the slaves was a woman, presumably the savage monarch's consort.

Between the recumbent figures of the sentinels the giant passed, the chair was brought forth and he sat down. His wife squatted on the ground at his feet—her business was to act as his royal footstool, and the slaves retired.

All this time the Shaker of the Earth had not cast a glance in the direction of Raymond, who stood leaning on his rifle—for none of his possessions had been touched by the captors—staring at the king in the frankest of curiosity, seemed not to see his visitor.

When comfortably seated the king clapped his hands, and abased subjects resumed the perpendicular, and from the hut nearest the royal enclosure trailed forth a dozen ancients, each wearing the keshla, or head ring. These were obviously the king's councillors of high rank, for they wore necklaces of lions' teeth; their other garments were a sort of fringed petticoat reaching from the loins to midway to the knee.

Silently they filed towards the king and squatted down on their heels behind the throne. And the Kose-Kose deigned to notice the witch doctor who, since his sitting down had been grovelling in front of him, beating his forehead on the dusty ground.

Raymond felt uncontrollable longing to indulge in a hearty laugh, but succeeded in restraining himself.

CHAPTER 5.

Jack Raymond's Pipe Causes Consternation.

SAVE that he wore broad armlets and anklets of ivory and that the petticoat around his middle was composed entirely of lions' tails, while a lion's skin lay from his ponderous shoulders, the king's appearance differed but little from that of his councillors. He, however, carried a long staff in his hand with an ivory handle, and shod with a sharp point also of ivory. With this, having refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff, he prodded Ilonga recumbent figure and bade him get up. The witch doctor obeyed, and squatting on his heels before the chief, awaited his pleasure.

"Dog, hast thou prophesied well and truly?" was Kose-Kose's opening remark; and Ilonga answered in the affirmative.

"Has the white god of whom thou didst speak been seen?"

"He has, O Shaker of Earth."

"And what of those who went forth to look for him? Have they returned?"

"They have, O Great Elephant."

"Evidently, hereabouts it is etiquette," thought Raymond.

"for the king to see nothing until it is pointed out to him."

Surely I'm big enough to see, and these other fellows ought to be sufficiently visible. He does not look to be blind of house."

And, in fact, Kose-Kose had exceedingly sharp eyes, of and

"Why, then, dog of dogs, are they not here?" he asked.

manded, prodding the witch doctor again.

"They stand before their lord's eyes. Is it not good to see my lord see them?"

Whereat the king who had been staring hard at the noiseless leader, and past him at the white man with whom

was in line, ever since he had issued from the hut at which he became aware of the soldiers' presence.

"Thou hast seen the god, noseless jackal?" This to the leader.

"Yes, Great Chief."

"Thou hast done as I commanded and led him hither even as this son of a dog prophesied he should come?"

"It is so."

"And where is he? If thou hast let him go away there is death for thee, thou who canst not smell," cried the king, who appeared to be gifted with a malicious humour.

"He has not left us, O Elephant, he is here."

"Where stands he?"

"Even before thine eyes, Mighty One," the soldier answered with perfect gravity.

Whereupon the Mighty One discovered Raymond.

For many minutes he gazed openly at this strange, coloured being, the denizen of another world, the god, the witch doctor had assured him, and the mountain savage was impressed. But a scowl sat on his forehead, little black eyes were strained, anxious, and evil in their

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Now that the prophecy had been realised he was greatly pleased. In his cunning brain was the thought that a god in his kingdom was not conducive to the continuance of his throne and that the rule as king; the presence of a divinity might be inconvenient if his subjects became possessed of the power that there was one in his kingdom with powers greater than his own. Were that idea to take root and gain ground, a good-bye to the privileges of kingship. It was by fear that his own authority was maintained; an individual who could show the people that they had greater reason to fear him more than the king was decidedly dangerous. For eight-and-twenty years had Kose-Kose ruled, and the prospect of being obliged to resign altogether, or even to abdicate, the delights of autocratic government was not a pleasing one.

Decidedly the Earth Shaker had no friendly feeling towards his heavenly guest, and the questions which his half-fabulous, half-fearful brain prompted were to the end of discovering what might be the intentions and powers of his visitor.

It was through Ilonga that the resulting conversation between him and Raymond was held, for with the Matangas Ilonga forbade that the king should hold direct communication with a god except through the medium of one who was confidently believed to be in league with the bad spirits. The conversation was something like this:

"Whence comest thou?" This from the king.

"From a country where all are even such as me," was Raymond's diplomatic answer.

"Are there many such as thou?"

"So many that if you were to start counting at daybreak and continued throughout the day until sunset you would not have numbered a hundredth part."

At this answer there leaped into the eyes of all who were within hearing an expression of amazement and consternation. No doubt it had not been thought so many gods existed. Even the king looked troubled, and his wife at his side heard the whisper, "It cannot be."

Ilonga, whose connection with spirits good, bad, and indifferent, as became his profession of witch doctor and magic man, and, therefore, had less awe of such beings than less civilized men, muttered to himself after transferring this remark, "He is a liar!" Ilonga was no fool; had he been so he would not have kept his life for a week.

"Wow!" So amazed were the councillors and the soldiers that an exclamation of astonishment was not to be held back.

The next question was long in coming, for the Chief of the tribe was in deep thought.

"By what name art thou known?" he at length inquired.

"John." The pronunciation of his full name Raymond thought would be too much for barbaric lips and tongue.

The next question was curious.

"How long has been in this land?"

"Thirty-six moons."

"And why hast thou come?"

"In search of another great spirit," Jack answered magnificently. Since they had taken him for a divinity he would indulge them in the idea.

A while the king pondered, then a cunning look passed over his fat face.

"It is a long time for one who is a god to be searching."

"Observed. 'Surely one who is a spirit should be able to feel all the earth at once and all those who are on it?'"

This was a direct question of the power presumed to belong to his divinity, and Raymond replied:

"I find what I seek when I choose. Where I look for it, there shall I find it. But this is a pleasant land, and I have dwelt awhile."

At which answer the king scowled. Perhaps the white man might take a fancy to the country over which he ruled.

"What is the thing thou hast in thy hand?" he inquired.

"This." And Raymond held up his rifle.

"Yes."

"It contains both thunder and lightning. It is that with which I slay those who would hurt me. And I slay without touching him whom I would kill."

At this answer soldiers and councillors opened their eyes with wonder; but upon the faces of the king and the witch doctor there was incredulity.

"We will talk again," commanded the king.

And with this he sent his obedient wife sprawling in the dust with a shove of his great foot and abruptly rose from his seat. A word he spoke to the nearest of his councillors, and then turned towards the entrance to his kraal.

"Bayeto!" came the thundering salute as he turned, and once more soldiers and leader prostrated themselves on the ground.

When the elephantine savage had disappeared all rose,

and he to whom the king had spoken came, not without hesitation, to Raymond and signed to him to follow.

"It is well," Jack answered solemnly.

But he did not go at once; he was minded to wait and let the people see something of his powers. To that end he took tobacco-pouch, pipe, and matchbox from his jacket-pocket, all looking on with wondering curiosity, and prepared to light up. When his pipe was going strongly, and all were watching with astonishment the smoke that issued from his mouth, he signified that he was ready.

"Wow! He eats and breathes forth smoke!" he heard one of the soldiers whisper in an awe-stricken voice as he followed the councillor.

His destination was a hut to the right of the royal enclosure, and stooping down, he crawled into the low, tunnel-like entrance. At the doorway four soldiers were stationed—an honour or a guard, it was not clear for which they were intended—and having ordered food to be brought to the divine guest the old Matanga left Jack Raymond to his own reflections.

And these were mixed; to be regarded as a divine being was all very well in its way, but it had its disadvantages. Moreover, Jack had not liked the expression in the little black eyes of the Shaker of the Earth. He might consider a divine being as a greater danger than profit; and, for the Zulu people have no great veneration or spiritual fear in them except when they see a very good material reason for it. Kose-Kose might feel inclined to take the possible risk of putting his guest out of the way.

Besides, even though no harm might be intended, Raymond had no desire to spend his existence as a deity, good or otherwise, in the town of the Matangas. He had other work to do. And if the Matangas, or their king, did come to look upon his being with them as an asset, an advantage to themselves, they would be little likely to stop short of force in their efforts to retain him amongst them.

However, sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. He had his weapons, he had his life; and, by Jove, but he was hungry! And there was food awaiting his attention.

Squatting down beside the three pots which had been left with him, Raymond examined the contents. One held milk, thick and curdled, which is to the mind of the South African savage the proper condition milk should be in when drunk. Another pot contained a stiff sort of porridge or gruel, by no means bad in smell, and in the third was meat, venison, cut into small cubes and stewed.

Without the slightest trouble Raymond contrived to make a very excellent meal; after which he smoked another pipe. Then he rolled himself in a thick ox-hide rug or blanket, the only article of furniture the hut contained, and slept the sleep of the man whose mind is at ease.

CHAPTER 6.

Feats of Strength!

THE whole of the remainder of that day and right through the night Jack slept as soundly as a top, nor did he awaken until the entry next morning long after sunrise of three boys, each bearing food pots. The meal disposed of, there came to the hut the elderly native who had escorted him thither the day before, and he gave Raymond to understand the king was anxious for a further conversation.

"Very good; I want to do some talking myself," the Britisher answered, in his own language, and he left the hut; but he did not forget to bring with him the Winchester repeating rifle and his belt full of cartridges.

Immediately Jack stood in the open square, he could see that preparations had evidently been made for a more formal and distinguished reception than that of the day before. On two sides of the square, drawn up in ranks three deep, was the whole of the available fighting strength of the Matangas. Each man was fully armed, and a truly imposing sight they presented, between four and five hundred men, all in the very prime of manhood. Although the average physique was not so good as that of the Zulus, all were men of good height, and sturdily built, bigger than the Basutos, but a trifle inferior to the warriors of Matabililand.

In front of the royal compound was already placed the massive chair of the king. Behind it squatted a number of women, probably the monarch's wives, while on either side were grouped the councillors. In a row by themselves sat a dozen individuals of both sexes, though it was not very easy to tell the men from the women, evidently of the same persuasion as the evil-looking Ilonga, who had a seat at one end.

All were profusely decked out with the weird paraphernalia of their business—air bladders, coloured rags, animals' teeth and claws. Old, wrinkled, withered, decrepit, and disgusting in appearance, their bright sparkling eyes

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denoted that there was plenty of life left still in them, and wickedness as well, for that matter.

Their gaze was anything but friendly when the white man was led towards a hollowed block of wood, a little in front of where the king's throne was set down, and with a guard of half a dozen fighting men around it. Upon this Jack was requested to seat himself, and he did so, his rifle between his knees. If his heart were beating anything faster than usual—and it had been great wonder were it not so—his face, serene and pleasant looking, gave no sign of any disturbing thoughts or fears. With dignity he took his seat, looking around him as unconcernedly as if he were sitting in the garden of an English house belonging to one of his friends.

Nerves were disagreeable things, for which Jack Raymond had never had any use. He had been the coolest and least easily disturbed lad in his school. Again and again in the cricket-field he had walked up to the wickets smiling and untroubled, whistling and swinging his bat, even though the innings were nearing its end, and a number of runs were required to save his side from defeat. He simply refused to be worried or flurried, and it was useless any adversary attempting to make him so. No matter what the circumstances, he kept his temper, and he kept his nerve. It was constitutional.

At the wickets, in the football-field, on the river, it was all alike. Things might be bad and getting worse, but Jack Raymond remained cool, collected, and full of hope. He was never beaten. "Never say die!" was a tradition he lived up to. In the darkest hour he kept his pecker up.

This sang-froid had stood him in good stead more than once even as a youth. On one occasion, when no more than sixteen years of age, he had got into a row with a bargee, of herculean proportions, and well-known pugilistic abilities. The bargee had threatened to make mincemeat of Jack and his companion, and had removed his jacket to do so. But Raymond was not in the least scared, though the man was big enough to thrash him, and eat him afterwards.

"Hold my blazer, Tommy," he had said coolly to his friend, "while I give this fellow the thrashing he deserves. I hope he's got some pals near at hand who'll carry him away. He'll need carrying before I've done with him."

Whereat the bargee was so taken aback that he reconsidered his decision, put on his coat again, and declined the intended combat.

Five years knocking about such as he had had in South Africa had not reduced Raymond's stock of confidence and self-control. He had been in more than one tight corner, and his grit had pulled him through. When he had faced the lion which had just felled his poor chum to the earth, his hand was as steady as if the fierce, wounded brute had been no more formidable than an angry puppy.

For a few minutes the crowd in the square stood expectant, and then Kose-Kose's immense form appeared at the entrance to the royal hut, whereupon there rose from five hundred throats the royal salute.

Majestically the Earth Shaker took his way to his throne, before which his obedient wife had laid herself to be used as a footstool as before, sat down, and raised one hand in beckoning of the head witch-doctor. Grovelling, the old rascal approached, squatted on his heels, and prepared to act as go-between.

And then followed question and answer as before. A hundred subjects the king touched, and at last Jack noted that the savage was approaching by devious ways some sort of discussion as to the powers of his godlike guest. Could he do this, that, and the other, the wily savage wanted to know; and question and answer were shouted by Ilonga in a voice loud enough for every individual in the square to hear each word. To depreciate the potency of this presumed god was obviously the king's intention, and he was desirous that his subjects should see and hear that this white being was inferior to himself.

Could he make rain? No; and the king smiled a superior smile. Could he ride through the air? No. Could he see into the earth? Did he know what was in the mind of a man? Could he speak with the ghosts of the departed? Could he even cause the ghosts of the dead to appear? Could he do a hundred and one things which Maskelyne, with all his conjuring apparatus, would have been stuck up to perform?

At first Raymond, when he began to see the drift of all this, was tempted to answer in the affirmative; but the first time he did so, he was flabbergasted by the demand that he should give proof of his possession of such power there and then. He declined, giving various reasons, and the cunning king smiled wickedly at the evasion. Yes, he would believe, and his warriors and councillors would believe, could they see with their own eyes the white god do those things which he claimed to do. But without such proof—well, the king politely intimated his scepticism.

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And what was worse, after each denial or evasive answer, Raymond was forced to give, the king made it a point to see into the earth, oh, my children?" the old man demanded.

And pat from every throat came the answer: "The Chief of Chiefs can do this thing."

And then to clinch matters the king would say: "Do not my children seem me to do so and so?"

And "We, the children of the mighty one, have seen you do this thing," was shouted by every soul in the square.

Jack began to feel uncomfortable; his credit was sinking, his importance being reduced every minute. And the king came down to concrete, material examples of royal prowess and power.

"The might of this great white one would seem to be but a little thing," he cried sneeringly. "Bring me his bundle of rods."

A slave stepped forward with a dozen thin sticks, tying to one end, all tied into a compact bundle with a strip of ox-hide. They were obviously the ordinary sort of warriors' assegais, a tough, hard, exceedingly strong, elastic wood, as Jack knew, having examined the spears of the warriors who had captured him.

"Will the white one break these in halves?" cried the king.

Then, without rising, he took the bundle in his hands, holding it at the ends, and laid it across his huge knees, and with a slow, steady movement of his giant arms snapped the bundle fairly in halves.

It was truly a mighty feat of strength, though Jack had no means of seeing whether the shafts had been prepared beforehand. But if not, it was a feat proportionate strength to the bulk of the performer, and one which Raymond, powerful as he was, could not expect to emulate.

"Will the white one try to break another bundle of rods?" the king, smiling, inquired through Ilonga, who the "wows" of wonder at his strength had died away.

A bundle, similar to that the king had handled, brought and carried to Raymond, but he, knowing futile would be his effort, and conscious what would be the effect of a palpable failure, waved it aside.

"Wow!" cried the Chief of Chiefs, in a tone of exasperation; surprise; and the witch doctor broke into a low laugh.

Then the king called for a bar of iron, a strip of metal which a spear-blade would be beaten, and with an effort of his enormous hands he snapped the metal as if it were a stick. A giant's strength had he as well as a giant's bulk, he was utilising it for the discomfiture of the being he chose to regard as a dangerous rival or enemy.

A similar iron bar was offered to the white man, but was refused. And again Ilonga, and this time the row of magic-makers, laughed.

Then a huge basket filled with great stones was carried into the square—and it required four men to carry it—placed in front of the king, who made offer to Raymond to lift it with his own unaided efforts. A huge weight was, and the slaves who brought it could barely walk, it, their legs bent and trembled beneath the weight, the muscles of their forearms stood out like ropes with strain.

Once again Raymond declined, and a titter ran over the lines of fighting men. And the king smiled, and rising from his seat, he took the basket in both hands, and lifted it from the ground as if it had been no more than a bundle of feathers. For several seconds he held it breast high, then he hurled it from him in the direction of the royal witch-doctors, and a great laugh broke from him as the wretches leaped out of the way of the rolling lumps of stone.

The king seated himself, and then he said:

"Can the great white one do nothing, then? Is it he hath lesser strength than I have?"

And very readily came the answer:

"Nay; I waste not my strength on such trifles as iron and stone. It is unworthy of one like myself, he should play with such toys. These be but the tricks of children, with which the gods have taught to do."

"Ha!" answered Kose-Kose. "Is it so? Maybe of those things which live the great white one hath power."

He beckoned to a soldier, and spoke to him, and the man went from out the square. A little while was he gone, and Jack wondered what fresh exhibition of the Colossus' astounding strength was in course of preparation.

When the soldier returned to the square, he drove before him an ox, a great dun brute, which Jack recognised as the leader of his own team. To before the king the brute was driven, and the soldier returned to the ranks, leaving the ox gazing half wondering, half frightened, at the man standing around.

Then said the king:

(Continued on Page 44.)

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"Since the white one will have naught to do with those things which have no life, will it please him to try his might on that which lives? We have other oxen; let the white one try if he may match my blow."

Standing upright, he approached the ox, facing it, his ponderous fist clenched. Then he raised his arm, and for an instant remained standing so, his eyes on the ox. Lifting his voice in a great shout, he brought his hand down fairly on the brute's forehead, between the eyes, and the crash of that terrible blow resounded through the square. And the ox, stunned, sunk headlong to the ground, and lay motionless at the feet of the striker. And all present gasped in wonder at the fearful blow.

Well pleased, the black Hercules sat down, and Ilonga asked of Raymond if another ox should be brought for him to try thereon in equal fashion his own strength of arm. But the white man declined. It was a feat that he might compass and yet might not, and he judged it more politic not to risk failure. And at his refusal a great and loud laugh broke from all in the square.

When it had died away, Raymond rose from his block of wood. The growing change in the minds of those who had witnessed their king's tremendous feats of strength was evident, and he thought it was now time for him to show something in return.

"Tell your chief I strike not with my hands, but with this," he cried to Ilonga, and indicated his rifle.

"Let us see!" was the derisive answer.

Without the slightest hurry or nervousness, Raymond picked up the bundle of spear-shafts he had declined trying his strength upon, cut the thong binding them, and drew out a rod. About as thick as the base of a man's thumb it might have been at one end, tapering off to the size of a little finger top at the other. Then he walked off in the direction of the open side of the square, and when he had gone fifty paces he halted, and stuck in the ground the rod thin end downwards.

Back he came to his starting point, the eyes of all upon him, and then he turned his back to the king and brought his rifle to the shoulder. It was a slight mark for a bullet even at fifty yards; but Raymond knew his powers of shooting to a nicety. He had a keen eye, steady hand, and iron nerves; both in England and in South Africa he would have passed as a first-class shot with either gun, rifle, or revolver. Sighting carefully he pulled the trigger.

At the resulting explosion a cry of alarm broke from all, and, but for the strong discipline that held them in check, the soldiers would have broken their ranks and fled, for to them gunpowder was a strange and unknown agent. The women yelped, and even Kose-Kose himself betrayed symptoms of terror. But when it was found no one was hurt quiet was restored; and all eyes were turned on the mark Jack had set up.

Fairly in the middle the assegai shaft was severed, and in blank amazement men looked from the shaft to the shooter and back again.

Bringing back the severed rod Raymond handed the pieces to Ilonga.

"Ask of your king if he can break a rod in twain at fifty paces distance from it," he cried.

"It is witchcraft," muttered Kose-Kose, as the halves were given to him; and "Witchcraft!" was muttered in the ranks of councillors and soldiers.

"What says your king?" demanded Jack, raising his voice; but Ilonga made no answer.

Presently the king spoke.

"Tell the white one," he said, "that even as he could do not as I have done to wood and iron and stones, so will not I waste my powers upon such things. Let it be shown further what he can do, but to some creature that lives."

Thereupon, Jack asked that one of many birds, somewhat of the size of pigeons, that were in cages hanging upon the outside of the huts, might be brought to him. One was brought, and holding it with one hand by the legs he slipped his forefinger to the trigger of the little rifle. Then he released the bird, which spread its wings and straightway mounted into the air. But before it had risen twenty yards Jack had brought the muzzle of his rifle upward and fired. And plainly, in the sight of all, the bird, shot through the head, suddenly turned and fell downwards, to fall a fluffy heap, at the shooter's feet.

"But that also can your king not do?" cried Jack.

And the Earth Shaker, whom the second explosion had affected far less than the first, did but laugh, though he was scowling terribly, and said a bird was but a small thing—smaller than an ox.

"Bring me then an ox, and I will let your king see that I may kill it as easily as the bird."

So an ox was led into the square—one of his own beasts it was—and at forty yards a bullet, striking fairly behind the shoulder, toppled it over dead as a doornail.

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"What says the Chief of Chien now?" asked tranquilly.

But the savage had nothing to say; these demonstrations of power which he could not himself equal, and caused him appear inferior in the eyes of his subjects to the white being brought anger to him. But with the anger there was a mingled fear. And with foot and staff point he vented his ill-humour on the woman crouched before him.

For long he sat in thought, then an idea came to him; he signed to Ilonga, who had been whispering with the subordinate magic workers.

"Tell the white one," said the king, "that his power is indeed great, but that greater proof of it will be given if he can kill a man even as he has done the ox."

He pointed to a soldier in the left-hand rank as the one to be experimented upon, and though a shade of fear came into the man's eyes he slipped immediately from his place. There was plain that Kose-Kose had instilled into his subjects the same discipline and blind obedience to his orders or wishes which Chaka enforced upon the Zulus during his long and terrible reign.

But when Jack Raymond heard what was required of him he refused flatly. On no consideration, not even though it were to save his own life, would he so murder a fellow human being. To kill in actual defence of his life was one thing; to murder in cold blood something totally different, and he gave a point blank refusal. It had been not without some qualms that he had shot the bullock. He read the expressions of sneering disbelief which came into the king's face, and the malicious glances of the witch doctors, and the dying awe of the awe he had inspired in the common men, but altered his resolution he would not.

CHAPTER 7.

The Fetishes of the Intongas.

ONCE more back in his hut, having eaten and drank, Raymond stretched himself out on the ox-hide to smoke and think. Whether he had bettered himself by the exhibition he had given of his powers was a moot point. One thing was quite certain, he had aroused the king's anger against himself. Whether he had inspired fear strong enough to keep the former passion in check, the crucial question. If so, well and good; he was safe from harm. If not, he could only consider the chance to be greatly depreciated.

Many plans he thought over, only to regret their length he came to a determination—to walk boldly out of town, and if attempt were made to detain him to fight his way out. It was simple, crude even, but he could think of nothing better.

Of what might come after he could not then trouble himself. A single white man, his sole possessions a rifle and a few cartridges, alone in an unknown country—his own experience told him how precarious such a condition would be. Yet he was resolved to risk it.

Having come to this conclusion he prepared to sleep. Sleep would not come, and in the darkness of the hut lay on his back, his eyes turned to the invisible roof. For long he remained thus until he became aware of a slight rustle at the entrance, and he sat up. Someone was at the doorway, a light gleamed in the darkness, and to his astonishment he saw that the visitor was none other than the Earth Shaker himself. In one hand he held a tiny lamp, an earthen saucer with a wick floating in fat, and in the other a shielded, broad-bladed assegai. Jack's first thought was that the savage monarch had come for the purpose of getting of his rival with his own royal hands.

But he was deceived. Kose-Kose had no belligerent intentions.

"O great white one, let us talk!" he said, and he squatted cross-legged, in front of Jack, the lamp on the floor between them.

The talk was, on the king's part, circumlocutory, but last the reason of his coming was made known to his hearer. He had come to make the white god an offer. He explained that the Matangas were in no need of the help or advantage which the presence of his divinity amongst them might be supposed to give. Ever since he had ruled, things had gone on well. The tribe had prospered and multiplied, was rich and powerful. Obviously, things were so well with the Matangas that they could not be improved upon. The white one was wasting his time there.

But not very far away, quite close at hand—in fact, only a two days journey—was another tribe, the Intongas, a wild race, who were under the influence of two strange gods whom they worshipped, though one had never yet been seen by any individual outside the tribe. But obviously they were gods, for the Intongas were the most wicked and depraved beings that ever existed. If the white one would

his attention to these he would be doing some good, and to speak, wasting his valuable time.

And he, Raymond, consent to go to them and turn them to their evil practices, Kose-Kose would willingly give him aid he could, even to the extent of lending his own fighting men for the purpose.

Such was the gist of the colossal savage's conversation, though not put into such words as above, as Jack smiled to himself. One thing was clear, Kose-Kose feared him to some extent, and was anxious to get rid of him, and feared him much he dreaded to make use of the assegai or other loved means for the removal of a rival.

At Jack temporised, and the more he seemed to hold off the more eager became the king. He volunteered information concerning the Intongas and their dual idols. One, he said, was huge, black, and terrible, a fearful monster, but he seemed to add, helpless before such powers as the white man possessed. The other—and here the Earth Shaker became mysterious and involved—he could say nothing definite about, but it was believed to be beautiful—a being similar to himself and a woman.

A woman! At this Jack Raymond pricked up his ears very considerably. The recollection of Hugh Turner's sister came to him. Was it possible? Could it be that his old chum might—that the girl was still living? Was this white god the Intongas she? It might be, incredible as was the idea. He questioned Kose-Kose further, but it was evident that he had told all he knew: more he could not say. What was outside Intongaland of the idols they worshipped was hearsay. Rumour, however, was persistent in its proclamation of their wonder and their power, and the veneration shown them by the people.

Could Jack go? He would, and thankfully, though he did not see it very clear to the troubled Earth Shaker that in so doing he was visiting the Intongas he was conferring on the king a very great favour. Yes, he would go and as soon as might

could he go at once? Kose-Kose asked eagerly. Would he leave the town during the night? A reliable man should do him the way. But Jack declined to thus slip away like a thief, possibly that the king should claim for his subjects credit of having disposed of the great white god. No, he would go in the daylight; all should see him go, should know he went, and to where he was going. And to this Kose-Kose perforce agreed.

Very for the purpose of scoring against the cunning, the king did Jack thus hold out. He was not to know until what advantage the knowledge of the Matanga tribe was to be to him.

Amazed by his successful diplomacy, the elephantine Earth Shaker kept his word. Having publicly explained the reason for his leaving, the great white being took leave of Matangas and their king the next morning, was escorted to the town by awed crowds, and furnished with two men to act as guides to the Intonga country.

During the three days they were travelling Raymond made attempts to get from his guides some further information concerning the supposed white woman who was one of the gods or idols worshipped by the Intongas. But the men would tell him nothing beyond what the Chief of Chiefs had already related, and Jack became convinced their ignorance was not merely a deception. And the uncertainty did but add to the Englishman's desire to reach the Intonga country and ascertain the truth of these strange rumours.

In the evening of the third day the guides intimated that they were going no further. They had approached, they said, within an hour's journey of the confines of the Intonga country, and they pointed out the direction thereto, but when on the way they refused to go. They seemed nervous, and when the white man pressed them, muttered something about the great black fetish. Jack threatened them, but all to no purpose; go further they would not, and they took the first opportunity to escape into the recesses of the dense forest land through which they were passing. Pursuit was hopeless, and Jack found himself alone.

The next morning Raymond took up the indicated path, and pressed on with lively imaginings of what he might discover when he reached his destination. Within him he felt a curious assurance that he had stumbled on the object of his long search, the lost sister of his dead friend to whom he had given his solemn promise that he would find her. What he could do if his presentiment turned out to be correct was a matter requiring thought. Were the girl a fetish amongst these people they would be little inclined to let her go.

He was engaged in these reflections when his foot caught in a trailing plant stretched across the line he was following and he fell heavily to the ground. At the same instant there came through the trees a dozen black men, of tall and athletic and ferocious aspect, painted with a sort of white clay, and armed with spears. Throwing themselves upon him—for he was a little stunned by the fall, and too greatly taken by surprise to be able to make a long or effective resistance—

they held him firmly while his hands and feet were securely bound with hide strips. Rifle, cartridge-belt, and revolver were quickly removed, and in less than ten minutes from his fall he was being hoisted on to the shoulders of two of his captors and rapidly conveyed in the same direction as he had been pursuing. Helpless, furious with himself for having been so easily overcome, Jack Raymond resigned himself to his fate.

In a very short while the party arrived at a wide clearing in the forest, or, rather, a break between two separate forests, for the space was two or three miles square in extent, a fertile-looking, undulating stretch of ground whereon stood a great number of huts of the favourite beehive pattern of architecture. In and near these were many men, women, and children who greeted the appearance of the party with cries of satisfaction, which changed to surprise when was noticed the colour of the captive they bore. Rapid question and answer followed, but without halting Raymond was carried into the centre of the village and towards a long, low building, not constructed as were the beehive dwellings, but of solid timbers, the walls ten or twelve inches in thickness. This was roofed with heavy timber; and entrance was given by a still more solid door that slid up and down in grooves something like the slide in an English farmer's poultry house.

Near this were lounging a dozen spear-armed natives of the same repulsive cast of countenance as those who bore Raymond, and these, too, uttered exclamations of astonishment when they beheld the white man. They talked rapidly and loudly together, but their language was altogether different from that of the Matangas or any other tribe with which Jack was acquainted, and he could not understand a word.

The door was raised, Jack was taken by head and feet and propelled through the opening, and there he was left. But not alone, for as his eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness and he turned his head this way and that he could make out half a dozen figures lying on the floor, whether male or female he could not tell.

For a while he lay still, and then, having satisfied himself that no exertion would break or even loosen the bonds confining his limbs, he rolled himself towards the nearest of his fellow prisoners, from whom, at intervals, came groans and whinings as if they were in mortal terror.

Jack spoke to them, and when they became aware of the presence of a fellow unfortunate one mumbled forth some reply. But the tongue was strange to Jack. He tried each of the half dozen native dialects with which he had acquaintance, but none appeared to be understood.

Decidedly, Jack Raymond had fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire, and an exceedingly hot one at that he feared it was likely to be. Why had he been taken prisoner? What was it they intended to do to him? One thing he had noticed was, that the Intongas who had seen him had not evinced that awe of him which the Matangas had felt. His white skin had provoked exclamations of surprise; but the fear usually felt by coloured races on their first view of a white man had been conspicuously absent in this case.

Suddenly the door was raised, letting a flood of light into the room and allowing Jack to see that each of his companions was made fast to a stout post fixed in the floor, while their legs were confined by a sort of gigantic stocks, formed by a huge tree-trunk being placed on top of another laid on the ground, and with grooves cut across its width. Within these grooves the legs of the prisoners were fixed. Their hands were free, but they were quite unable to escape. It was a really ingenious method of preventing one from getting away, it being impossible to draw the legs from between the two logs, the upper of which was movable.

Before Raymond had time to note more he was seized and dragged from the building, lifted like a sack of coals, and conveyed to a wide, open space, where several hundred natives were assembled, who greeted his advent with cries of wonder and delight. Here he was dumped down in front of a man who was presumably the chief. He wore a lion's skin around the waist of his otherwise practically nude body, and was as small and insignificant as the Matanga chief had been huge and imposing. Looking into his coal-black face, Jack almost shuddered. Never had he seen a human countenance so positively diabolical. Cruelty and wickedness were written in every lineament.

For a while the chief surveyed his prisoner gloatingly. He bade two of the natives lift the white man upright, and then he came from off his seat, a gruesome piece of furniture, since it appeared to be constructed of bones, and passed his hands over Jack's body with an air of gleeful appreciation. He pawed the white man's limbs, feeling the strong and finely-developed muscles; spread his short arms across Jack's wide body—standing on tip-toe to reach him—and then he stepped back.

Something he shouted aloud in a wonderfully shrill and penetrating voice, and, whatever it was he said, it caused the hearers to laugh exuberantly and clap their hands together. Again he spoke, and they roared approvingly.

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shouting some word which Jack did not understand, but which, to his ears, had a similar sound to the mumbling repetitions of the prisoners in the wooden hut.

While this was going on Jack had been looking about, and the first thing that caught his eyes was a square hut similarly built to the prison hut, and adjoining it an open enclosure built of thick and strong wooden stakes. These were set about a foot apart, sharpened to a needle point at the top, not less than eight feet in height, and unconnected by cross pieces or interlacings of any kind.

This hut and the enclosure—which was joined to the hut, which thus formed one section of the circle—rivetted Jack's gaze. He could not understand what it represented. He noticed that in the centre of the enclosure was a taller and stronger post than any, and to this was fastened an immensely thick iron chain. It trailed along the ground, and the free end vanished within the mouth of an opening about three feet square in the side of the hut.

The sight of the structure positively fascinated Jack. He had seen some queer things in Africa—things beyond ordinary imagination—and it was little that could surprise him; yet this hut and enclosure did. It occurred to him that it might be connected with the idols, the living fetishes that the Intongas were said to worship, but granting this gave no elucidation of the mystery.

So engrossed was he that he did not heed the chief, who had resettled himself, and was speaking to him. All at once the evil-looking ruffian sprang from his seat and struck Raymond, thus compelling his attention. Then he repeated his words. To these Jack replied in the Matanga tongue, upon hearing which the chief made a sign to one of the score or more elderly natives who stood around him, and the man came forward. He was acquainted with the Matanga tongue apparently, and he prepared to translate.

To the question, "What are you?" Jack, who had remained upright, replied:

"In the country of those whose tongue I speak I am worshipped as a god."

This was translated, and the chief burst into a fit of laughter. Something he shouted in a loud voice, and the gaping crowd laughed also. Then he said something more—again Jack caught the word that had attracted his hearing before—and the savages laughed again, clapping their hands and stamping their feet with amusement, and repeating this word.

"Tell him," commanded the chief, turning to the interpreter, "that we, too, have a god—a great, black, fierce god. He"—and he pointed at Raymond—"shall see him in two days' time, and it will amuse us to see which is the stronger."

This was repeated to Jack, the while the savages laughed and clapped their hands in noisy appreciation.

Jack would have spoken further, but the interpreter had retired, and the Intongas, their chief having also gone, crowded round, viewing the white man with the appreciative eyes of persons inspecting some new and surprising animal, their ill-looking faces twisted into savage grins the while they jabbered with great animation. They pointed at Jack and then to the enclosure with the post in its centre, laughing horribly, wherefore Jack concluded that the place must be the temple, or whatever they called it, of their god; but what meant the spiked palisading, the stake, and the iron chain he could not conceive.

He affected indifference, looking over the heads of the crowd at the huts dotted about near clumps of trees, and particularly at one larger than the rest, which was surrounded by a strong paling, very similar to that around the royal dwelling of the Earth Shaker of the Matangas. He concluded it to be the residence of the wicked-looking little brute who had seemed to be ruler of the Intongas.

When it was thought he had been on show long enough he was picked up and carried back to his prison, where the stocks-like arrangement being opened, his legs were untied and inserted, and himself firmly fastened to a stake alongside a negro, who appeared half-dead with fear. Then his hands were loosed, and he, together with the other prisoners, was given a meal of rice and some hard, reddish-looking, cooked meat. Then the gaolers retired, and the prisoners were left to themselves.

CHAPTER 8.

Jack Raymond's Remarkable Achievement.

THERE are some persons so gifted who can eat and sleep even though they know their lives are in danger, others cannot. To the former type Jack Raymond belonged. The apprehension that his life wasn't worth a month's purchase did not rob him of his appetite, and he ate heartily, a contrast to the others, who refused to touch the food.

The meal over, Jack tried again to make himself understood by the negroes, but they seemed too far sunk in fear

and wretchedness to heed him, but when he repeated nearly as he could the word used by the chief which seemed to cause such intense interest to the Intongas, awoke from their lethargy, and broke into words, but they said Jack could not make out.

Raymond slept soundly that night, though once he was awakened by a series of most curious sounds outside prison—a kind of deep-chested roars, seemingly denoting impatience or irritation, but they were sounds which, though obviously animal, were foreign to him.

The next morning the gaolers, instead of bringing food, entered to take away one of the negroes. They seemed in highest of spirits, but the wretched prisoner shrieked howled as if he knew he were going to some fearful doom, and once more that curious booming, roaring sound came to Jack's ears, and he was excited to the very utmost by it, wondering as to what it meant.

Soon there arose from outside sounds of a great cry, delighted beyond all measure. Shouts of laughter, roars of approbation, and howls of delight rang in the ears of the prisoners, and at each repetition the terror of the white men's companions increased.

After an interval the gaolers entered again. One carried food, but it was for Raymond alone; the rest removed one of the blacks. Again was to be heard the vociferous sound from the satisfied crowd; again came the deep bass booming and roaring which puzzled Raymond so greatly. What it might be he could not conceive; he had never in his life heard any sound quite like it.

Now, had it been the roar of a lion he could have understood. He would have comprehended the abject terror of black prisoners, the stout hut, with its strong enclosure joining, and the mad yelling of the crowd gathered outside which arose shortly after each removal of a prisoner. He would have understood that.

Ugh! The terrible thought brought almost a chill to his own stout heart, and caused him to wonder fearfully what his own turn should come. He knew something of the very high incredible cruelty and ferocity of the barbaric blacks of Africa, and the thought was not in advance of what he is capable. Besides, the civilised Romans threw prisoners to the lions, and turned men, women, and children into an arena to face hungry, savage beasts.

But this strange sound was like that of no wild creature that came within Jack Raymond's range of experience.

One by one, at intervals of half an hour or so, Jack's companions were taken from the prison. The gaolers, as they removed the last wretched object, already half dead with fear, pointed and shouted at Jack himself, laughing while in cruel glee.

A healthy body and an easy conscience caused Jack to sleep soundly that night, the misgivings he felt for what tomorrow might bring forth notwithstanding, and he awoke strong and refreshed. This was the day when he had been promised he should see the god of the Intongas, and he felt great curiosity to that end.

He had not long to wait. His gaolers entered, and, having secured his arms, they released his legs from the stocks and cut the fastening around his waist. Outside the prison was gripped, two men taking each one arm, and urged the open space where had sat the chief two days earlier. He could hear the dull roars which had so stirred him so plainly, and they appeared to come from the hut and enclosure, around which were gathered the whole of the Intongas, women as well as men, seated, squatted, or standing in a huge semi-circle, about twelve feet distant from the palisading. They could see easily into the enclosure, and he heard it Jack could see likewise.

And then he understood. He realised how his fellow-prisoners had died the day before—he realised to what a death he himself was doomed. He understood all as to that great black devil worshipped by the Intongas, and he comprehended the infernal treachery and cunning of the man who had caused him to leave his country for Intongaland.

Within the enclosure, squatting at the foot of the pole which it was fastened by the chain Jack had noticed, sat an enormous gorilla, the largest, strongest, and most ferocious of the ape tribe, the most savage of all wild creatures, that most feared, even more so than the lion, by hunters, was beating its enormous hairy chest with its clenched fist, thus producing the dull, booming sound Jack had heard every now and then it would throw back its horrible-looking head and give utterance to a fierce roar of irritation, impatience, as if, unsatisfied by its recent victims, it desired more.

For the first time in his life Jack Raymond's nerve failed him—as well it might. He knew what was coming, and his heart turned sick. He forgot everything—forgot the devouring curiosity as to the identity of the white fetish or of the Intongas, everything but the awful brute within

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and the death awaiting himself. It was not that he feared death, but death in such awful fashion! Ugh! Calling with delight, the Intongas viewed his approach, they laughed, and it was that which aroused Raymond, and transformed his fear into rage. If die he must, he would not with the mockery of these inhuman wretches at his terror in his ears.

Suddenly—he was brought to within a few feet of where a strong gate in the palisading, which a waiting savage stood ready to open and close again once he were inside—stood still; his heart swelled, and he nerved himself for a last effort, his muscles straining and expanding. He made a fierce movement with his legs, and two of those who had him went sprawling; he wrenched at his bonds, and the thoughts snapped, leaving his arms free. The other two were shaken from their hold, and, seizing each in one hand the back of the neck, he dashed their heads together. So great the rage inspiring him, so terrible the power suddenly to him, the skulls of the men cracked, and they dropped dead and lifeless.

But the effort availed him little. Ere he could make any movement a dozen of the Intongas leaped upon him, the waiting savage threw open the door, and he was pushed and hustled through the opening. Immediately the door closed behind him it was made fast, and he was alone in enclosure with the man-killing black god of the Intongas. For a while the gorilla remained still, its fierce, sunken eyes fixed on its prospective victim. It had ceased drumming and singing, and apparently the sight of the white man—the first he had ever beheld—caused it surprise, though it is a well-known fact that the mere appearance of a black individual

arouses this savage monster of the African forests to a condition almost of frenzy.

And Jack eyed his enemy just as closely. All fear and nervousness had left him; in the actual presence of death he became cool and collected. He remained quite still, expecting that a movement on his part would cause the terrible brute to advance. The chain by which it was fastened to the stake, so he judged, was just long enough to enable the gorilla to reach to the palisading, and so circumvent any unhappy wretch sacrificed to him by the barbarous savages from escaping death by climbing the poles or forcing himself between. He noted the enormous girth of the tremendous body, covered, as were all its limbs, with long, coarse, black hair, the immense size and power of the tremendous arms and legs, the fearful expression of the savage face, anything approaching which in horror the most imaginative artist never limned, and the stains of blood on the great hands and thick forearms.

So the antagonists, human and animal, remained for what seemed to the man many minutes, but was probably but a few seconds. And the savages without the circle of posts, silent, their heads thrust forward, their eyes glowing in ferocious anticipation, looked on.

All at once there arose a commotion at one part of the semicircle of savages. Cries of wonder and alarm broke the silence of the open space, and Jack, removing his eyes for a single moment from the chained beast, saw flash through the ring of black a white figure—the figure of a white woman.

That was all. He had no time to see more, for at that same moment the gorilla moved its tremendous bulk, and, tired of inaction, its curiosity satisfied, rose to its feet. But

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thought travels quicker than a living body may move, and to Jack Raymond came the knowledge, ere yet his eyes went swiftly back to his executioner, that this woman was she whom he had sought; the sister of his dead friend, whom he had given his word he would find; the other fetish of the savage Intongas, and the mysterious being whom no one had ever seen.

Well, she had come in time to see him die. But there was no time for further thought even, for the gorilla was on the move, heedless of what might be going on without the enclosure, and seeing only one more victim to slay. Raised on its hind limbs, the monster could have stood no less than six feet in height, endowed with a muscular strength beside which even that of the giant Kose-Kose would have seemed slight. And against such an antagonist Jack Raymond had but his bare hands to defend himself. No wonder the wretched negroes who had been its earlier victims had been half-dead with fear!

Beating its capacious chest, and sitting down every two or three paces to roar, the monster, its lips drawn back from its powerful white teeth in a fiendish grin, and its bloodshot eyes glowering, advanced towards Raymond, from whom it was separated by perhaps thirty feet—twelve yards at the most. One blow with its mighty hand, did it fall aright, would finish the contest.

Contest! It was impossible there could be aught deserving the word. The human being was helpless; his killing sheer butchery.

Some of the savages were looking at the enclosure; others were not, their attention diverted to the commotion the coming of the white figure had caused—and Raymond's eyes were fixed intently upon the gorilla. Nor did he fly as the brute advanced—on the contrary, he slipped two paces nearer, as if he actually meant fighting.

On came the fiendish animal, and, when near enough, it lifted its right hand and struck a blow which would have stricken the man down dead, or dying, had it gone home. But it never fell. The Britisher was too quick. As the arm descended he stepped aside, dexterously as a skilled boxer, and with all his force he struck with his clenched fist at the brute's body. Just below the edge of the lowest ribs, and somewhat towards the centre of the punch, his quick eyes had seen a kind of excrescence—a swelling as big as a man's two fists—and on this his blow fell. Immediately he leaped backward, to escape a smashing stroke from the creature's left hand, and, darting past, reached the other side of the ring.

And then—But Jack's eyes were surely deceiving him! It seemed as though the monstrous brute were staggering; that it dropped forward on its hands; that it was moaning, as if in pain! But, no; so it was! The brute was rising again; it was staggering towards him; it was upon him again; again was its arm lifted to strike, and a second time, his clarity of brain dimmed, did he avoid the stroke, and almost automatically did his clenched fist, with all his force behind it, alight upon the tumorous swelling. It could not be real! Surely he must be dreaming! The gorilla seemed to be falling backwards!

And then a stunning roar broke from the savages, and Jack Raymond's brain cleared, and he knew that which his eyes had beheld was indeed truth. On its back, a stream of blood issuing between its exposed fangs, the gorilla lay motionless. It was dead.*

For a moment the man stood quite still. Then he raised his voice in a mighty shout—a true British hurrah, such as this part of Africa had never heard before—and running to the palisade, he climbed a post as actively as a cat. Dropping unhurt, he ran to where he could see the white-robed figure of the woman standing before the chief and his counsellors, her arms raised in denunciation.

No one tried to stop him. On his way, he snatched a broad-bladed spear from a native, and as he dashed to the side of the white woman the chief and those near him, uttering a scream of terror, fell backwards.

CHAPTER 9.

Conclusion.

WHAT followed upon the extraordinary conclusion of Raymond's successful combat with the gorilla must be told in a few words. Almost paralysed with fear at what had befallen; recognising the superiority of its slayer over the infernal deity which they had worshipped—jointly with the white woman—and to which they had offered such ghastly sacrifices, the Intongas did not attempt to raise a finger to stay the progress of Raymond and the girl he had rescued from her long captivity.

There, and at once, he and Lilian Turner had left the village. But the Intongas, either animated by revenge, or fearful of losing their divinity and meaning to recover her

by force, pursued them even to the boundary of the Matanga country—for Jack recollected the path by which he had come from the one village to the other—and beyond.

But here the pursuers were met by the warriors of the Kose, over whom Jack exercised all the powers proper to a now admitted and increased divinity. Truly, argued the elephantine savage, this great white one must be indeed mighty and most powerful god if he were able not only to singlehanded the black fetish of the Intongas—whereof wily Matanga had more knowledge than he had admitted—Raymond—but had carried away the mysterious white idol well!

The two tribes met in fierce battle, and the Intongas, signally vanquished—after which Kose-Kose obediently submitted to Jack's command that he should furnish protection, and food for himself and his companion until they reached the limits of civilisation.

This he did willingly enough, for, though admitting the power of this white being, the savage monarch was only eager to see the back of him—for he had fears of his supremacy being threatened. All that he could do to expedite his removal from the Matanga country he did. And when Jack may have thought of the character of the Earth Spirit he judged it prudent to say nothing. Evil as his ways might be, he could continue in them so far as Jack was concerned, provided he aided in his own escape and that of Lilian Turner.

It was while on the return from Matangaland that Jack heard the girl's marvellous story. It was not the Intongas who had killed her father and mother, but another tribe, whom the Intongas had taken her by force. They had never seen a white woman before, and they took her to be a god. As such they had worshipped her, keeping her jealously hidden in a big hut in their village—the one with palisading round it—and never permitting her to leave the enclosure.

There she had existed for eight years—an awful existence though the savages were in the greatest awe of her, and had not suffered the slightest harm. Thus secluded, she had not the slightest knowledge of the terrible sacrifices made to the other fetish of the tribe, though she had been aware of the gorilla's existence.

It was through one of the maidens deputed to wait on her that she had heard of the offering of the white man to the ghastly black fetish, and, despite all attempts to restrain her, she had fled from her temple, or house, intent upon proving it. Probably it was from fear of her using her prescient power to put an end to the terrible sacrifices that the Intongas had kept her ignorant of them.

And then Jack told her of himself, of his friendship for her brother, of the latter's death, and his own promise to the man.

"Had I not known from your lips who you are, I should have recognised you," he said.

"But how?" asked the girl, surprised at the statement.

"By the locket of your mother your brother showed me," he answered. "It was a face I could not have forgotten. And you are the image of her. I swore to find you, and that I have, I have, I hope, found even more than my first lost sister."

And as after events proved, he had.

THE END.

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Two young scouts are lauded from the Condor, Carfax's aeroplane, to spy out the land, when they are discovered, and are taken by a company of German infantry.

When pressed, they jump into a captive balloon, whose ropes Stephen had previously cut, and endeavour to escape by means.

(Now go on with the story.)

All Adrift.

A pile of sandbags paved the bottom of the car. With the haste the young scout toppled four of the largest out, the balloon sprang upwards as if shot from a gun, amid a spatter of rifle-bullets that came ripping through the net and the gas-bag.

The shouts of the Prussian soldiers and the crack of the rifles became rapidly fainter as the balloon went lurching spinning upwards, relieved of half her weight.

As the bullets sang round and through her with vicious intent, drilling the wickerwork of the car and smacking the gas-bag overhead.

He ploughed Stephen's forearm, and numbed it; while the other clipped through the peak of Sam's cap when he tried for an instant over the side.

The packed sandbags that still lined the bottom of the car deflected the bullets that came from below, for nothing makes

a better protection against lead. But the balloon ceased her upward journey, and began to waver and sag again.

"Out with the rest of 'em—quick!" exclaimed Sam, setting the example, and seizing the sandbags.

The balloon was now so high, and driving so fast before the wind that few of the shots came very near the car.

"But they're the only protection we've got!" objected Stephen, whose arm was bleeding copiously. "We shall get riddled without them."

"We shall get riddled if those beggars down there catch us!" rejoined Sam, heaving the bags over as fast as he could. "The gas-bag's pierced, an' it's leakin'. She's beginnin' to drop again."

They worked with a will to get the remaining bags out, though Stephen was not able to give very much help. It lightened the balloon, and she recovered for the time being, rising once more, while scattered shots followed her all the way.

"The usual thing is to empty out the sand," said Sam viciously, as he heaved the last bag over; "but we'll chuck these over whole, an' I hope they'll break the fat neck of one of those louts down there. Hallo, you're hit! Badly, old boy? Let's—"

"It's only a deep graze, I think," said Stephen, who had slipped out of his jacket. "Thought my arm was gone at first. Bleeds like the deuce. I've some lint in my pocket—there. Just tie it up for me, will you?"

The wound was only a light flesh one, and not as bad as it looked. Sam bound it quickly and skilfully with the roll of lint—the boys never marched without one apiece—and Stephen was able to put on his jacket again.

"Uncommon cheap get off, anyhow," he said. "I never thought we were goin' to pull out of that alive."

"I hardly knew what I was doin' when I grabbed the car," said Sam. "It nearly knocked me over. An' when that chap pulled out his pistol, I fired slap in his face. Well, it's a rare lucky lift out of trouble, an' it'll never happen to us again. We ought to have been more careful."

"You grumbled at me for wastin' time cuttin' the balloon's rope through," said Stephen; "but wasn't I right? If she hadn't broken adrift we should be cold meat by this time."

"We aren't clear of that yet, by long chalks," returned Sam. "The balloon can't possibly last long; the gas must

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be escapin' like anythin'. It's only because all the ballast's out of her that she keeps up."

"She doesn't keep up," said Stephen gloomily. "She's droppin' still."

The field from which they had risen was now a long way behind, and the Prussians could only just be seen running their hardest, and trying to follow, for it was plain the balloon would not stay up very long. They were easily out-distanced, however, for she was travelling at a rapid rate before the fresh, northerly breeze.

"Everything depends on where she comes down now," Stephen said, surveying the landscape anxiously.

"Fraid that won't make much difference!" muttered Sam, taking out his field-glasses from their sling-case. "Every German for a long way round'll make for her, an' reach her before she hits the ground. Looks as if our piece of luck wasn't goin' to do us much good. If I see a fair chance, I'll try an' open the bag up, an' let her down quick. There must be a ripping-cord somewhere," he added, examining the balloon's ropes and cordage.

"Better wait till we're well passed that lot yonder," said Stephen, pointing to a large assembly of men, mounted and afoot, that could just be seen in front and below—"if we do pass them. There isn't time to come down short of 'em."

Sam focussed his glasses on the troops indicated. The balloon was driving right towards them, and they could soon be made out plainly.

"It's a whole column—horse, foot, an' guns," said Sam anxiously. "By Jove, it's Prince Henry's brigade, or I'm much mistaken! That looks like him ridin' ahead there with his staff."

"I don't care much whose brigade it is," said Stephen; "but one thing's jolly sure, an' that's that this leaking sausage of a balloon is goin' to drop us right among 'em, unless something can be done."

The swarming Prussian force ahead looked more and more formidable as the balloon neared it. It was an entire column on the march, with guns, baggage-train, and cavalry, and from van to rearguard it covered a tremendous lot of ground.

There was evidently no chance of the balloon clearing it. The gas-bag was wilting more and more, and she was sinking steadily, though still several hundred feet up.

With glasses, several of the Prussian officers could be seen gazing up at the balloon.

"They don't know yet that there's anything wrong," said Stephen.

"Their glasses ought to show 'em we're not Germans, anyway," replied Sam; "and there come some messengers, who'll soon let 'em know what's up," he added, as a couple of orderlies, from the direction in which the balloon had travelled, came galloping up to the column. "This is a pretty complete finish," said Sam grimly. "That's Prince Henry's column, right enough; an' the only certainty is that we shall be set up, an' shot out of hand. He hasn't forgotten Potsdam, you can bet. Look! The wretched balloon's droppin' faster an' faster!"

The commotion below could easily be seen, and the boys watched, raging at their own helplessness.

"How is it they don't fire on us, if they know?" said Stephen bitterly.

"What for? They've got us safe enough. They can wait for the firin' till they call out six riflemen and a sergeant," rejoined Sam grimly.

They watched the earth as it apparently moved up to meet them. They were barely three hundred feet up now, and the faces of the Prussians could be plainly seen.

The worst of it was, the boys could do absolutely nothing to save themselves. Their end had never looked so near. Suddenly Stephen gripped his brother's arm.

"What's that?" he cried, pointing to the southward.

A large, strangely-shaped object was moving swiftly through the sky at a great height, and dropping towards them. So engrossed were the boys with the Prussians below that they had not noticed it till it was within gunshot.

Not a second glance was needed to tell what the stranger was, and new hope sprang into the breasts of the two scouts.

"The Condor!" shouted Stephen. "Hurrah!"

"By gum, she's seen us, too! Carfax must have spotted us with the telescope!" cried Sam excitedly. "Can she be in time?"

The Prussians had also seen the aeroplane, as a great shout from below testified, the balloon sinking so rapidly that it was within pistol-shot of them; but all had turned their attention to the new-comer.

"Carfax'll pull us out of this yet!" cried Sam. "Stand by to jump for it!"

For some moments of tense anxiety the brothers doubted whether their rescuers would be in time; but the swift airship was more than equal to the task.

She came along with a mighty rush, surging alongside the balloon just as the boys scrambled to the ropes.

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They both leaped for the Condor's rail, caught ice, and tumbled aboard pell-mell.

As they did so they heard Carfax's voice shout in order, the snap of a lever, and the Condor was whirled away skywards once more.

A rattle of shots greeted her, and a field-gun, unlimbered, and levelled, belched a shell after the Condor in her flight.

Neither of these efforts did the slightest harm to Carfax, standing on the bridge, laughed contemptuously, then turned to the boys.

"That was a near thing," he said; "and, by Jove, glad to see you safe out of it, youngsters! What on earth does it mean, and how did you come to be in that old and-steel gas-bag?"

"We weren't in her by choice, sir," said Sam gratefully, "and we owe you our lives, that's very sure. A minute'd have seen our finish."

"Rather!" said Stephen. "I could see myself folded an' shot by a Prussian squad. We never did you'd be along this way so soon, sir. Phew!"

Both the boys felt very done up with the strain they had gone through, and the crew of the Condor, full of sympathy, were eager to know how they got into such a fix.

"It was the biggest surprise of the journey," said Stephen. "We turned a couple of miles out of our course, we first saw the balloon in the distance, reckoning a German one, of course. Our idea was to rip her up and put her out of action."

"We saw there was something wrong with her, turned on the telescope," said Carfax, "when K. announced the car didn't hold Germans, but two fell khaki. We recognised you directly afterwards, and I suppose we made the Condor hum along. There was just time to snatch you out of it and mount up again."

Stephen kissed his hand to the Prussian brigade, and but out of sight.

"I'll bet those beggars are sick to see us slip through their fingers like that!" he said.

"Yes; that's Prince Henry's brigade," replied Stephen. "He'd have made short work of you, for I believe it's everywhere that you two were aboard with me when we saw him that ultimatum and smashed up his palace. By the way, did you come to be in that balloon?"

Sam told him of their night's scouting expedition, and how they had been overtaken by the dawn.

"The place swarms with Germans, so much that they'd gettin' through them in the daylight," he said; "but you got the information we wanted; and, thanks to you, E. Blake will get it. We never expected you back so soon. Did you reach the French forces all right?"

"Yes, I found their commander-in-chief, De Calville, farther north than I reckoned upon," said Carfax. "I delivered the despatches into his hands. He's got a scheme for a sudden attack where the Germans least expect it, I believe. He has a large, picked force with Splendid fellows they are. Those French soldiers have the go in them that the Germans have."

"It'll be a very different story to what it was in the said Sam. "I suppose the Germans are hurryin' to him?"

"They're massing huge numbers of troops to meet the French. That's why they can't spare so many to tackle the invading forces up north here."

"The Germans have got an army big enough to meet countries, with a million to spare," said Sam; "but back our lot to give us good account of ourselves and friends, the French. All the Colonials'll be on the job. Yonder's General Blake, sir, hammering away at German batteries. Are you going straight there?"

"Yes; but we shall not stop," said Carfax. "I've a mission to make to him, and you want to deliver a report. After that I must clear out again with the Condor on urgent business. Are you two going with me?"

"Like a shot, sir!" said both boys.

Ten minutes later, dropping down from the skies, the Condor alighted in her old place in the British lines.

The Raid on the Petrol Stores.

It was some little time before General Blake could get to his post, whence he was directing the defence, but when he arrived he shook hands warmly with Carfax, and the astonished to see Sam and Stephen, who saluted him and said, "Hullo," he said, "I never expected you to return in this way, youngsters!"

"We shouldn't have returned at all, sir, if the Condor hadn't pulled us out of a tight place," said Sam. "We were nearly dished. But here's the information you sent me, sir," he added, handing a folded sheet to the general.

he had written out his report while the Condor was on its way back to Husum.

General Blake looked through the report, and his face lit up with satisfaction.

"All done!" he said. "This is valuable information. It is precisely what I wished to know. And now you are forewarned. You youngsters never fail to hit the mark. Mr. Carfax, were you successful in your mission?"

"Yes, general. The French are moving in upon German southern frontier with eight army corps, so you'll need reasonable numbers to deal with, and not the whole of my army to meet with your little force. I made all my arrangements back here, and, finding these two youngsters out of the way, I brought them along."

"Alloning!" exclaimed the general.

"I were seen by the Germans, sir," said Sam, "and, by the luck we made our escape in a captive balloon my brother Stephen had cut loose. Being shot full of holes, it came down in the middle of Prince Henry's column, and this on the march eastward. The Condor picked us up in time. But you are too busy to be bothered with us now, sir, of course. Do you want us for any other purpose, or may we ship again for service on the Condor?"

"I can always find work for you youngsters," said the general. "But you're not in my command, of course, and the Condor has first claim on you. I must return to my headquarters now, but what you have done for me won't be forgotten."

"I am, are you now on any special service?"

"I've one pressing need just now, general," said Carfax. "I want petrol. I can do anything else, I want petrol. Can you let me have it?"

"You've asked for the one thing I haven't got," said General Blake, looking grave. "We have only a very small quantity for the needs of my force. I might supply you with a little."

"A little would be no use. Don't trouble, general. I will help myself—not from you, of course!" said Carfax.

"Soon I hope to be in full fighting trim again, general, at your orders."

General Blake returned his salute, and hastened off to his headquarters, leaving the boys with Carfax.

"Now," said the aeronaut, "without petrol for my engines I can do nothing. We've run short, and must get some."

"It's a marvel the Condor's run so far without refilling, I think," said Sam anxiously. "But how—?"

"She can go six days, as a rule, or even much longer, if she has not to travel great distances. But our voyage out to England, and my journey to France and back at high speed, taxed our resources. Our engines use very much and use it very slowly, even at their best pace."

"We have now enough to last twenty hours, and I did not get in France, being anxious to get back to work here. I must now obtain a supply from the transports, or one of the warships. But they are gone, all save two gunboats, which, of course, haven't any to spare. We shall get petrol here."

"How's it to be got, then, sir?" asked Sam, realising how completely stripped of her wonderful power the Condor was without the necessary fluid.

"We must loot it from the Germans," said Carfax. "It will be had at any risk."

The boys' faces lit up.

"This'll be just the sort of expedition that's to my taste," said Stephen appreciatively. "Sounds very sportin'." "Do start at once, sir?"

"In an hour before twilight. There are several repairs to be made, and I want to get the Condor in thorough trim again. Besides, my crew and I need rest badly. You'd better get your own in the meantime, yourselves," added Carfax.

"Worthwhile he and Kenneth set to work at a couple of hours' turning and fitting among the delicate engines of the airship, while Hugh, who was dead-beat, rolled himself up in a sleeping-bag behind the ammunition-waggons, and was snoring soundly as soon as he lay down. He had stood the last night-watch on the voyage home from the French coast."

At the end of the two hours Carfax and Kenneth, having completed the repairs, and nearly fallen asleep over the platform of the Condor, and taking their well-earned sleep at their posts. It was very rarely that the whole of the Condor slept at the same time; but here, in the fish lines, they were safe at least.

Sam and Stephen also seized the opportunity and slept, for they knew that rest is a thing to take when you can get it during a campaign. Throughout the day skirmishing was in progress on one flank or the other, but not even the distant thunder of the batteries woke the sleepers, so they went out very early.

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made a sound meal at the gunners' mess, which was thrown open to them, and before six the Condor's propellers were whizzing round once more, and she sailed steadily up towards the clouds.

"Keep her running on one engine, Hugh," said Carfax; "we must hoard our power till it's most needed. That's better. Both of you fetch out that gun and mount it on the fore-platform."

Sam pricked up his ears at the word "gun," and, to his surprise, Kenneth and Hugh brought out of the deckhouse what appeared to be the barrel of a Maxim, short, and very light in construction, with equally light working parts and breech, and, instead of a carriage, it fitted on a sort of tripod of hollow steel bars.

"Hallo," said Sam, "where on earth did that come from? What is it?"

"A very neat invention," said Carfax. "One of the new French portable Maxims, for placing in a fixed position. It weighs under ninety pounds; and, though I'd have made it lighter still for this sort of work, it struck me as just what we needed, as we're no longer to drop bombs."

"Did you get it from the French Army?" said Stephen, inspecting it eagerly.

"Of course! Several were being brought up when I delivered my despatches, and De Calincourt supplied me with one at once when I asked him. It isn't intended for long, hard work, but just what's needed here. Kenneth riveted the foot-bars to our framework forward there as we came along. It's all ready to fix."

The gun was mounted on the fore-part of the platform, and a very tiny, light, and yet vicious little weapon it looked, for a machine-gun.

This sort of small artillery being Sam's speciality, he was asked to adjust the gun and try it. He did so, and fired a quick rattle of shots at a test.

"Works capitally," he said. "A little beauty, sir, and no mistake!"

"I'm glad you approve it," Carfax said, "for you know your business. Kenneth is a good hand with a Maxim, but not up to your form. We shall only use it in emergencies, and in order to bring it and its ammunition, I left more than half my store of explosives and bombs behind. This will be useful now. But we must go ahead and get that petrol."

The Condor had now left Husum and the combatants a long way behind, and was passing over the open country stretching between the North Sea and the Baltic. Many German pickets and several regiments on the march could still be seen.

"The Condor'd come to a poor sort of end if she ran out of petrol here, an' had to land an' let herself be captured by the Germans," said Stephen thoughtfully.

"Sooner than that, I should blow her into shreds, and ourselves as well," said Carfax calmly. "But it is growing dark now, and we shall have that petrol before dark."

"Do you know of any special place to get it, sir?" asked Sam.

"Yes; there is a big motor-garage outside the large village of Hasenfeldt, where cars call to fill up with petrol. We are not far off it now. I think we shall get what we need without any trouble at all, though we might possibly be disturbed by a German patrol. We shall land at the doors of the garage."

"Would you like Steve and me to slide out and scout for any approaching enemy?" said Sam.

"It would be an advantage," said Carfax thoughtfully. "But you must do it at your own risk. I could not wait to pick you up if by any chance the Condor were attacked by numbers. She would have to mount at once, for you understand what a weapon she would be against us if the Germans got hold of her?"

"Of course, sir! We'll take care she isn't surprised by numbers if we scout," said Sam.

The Condor went higher yet, for Carfax did not wish her arrival to be noticed too soon, or prepared for. The boys were unable to tell where they were, but Carfax knew exactly the spot he intended to reach. The Condor came whirling down out of the sky, to alight at the very doors of a large motor-garage standing next the high-road, a little distance from a large village.



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"TOM MERRY & CO.'S HOME-COMING" in Next Thursday's GEM Library.

So swiftly had the Condor appeared out of the darkening sky that the few Germans in the neighbourhood were utterly taken by surprise. She settled as softly as a feather upon the high-road, her head pointing towards the village; and the proprietor of the garage—a fat, prosperous-looking Prussian, with large diamond rings on his fingers—stood in the doorway gaping at the new-comers helplessly.

He was just about to turn and yell an alarm, when Carfax sprang down from the platform and covered him with a revolver.

"Stay where you are, and make no noise!" said Kenneth warningly, in German. "No harm will be done you unless you attempt to interfere."

The proprietor turned very pale and gasped like a fish. Three attendants came running out to see what was the matter.

"Did your men bring out petrol from your storage-rooms as fast as they can?" ordered Carfax sharply. "Quick about it!"

The frightened German stammered out directions to his men, who were as much taken aback as himself. They hastened to obey, however, Hugh hustling them into the building, where they hurried to the tank-room. There were numbers of cans and drums of petrol, which they seized and carried out to the waiting aeroplane, only too anxious to save their own skins. Hugh, pistol in hand, shepherded them on each journey.

A cry of warning was heard from Stephen, and suddenly a squad of Prussian Grenadiers came running round the bend of the road from the village. As the first man came in sight he gave a hoarse shout, threw his rifle to his shoulder, and fired.

Kenneth sprang to the Maxim, which was all ready for action, and in a moment turned it upon the oncoming squad. The fierce whirr of the little machine-gun rang out, and the Prussians were mown down like grass before they could reach the Condor, or fire on her again. The hail of Maxim bullets swept the narrow road, and in scarcely more than twenty seconds the squad was utterly wiped out.

"Go ahead with the loading-up!" cried Carfax. "We've accounted for that lot, and we can finish in peace. Stand by the gun, Kenneth!"

"Look out that we aren't surprised from over the hedges there!" replied Kenneth sharply.

"We'll see to that!" said Sam, jumping down. "Take the left side, Steve, and I'll take the right. Scout across the field, and keep a watch for trouble!"

The brothers darted off in opposite directions, each breaking his way through the quick-set fence on either side.

Sam, once in the wide meadow behind the garage, took a quick look round; then made for a higher knoll a little way beyond, whence he knew he would be able to command a view all round.

It was immensely important that the Condor should finish loading up, and, moreover, that she should not be taken by surprise. The place she had landed in was not as open as her crew would have liked.

"Hope Carfax'll look sharp," murmured Sam, as he hurried along. "If by any chance the Germans saw us coming, an' made ready for us, this is just the sort of place where they could steal a march on her without bein' seen. There's too much cover about, an' too many hedges."

Sam was fast learning the possibilities of the Condor, and he knew that, defiant and all-powerful though she was when in the air, a small thing might defeat her when she came to earth. It need not even be a shell from a gun. A volley suddenly poured in at close quarters might kill or wound the whole of her small crew, or an unlucky bullet disable the delicate engines, for she was only bullet-proof from underneath.

The young scout reached the hillock, and, keeping under cover of some bushes of it, took a rapid look round beyond. The growing darkness made it difficult to see much, but the first survey showed no signs of danger.

Sam could only see the top half of the Condor between the tall fences of the road, but he had a view of part of the field on the other side, and even at that distance he caught a glimpse of his brother, making for the farther hedge.

"Steve's showin' himself too much," thought Sam, with a frown. "There isn't much cover there certainly, but he ought to keep nearer the hedge. Wish the youngster'd be more careful of his skin. He—Hallo! By Jove, there they come!"

Sam's eyes suddenly caught sight of eight or ten Germans creeping along on the far side of a thin hedge that reached to the road. He was just about to dart back and give the alarm, when a sudden spatter of rifle-shots right ahead, near the Condor, broke out.

They did not come from the men Sam had seen. It was evident that a march had been stolen upon Carfax by some other route. What followed was only a matter of seconds.

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Next Week:

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Sam heard Carfax's voice sharply calling "Villiers!" and the whirr and stammer of the little Maxim, a fresh rain of rifle-shots, and the Condor shot up like a rocket, and slanting up towards the clouds at a tremendous speed.

Sam was already sprinting across the meadow towards the garage when he saw her go. For an instant he halted, stupefied by her desertion. Then, realising that he was cut off from help, and might be seen at any moment, he darted back to the hillock and concealed himself in the bushes again.

"Great guns!" he muttered. "She's left us both at the lurch!"

The situation was a desperate one. The Condor was out of sight in the darkened sky, and the whole neighbourhood was swarming with German soldiers, like a wasp's nest that has been stirred up by a stick. There was not the slightest likelihood of the airship returning anywhere thereabout. What that all were on the look-out for her, and the Germans had soon learn from those at the motor garage that two of our crew were at large.

A sudden feeling of anger seized Sam, for at first he thought it seemed cruel that Carfax, whom they had risked so much to serve, should leave them to their fate, but the first of the quick passing, and, with a sigh, Sam realised that the Condor was out of sight.

"He warned us," thought the young scout. "It's his own skin that he got out. It'd be an awful thing for the Condor to be captured by Germany, and her stores used against us. They'd have got him if he hadn't deserted out quick. They were all round him. I wonder what his chance is, though?"

He pulled his cap low over his eyes and peered about the bushes. His own field was clear of men, but he could hear the tramp of many feet on the road and above the gate, and the shouting of orders. It was practically dark now, but he could still see the field opposite beyond the road. What he saw as he glanced that way made his heart beat.

A dark figure, which he was certain he recognised, stood in the shadow of the hedge. Immediately afterwards there was a rush of other figures suddenly appearing, a shot, a fall, and silence. Then harsh voices shouted loudly from the bushes.

"Wir haben den Engländer!"

"Gut! Suchen Sie wohl, es giebt noch eins!" ("With well, there's another!") called an officer's voice from the bushes.

"Great heavens," gasped Sam, "they've caught Steve!" One disaster had followed swiftly on the heels of another. The airship had gone, and now Stephen was in the hands of the Germans, beyond a doubt.

"What shall I do?" thought Sam wildly. "They've got out who he is, and he'll get short shrift from them!"

He hesitated, and then, stealing swiftly towards the ditch beside the fence that led down to the road, he slipped to worm his way along it in the direction of the captors.

"They'll get me, too," he muttered, between his hands. "an' so they may, for unless I can get Steve out of their hands they may shoot me with him!"

Silently as a snake he crept towards the garage.

When Stephen left the Condor to scout to the left, he soon found he had no easy job, and that he would likely to do much good, so shut in was the field, and so dense the cover, that it gave a view over the other ones.

He soon struck out straight across it, deciding that there was little risk of being seen, and that the only thing he was to get into the next meadow or climb one of the hedge-row oaks and take a look-out from that.

"Won't do to go too far from the road, though," thought, as he reached the hedge. "The chief says he wouldn't be able to wait for us if— My word! Voots that!"

The thing came to pass even as the thought entered his mind, and he heard and saw the thing happen just as his brother did, from the far side. The rifle-shots volleyed, the Maxim opened fire, and the Condor, mounting out of the thick of the fight, sped away into the gloomy skies and hid.

"Oh, glory, what a go!" groaned Stephen. "Why Yes, dickens am I to do? She'll never find us again! The beastly Germans are all over the place, too!"

He hesitated a moment, keeping under the shelter of the hedge.

"I'd better try an' find Sam," thought the boy. "I know best what to do. He's on the other side, an' he'll lie up an' wait for me."

Stephen took a quick look round to see if the coast was clear, and, doubling along the hedge, cut off the corner, and darting across it. He felt there was little time to be lost, so watching every step he took. Unless he found Sam quickly, the chance would be gone.

Right or wrong, luck was against him. No sooner had he

at the corner than five or six German riflemen came rushing through the gap in the hedge, and Stephen all but fell into them. There was a shout, a bullet whizzed past the young scout's head, and one of the men took a hurried snapshot at him, and then he whipped out his revolver. Before he could use it a second rifle dashed it out of his hand, he was felled to the ground, and held there by three burly Prussians. "We've got the Britisher!" shouted the man who had felled him.

Stephen came back from the road, and two of the men turned and made sure of Stephen, while the other three hurried out and continued the search. Panting, and sweating out of breath, Stephen was hauled to his feet by his captors.

"Why, he is not much more than a boy!" said the man who had wielded the rifle-butt, gruffly.

"I suppose they have to carry light-weights on those cursed hills!" said the other in strong Prussian dialect. "He's the airship, anyhow. Bring him along to the garage. If he gives any trouble, you whipper-snapper, you'll be shot! Do you hear?"

"He'll be shot either way, and a good riddance!" growled the other. "That British airship's done mischief enough!"

Stephen made no reply, for he felt that his chance was all but gone. His chief hope now was that Sam would escape somehow. They marched him down to the road, where a Prussian lieutenant, whose half-company was scouring the neighbourhood in all directions, was talking to the excited driver of the garage.

"That's one of them!" cried the latter, as he saw Stephen brought in.

"We found him at the top of the meadow, Herr Lieutenant," said Stephen's captor, saluting.

"Take him in there and guard him till the other is found," said the officer.

Stephen was marched inside, and for the time he almost forgot his own peril in keen anxiety lest Sam should share his fate. He could hear the Prussians making as much noise as a herd of bullocks, and it raised his hopes.

"He's too sharp to let those clumsy louts catch him," thought Stephen, "with all that row. Wonder how I was able to blunder into them like that? What will they say with me?"

After a short time, however, Stephen's guards were called out, and they brought him before the lieutenant.

"Take the prisoner to the cells," said that officer. "We'll account for the other later." He looked at Stephen closely, and said something to a grizzled, fierce-looking old soldier who was with him. Then, turning about, the two Prussian riflemen, joined by four others, marched Stephen off towards the village.

"Six of 'em for a guard!" thought the young scout. "They can't think I'm somebody important, one'd think. What do they mean by cells? There aren't any barracks in this little town, surely?"

There were not, but a Prussian regiment was quartered in the place, and a strong, old stone manor-house outside the village was evidently being used as headquarters for the depot, and prison. It was well guarded by pickets and sentries, and Stephen, marched in through the gate beyond the old dry moat, by a number of riflemen who treated the lieutenant as he passed them, was taken to a small, cell-like room with a heavy, iron-bound door. The door was closed, and he was left alone.

"No gettin' out of this," Steve said to himself, looking at the stone floor and walls, the massive door, and the small, glazed, heavily-barred window overhead. "I'm in for it this time," he added gloomily. "The only consolation is, they haven't got hold of Sam."

Footsteps were heard approaching in the passage outside, and soon the door opened again. The lieutenant, with the colonel of the Prussian regiment, a grim-looking, mahogany-faced man, with an iron-grey moustache, appeared with a couple of privates, who remained outside.

"Humph!" said the colonel, staring fiercely at Stephen. "This is the cub, is it, Gessler? You are off that infernal ship, are you, sir?" he said to the captive.

"Yes," said Stephen.

"The Conдор, isn't it? You serve the man Carfax, then?"

"I serve Mr. John Carfax," said Stephen quietly, "and both serve King Edward."

To the Rescue!

"You! Nothing of the sort!" barked the Prussian officer. "I know you by sight. This Carfax belongs to no service. And you—you are one of those Villiers brothers who have got so much trouble. Both you and your chief are traitors. You know the penalty for civilians found bearing arms against German soldiers?"

"I'll leave Mr. Carfax to answer for himself, when you've

caught him," said Stephen. "As for me, I am no civilian. I am a sub-lieutenant of the Greyfriars Cadets, which are part of our Auxiliary Forces."

"We do not recognise them. But enough talk. In the ordinary way," said the colonel, pulling his moustache as he looked grimly at Stephen, "I should have you taken out and forthwith shot. But as you come off this infernal airship, which is the same which destroyed Potsdam, I shall wait until I have communicated by telegraph with Prince Frederick, and inform him of the capture."

"As you please," said Stephen; "neither he nor you will get anything out of me."

"No," said the colonel grimly, "I am not holding out any hopes to you, in any case. You may regard your execution, either here or at Potsdam, as absolutely certain."

He turned on his heel, the massive door clanged, the bolts were shot, and Stephen was left to his own reflections.

When Sam had crept half way up the ditch towards the garage, after witnessing the capture of his brother, he was in such a state of mind as he had never known before. Cool as he usually was, he felt that he cared little what else happened, if Stephen was to pay the penalty at the hands of the ruthless enemy.

"Will they shoot him?" thought Sam, as he neared the big shed. "If they do," he muttered between his teeth, "I shall curse the day that ever I spared any German's life—and there have been a few, first and last."

He paused, as the heavy tread of a Prussian came past within a dozen yards, and he crouched low.

"They don't ask much excuse before executin' a prisoner who's been troublesome."

The ditch became wetter, and Sam was now close to the back of the garage. There was nobody on the field side of it, but many in the road. Sam thought he heard Stephen's voice, replying to the harsh tones of a Prussian officer. It was just then, in fact, that the boy was led into the building.

"They haven't shot him straight away, an' that's something," thought Sam; "he'll be taken before the commanding officer, no doubt. Little hope for him there, I fear. Now, Heaven help me to know what I'd best do."

Sam's own hiding-place, in the overgrown ditch, was safe enough, unless some Prussian came prying round at the back; and they were not likely to search so close at hand. He was more secure there than he would have been much farther out in the fields, where whole companies and squads of men were searching in all directions. But of his own safety, at the time, Sam thought nothing.

The case seemed hopeless enough. Should he dash into the garage, revolver in hand, and try to get Stephen away by force? Things were so desperate that Sam felt ready to attempt it. But directly afterwards he gave up the idea as childish.

"It could only mean both of us being shot down," he mused, "an' they'd shoot their prisoner first, if it came to that. There's somebody giving orders again."

It was a very short time before Stephen was marched off by the guard, the lieutenant accompanying them, and Sam caught sight of them as they passed down the road.

"That's it; they're goin' to take him to headquarters, wherever that is," said Sam to himself. "I must find out where he goes, at any cost."

To follow the departing Prussians at all closely as they went along the road was not possible. Sam knew his best plan was to get back to the post of vantage on the hillock, and watch the direction they took. He began to hurry back again along the ditch.

A squad of Prussians, while Sam was by the garage, had been searching the hillock, tramping over every part of it, and thrusting their bayonets into every bush. They had now passed on, satisfied that there was no one upon it, and as the place was not likely to be searched twice, the young scout reckoned it a safe harbour. He crept back among the bushes, and, commanding a view of the road, was able to see which way the escort went. They only appeared as a dark blur on the road, but Sam's eyes were keen, and he saw them skirt round the village by a by-road and make for the dark block of buildings beyond.

"That'll be their depot, or headquarters," mused Sam. "Whatever happens they aren't likely to call out a firing-party in the dark, if they do condemn Steve. They'll keep him there till morning, anyhow, and, of course, he'll be under lock and key. There's nothing more to be done till the neighbourhood quiets down a bit, an' these beastly promenadin' riflemen get back to their barracks. They'll have to give the search up soon. Fools! I'd be a mile away by now, if I escaped what I was after."

He composed himself to wait with as much patience as he might, though his thoughts were gloomy enough. The Germans took a long time to settle down; for fully another two hours they scoured the neighbourhood far and wide,

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making plenty of noise over it, and mounted men were riding hither and thither about the roads. Either they had very little to do and were glad of a job, Sam thought, or else they attached an immense importance to catching the stray refugee from the Condor.

For half the night there were too many men about between Sam and the village for him to go in that direction with much likelihood of success. Sentries or pickets on duty he could have passed much more easily; but with riflemen moving in all directions, there was every chance of one of them blundering on to him by accident, as will happen to the best of scouts. And Sam did not forget that Stephen's hopes, slender as they were, rested on him alone.

It was long after midnight that, having made a wide detour, he stalked his way in towards the place where he thought Stephen had been taken, and, lying in a patch of dry bracken on the side of a slope, he took as good a view of it as the distance and darkness would let him.

"It's an old manor-house they're using as a base," he thought, "till they get marching orders. Strong-looking place, too. Stephen'll be there, it's pretty sure."

"And now, what's to be done? There are only two sources of help, an' neither of them any good. The Condor's one. General Blake's the other, but it'd take half a day to reach him, an' then he could do nothing, that I can see." Sam paused. "Well, as we're at a deadlock, I'll go an' reconnoitre the place at close quarters. I can't be off an' do nothing while Steve may be under death-sentence. An' if the sweeps do shoot him, they may shoot me, too," he added bitterly. "Here goes!"

Never did Sam stalk more skilfully, or more quietly. He felt it was a forlorn hope. There were two pickets some distance off the buildings, and, waiting his chance, the Greyfriars scout stole past the patrols that moved between these, and did it with safety. They kept to their work with machine-like discipline, but not a man dreamed that an enemy was within miles of him, nor that the hunted fugitive who had been abandoned by the airship, would dare come near their headquarters.

When past the pickets, Sam was able to see that a tract of scrubby bushes and a wide, dry moat lay between him and the low wing of the house that was just in front. The walls were covered with ivy, and he could make out one or two narrow apertures that looked like very small windows. It occurred to Sam that rooms with such windows, behind a stone wall, would be very likely places for prisoners to be ensconced in.

A sentry was pacing round and round the house, at a fair distance from the walls on account of the moat and path. He appeared every minute or so, at regular intervals, and the scout lay in cover and watched him carefully.

"The beggars are more like pieces of clockwork than sentries," murmured Sam. "This is much easier work than scoutin' round a wideawake corps in the open after they've been shot at a bit. I'll get past that chap an' see if I can make anything of the house at close quarters. Those bushes next the wall will give shelter."

Just what he expected to do, Sam hardly knew. But something told him that he was close on Stephen's track, and after half an hour's cautious moving forward, covering the ground foot by foot, and lying quiet whenever the sentry passed, Sam reached the dry moat and got into it. Thence it was not long before he found himself crouching behind some holly bushes that grew next the wall.

The next move was rather doubtful, and Sam began to think that, beyond a clever piece of stalking, he had not accomplished much. He remained there for some time, thinking matters over, when a sound fell on his ear that made his blood run quicker, and he listened eagerly.

It was only a low, melancholy whistle, but both the whistle and the tune were familiar to Sam, and he knew they came from his brother. The air was the old school song of Greyfriars—and of many other public schools for that matter, if the words are altered—with the French refrain: "Vive la Compagnie."

Poor Stephen, there was little enough "company" for him that night. Sam guessed well enough what it meant—his brother was trying to keep his spirits up during the sleepless hours. It was a rather dismal and cheerless whistling, naturally, and it seemed to come from somewhere overhead and to the left.

The sentry evidently heard it on his next round, for he halted and turned his head. Realising what it was, he paced on again, and Sam eagerly listened to locate the sound. He decided it came from the next window but one.

These windows, if such they could be called, were only unglazed openings, two feet square, in the stone wall, and guarded with very strong bars of iron. They were about nine feet from the ground, the cells being on the lowest floor, and the walls were covered with thick-stemmed ivy.

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"That's the one!" thought Sam, gazing at the aperture. "By gum, I wonder whether the sentry spot me if I were hangin' on, close in the ivy? I do lieve he could, an' I'm bound to try it now, anyway, have a word with Steve, if I'm shot for it!"

When next the coast was clear, Sam glided out of bushes, and very quickly and quietly he climbed up ivy, rustling the leaves as little as possible. The stems and branches gave ample hold for hands and feet. The sentry passed again, and Sam flattened himself against the wall and remained motionless. When the German passed, Sam gave a very low whistle at the window's end, and "Vive la Compagnie" stopped.

"Steve!" whispered Sam.

There was a stifled exclamation from the interior of the cell.

"Sam! Is that you?"

"Yes; don't make a sound that you can help. Come here an' whisper. You're alone in there, aren't you?"

"Yes. There's a sentry patrollin' the passage, but they've got me safe enough."

"Can you reach the window?"

"Not without help. It's out of reach. Is there any of loosening those bars?" whispered Stephen.

Sam examined them.

"No. And it'd take two days' work with a file to get them. The place is built like a prison."

"I knew there was no gettin' out," said Stephen dismally. "Look out they don't catch you, too. I say, hard luck the Condor leavin' us like that."

"Yes; never mind that, now. What's goin' to happen? Have they told you anything?"

"There's an old tiger of a colonel, who seems to be havin' me shot. He's sent to Prince Frederick or some such to ask about it. He said I needn't hope to be let off."

"I don't believe it," muttered Sam, between his teeth. "They can't be such sweeps!"

"Why, old chap, you know we've always expected they got hold of us. I say, get down, Sam!" whispered Stephen hurriedly. "Somebody's comin' along the passage."

Sam climbed down a foot or two, to bring his head to the level of the window, and stayed there motionless, his heart beating.

Inside the cell, Stephen listened to the sharp tread of feet and the jingle of spurred heels. Then the door was opened, and the Prussian colonel strode in.

How the Condor Made a Capture.

All hours of the night were alike to the Prussian general. The colonel had evidently been riding out, for his boots and breeches were splashed with fresh mud. His escort, with him, one of them carrying a lamp, and he looked Stephen grimly.

"A message has arrived, with which I am to acquaint you," he said. "Your life is forfeit, on several counts, all military law as we understand it in Prussia."

Stephen made no reply.

"It is left in my hands to carry out the sentence," said the colonel gruffly; "but for the peculiar nature of the case there would have been no need to wait so long. You are very rightly sentenced, but your life will be spared on one condition."

"What is that?" said Stephen.

"That you give us a full description of this aeroplane, whose crew you are a member," said the colonel—mechanism, engines, method of working, the nature of explosives she carries, and how they are projected. "You are, of course, well acquainted with her various secrets, which you will describe for the benefit of the German Air Corps officers. If this information is considered satisfactory, your sentence will be cancelled, and your liberty given."

"Meaning that I'm to betray the Condor's secrets into the hands of Germany," said Stephen.

"If you choose to put it that way—yes."

"And if I don't?"

"In that case," said the colonel drily, "you will be at noon."

"Thank you! I refuse, of course," said Stephen.

The colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"You have till noon to consider," he said, turning away. "If you do not agree to the terms offered by that time, a firing-party will be ordered up without further parley, and the sentence carried out."

The cell-door was slammed once more, and Stephen sat silently listening to the footsteps of the guard dying away. He looked up at the window, and saw the outline of his brother's head reappearing.

"Did you hear what they said?" asked Stephen.

"Yes," muttered Sam. "I felt like shooting the butcher, if it'd do any good!"

"They mean business. They'll have me out soon," said Sam.

There was a pause of some moments.

"It is ghastly!" whispered Sam. "I wish I were in old boy, instead of you. Something must be done. I could—couldn't you say something about the Condor? To betray the secrets—you don't know them, for that. But to—to make up something, so as to lead them astray, you know, as if you were givin' her away?"

"No," said Stephen. "I can't do that. You wouldn't do it, if you were here in my shoes. There are worse than being shot."

Sam was silent, for, wretched as he felt at the prospect, agreed with his brother. An officer bearing the King's commission—though only a cadet—could not purchase his way from a sham betrayal and a string of falsehoods. "I am not goin' to truckle to the brutes!" said Stephen. "Even if I did, they wouldn't be humbugged by them're not fools."

"There's nothing else to be done, I shall go an' scrag 'em, an' they can shoot me alongside you, an' be led to them!" said Sam desperately.

"So, don't do that. Go an' find the Condor, Sam, if you can, rather, let her find you. I don't know what she is, but she's my only possible chance. Carfax is sure to come back an' try to find us. Let him know where I am."

"All right, I'll do it!" said Sam; though he privately felt that there was little hope of rejoining Carfax. "Sit down, old chap!"

"It isn't likely he can get me out of it alive," said Sam; "but I'll bet he makes it hot for 'em. They'll shoot me for nothing. I'm one of his crew."

"Then I won't say good-bye, old boy," said Sam; "for any chance I fail, I shall be back alongside you."

Sam watched his chance and climbed down the wall. There was need for haste, since the eastern sky was already paling, and the sentry and pickets had to be passed. Sam had little time to do it in, but he managed it successfully just before the pickets were changed. Then, being well away from the neighbourhood of the buildings, he decided on his plan of action.

Passing near the back garden of a cottage, Sam saw a linen hanging on a hedge, having been left out all night. He commandeered part of it—a large cotton towel—stuffed it under his jacket. Then he made for the best piece of ground in the neighbourhood—a small hill covered with a clump of trees.

"If the Condor's comin' back at all, she'll be here with daylight," said Sam to himself, "an' my only chance is to be picked up by her is to stick myself in the most conspicuous place possible, where she's most likely to see me."

He reached the top of the hill, and, selecting a pollard tree, climbed on to the crown of its trunk, standing amidst the short branches. He was certainly on the highest point for a long way round.

The sky was lightening fast, and anxiously the scout scanned every part of it. There seemed to be no sign of the Condor. Then, of a sudden, he caught sight of her way in the west, where the sky was still gloomy, at a considerable height. She was sailing along slowly towards the village.

"There she is!" exclaimed Sam. "Now for it!"

He waved the white towel vigorously, letting it flap and back in the morning breeze.

"If the Germans see me before she does," he said to himself, "it'll be a near thing. I'm making a fine mark for a bullet."

The Condor was yet half a mile away, but time pressed, and Sam knew her crew would be scanning the neighbourhood from end to end with telescopes and field-glasses, and he knew, too, how keenly they noticed every detail. At that distance, once they saw the towel, they would be able to recognise him easily with the glasses.

It was a bold move, for a party of half a dozen Uhlanancers, passing down a road not far away, pulled up and looked towards him. It was only by good luck—for Sam—that they had not their carbines with them, or he would have been picked off very quickly. They broke through the bushes and galloped towards the tree, and, at the same moment, the Condor, shooting ahead, came whizzing down towards Sam in a swift spiral.

He could have yelled for joy as he saw her come. Before the Uhlan had covered half the distance, the Condor was hovering abreast the tree, a shout of delight and welcome from Hugh and Kenneth, and the next moment the aeroplane was swerving upwards with Sam aboard her, leaving the baffled Uhlan gapes below.

"Thought we'd find you all right—couldn't wait for you yesterday," said Carfax, stopping the airship dead at a thousand feet up. "Where's Stephen?"

"In the hands of the Germans," said Sam grimly. "He's a prisoner in the stone house yonder. He is to be shot at noon."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Carfax. "We didn't know he was captured."

"That's what I'm here for, sir," said Sam. "I want to know if you can save him. I confess I don't see how even the Condor is to do it; so if you can't, put me on the ground again and leave me, and I'll do what my two hands may. It isn't much."

"Save him?" cried Carfax fiercely. "Of course we will! Do you think I'll abandon one of my crew? Tell me, as quickly as you can, exactly what happened."

Sam gave him the story of Stephen's capture and the night's adventures as briefly as possible.

"The lad's a thoroughbred to his finger-ends!" said Carfax, when he had heard all. "Those ruffians of Prussians, to condemn him for what he's done! Mark this!" said Carfax, his eyes gleaming dangerously. "If any injury is done him, this infernal country shall pay the penalty! I will withdraw my decision, and destroy every city in it within the week. If butchery is their motto, they shall have it back from me!"

"I would rather Steve were pulled out of the fire instead, sir," said Sam. "I want him saved, not sacrificed. If he had fallen in open fighting, I would say nothing."

"We will have him back here, alive and sound, before noon," said Carfax. "And now to consider how it is to be done. We must not blunder."

There was silence as the Condor's chief went to the side and looked long and carefully through his powerful telescope at the house where Stephen lay in durance vile. The problem was a difficult one, and Sam thought the aeronaut seemed at a loss.

"Why not steer over the house, signal the colonel, and threaten to destroy the regiment if Stephen is not given up, sir?" suggested Sam. "They would have to agree."

Carfax tapped the floor of the bridge impatiently with his foot.

"There's the rub," he said. "We have not a shell nor a petrol-bomb on board. I have cleared out the last of my stock of explosives since we agreed not to use them; and carrying them is dangerous to the vessel in scouting work, through the risk of stray bullets entering the magazine. If they took me at my word, I should be helpless."

Sam's heart fell, for he had been counting on his plan.

"We might try to bluff them," added Carfax, "but the time is too short to risk a failure. Besides, they might shoot their prisoner as soon as they received the threat, and scatter, for they are but a small force, and could move where they pleased."

"I fear that's right," said Kenneth; "and their superiors would blame them for giving up anyone they captured from the Condor. They're hot about her."

"That message condemning Stephen must have come from headquarters," put in Hugh; "either from the commander-in-chief, or from the Crown Prince's division."

"The commander-in-chief?" said Sam desperately. "Well, then, let's make for headquarters, and get hold of the biggest prisoner we can, and hold him hostage for Stephen's safety. An eye for an eye!"

"You've hit it!" exclaimed Carfax, striking the rail of the bridge. "It shall be done! Put her round, lads—south-west, and full speed ahead!"

Away went the Condor, spinning along at her fastest pace through the skies, and Sam's idea was approved of by all three.

"The difficulty will be to get hold of the man we want," said Carfax. "He must be someone of high importance, and the capture will not be easy—there is so little time to spare. But I am willing to take any risk after what you have told me. Fit a fresh cartridge-belt to the Maxim, Sam."

The Condor had not gone very far—perhaps a dozen miles—when Kenneth, being on the look-out, called the attention of the others to a large body of German troops far below, with guns, cavalry, and baggage-trains.

"Hallo!" said Carfax. "I ought to know that outfit. Hold on, and let us see."

He stopped the Condor's way, letting her glide along very gently, and examined the force below.

"I thought so!" he said. "It's the Crown Prince's division. They've struck camp, and are on the march again."

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"You're right, sir," said Kenneth, who had the big telescope, "for that's Prince Frederick himself, or I'm much mistaken, riding with the officers at the head of the cavalry brigade, out on the heath."

"Prince Frederick's division?" echoed Sam.

"By George, then there's no need to go any further!" said Carfax, his eyes glistening strangely. "We should find the prisoner we want out of these—if we can get him!"

"They can see us hanging over them," said Hugh.

"We're so high that we must look like a speck to them," Kenneth replied. "It's only with the telescope we can make anything of them at this distance, and they don't seem much disturbed. Suppose they know we've given up dropping explosives."

"They've yet to learn that the Condor is dangerous in more ways than one," said Carfax grimly. "Stand by the engines there, we may want our highest speed in a hurry. Now, which of those—"

"The Crown Prince himself!" exclaimed Sam eagerly. "Why not take him? He's an exchange they dare not refuse for Stephen!"

"Ay, lad, that's what I meant, but he's little likely to offer us the chance," said Carfax; "and while he's with the whole cavalry brigade—"

"Not he! See, there he rides across the heath with his staff!" cried Sam. "If that's the man you pointed out!"

The cavalry were well out on the right flank, trotting over the open, a quarter of a mile from the main column. And the officer riding with his staff—evidently a person of distinction—had just left the brigade and was cantering across the heath with four others in attendance, making for the main body of his column—some distance away, as has been said.

"By the powers, Sam's right!" cried Carfax. "Stand tight! Down with her!"

Then came one of those bullet-like rushes which the aeroplane made in moments of great emergency. Sam felt the wind roar in his ears as the Condor came swooping down out of the clouds, there was a wrench, a long swerve, and the next thing he knew she was skimming along like a swallow only a foot or two above the heather, her under supports tripped up, and the five uniformed horsemen not two hundred yards in front of her.

A great tumult of distant shouting was heard, and the Condor, increasing her speed again, swept after the horsemen. They, for their part, were spurring along as fast as they could gallop, alive to the sudden danger that threatened, and making desperately for the distant column. The middle rider glanced back, and Sam saw that it was indeed Prince Frederick, heir to the German throne, and the country's virtual sovereign now that the Kaiser was absent. His keen, moustached face was visible only for a moment, and then he spurred onwards the faster.

"We have him now!" said Carfax, as coolly as if he were chasing a Prussian conscript. "Look out for the shock, and stand by to nab him. Get free of the horse as quick as you can!"

The wild race across the heath, behind the galloping horses, made Sam's blood tingle. The other riders closed right in upon the Crown Prince, but the whirring swoop of the great aeroplane coming up behind made the horses unmanageable, well-trained as they were to all ordinary shocks of war, and they swerved and scattered frantically.

The Condor dashed in pursuit of the prince as he doubled, there was a cry of dismay, and the next moment the collision came.

The Condor, going twice as fast as the fugitive, struck the galloping horse with a heavy shock, the front of the platform catching it behind the hocks. In a moment horse and man were scooped right off the ground, and lay struggling on the platform, amid a wild shout and the cracking of the staff-officers' pistols.

For these puny assailants the Condor cared nothing. The instant the capture was made Kenneth sprang forward, seized the prince by the collar, and dragged him clear of the kicking horse, while the Condor soared rapidly upwards, the staff-officers shouting frantically, afraid to fire, lest they hit their reader. The airship suddenly tilted, at a height of about a hundred feet, and the hapless horse slipped off the platform and went hurtling downwards to the earth.

"A quick death for the poor brute; his legs were broken," said Carfax.

The prince was dazed by the shock of the encounter, and for a minute hardly realised what had happened to him. He was a tall, strongly-built man, with a somewhat youthful face, and when he stood up, in his handsome uniform and white cavalry gauntlets, he showed the same kingly bearing as his father the Kaiser. Sam at once felt reminded of his aforesaid acquaintance, the head of the German nation, when he looked at the prisoner.

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The prince was unhurt, save for a shaking, when Kenneth helped him up. He turned abruptly to the aeronaut.

"You are the Britisher, Carfax, I presume," he said in good English, in a curt, abrupt voice.

"Yes," said John, "I am he."

"Why have you singled me out for attack from all the rest of my corps?" said the prince, who was angry and ruffled, though he did not show it much.

"Because you are the nominal head of the nation, imagine, at the present moment. At any rate, the throne," replied Carfax quietly; "and I have come for your Highness."

Prince Frederick frowned angrily.

"A use for me!" he said sharply. "Is that your reason?"

"Certainly."

"Indeed!" said the prince hotly. "Well, sir, you probably know the answer my father, the Kaiser, made under circumstances, since, by an unlucky accident, he happened to be a prisoner in London. Lucky, rather than unlucky for you, however, I imagine!"

"I do not know that luck had much to do with it," said Carfax. "Let me present to your Highness Lieutenant Villiers, who, with his younger brother, effected the capture you speak of."

The prince turned with astonishment, and gazed at Sam.

"Indeed!" he said, biting his lip. "Well, that is better than I expected. I suppose you are avowedly the answer my father made when the British authorities held him prisoner, offered him immediate release on certain terms? He said that he would allow the factious capture to make no difference to Germany's demand that they could do what they chose with him! I return the same answer, sir!"

"Pardon me," said Carfax coolly, "no pressure was brought to bear on the Kaiser at all. The cases are very different. This young officer has a brother—Sub-Lieutenant Villiers—no doubt you have heard of being present a prisoner in the hands of your men. He is lying in a cell no great way from here, as I suppose you know."

"What have I to do with this?" said Prince Frederick, his riding-boot tapping the deck impatiently.

"It appears he is condemned to death by your order," said Carfax significantly.

"By mine!" said the prince. "I have heard nothing about the matter. I did not know of his capture!"

"Ah! Then it will be the easier for you to order his release," said the aeronaut quietly. "He was one of my men, and he is to be shot at noon. In order to save him from unjust death I have made your Highness my prisoner."

Prince Frederick flushed.

"I see very well what you mean," he said; "but I have given you my answer!"

"Do you approve of shooting prisoners of war in the blood?" said Carfax, calmly filling his reeking black gas mask. "If so, it is as right for me to shoot your Highness for your men to shoot Sub-Lieutenant Villiers."

"You may do as you please," said the Crown Prince curtly. "Shoot me, if you prefer it!"

"I have no intention of shooting you. Murder is to me an amusement of mine. I merely make war," said Carfax grimly. "But my first concern is to save Stephen Villiers. Your capture must mean a considerable loss to Germany. I am willing to at once release you if I have your man as an officer and a prince that the boy shall be settler. You, as heir to the throne of a great nation, cannot approve of such an injustice as to execute him for having been an arms against his country's enemies?"

"I will not say whether I do or do not," said Prince Frederick. "I will be forced into no action whatever. He so I refuse to give you my word. Put me down upon the earth again, if you choose, and I will do what I think fit."

It was plain that the prince's stubborn pride was a very arms, though the airship's crew felt pretty sure that he did not approve of Stephen's being sentenced to death. He would rather be shot himself than forced to make terms.

"The best judge is the prisoner's brother," said Carfax, turning to Sam. "What do you say, Villiers? Does the prince's offer content you?"

"No," said Sam. "I would take his word, as I taken his father's, over any other matter. The one I mean to make sure of is saving Steve's life and getting him free. If our prisoner won't even give his word for it, certainly don't let him go!"

"Quite right!" said Carfax. "Well, your Highness, I propose to keep you aboard this vessel till Sub-Lieutenant Villiers is delivered to me, alive and sound. If you make no terms for yourself, your army will make terms for you very quickly. I shall exchange you for the prisoner who lies at Erfeldt."

to that, you may make any arrangements you like," said the prince, with a slight shrug. "I shall do none."

"When the matter is simple," said Carfax. "Full speed ahead, Kenneth. Head her back for Husum." The Condor shot forward and went racing along the skies above, and as she did so Carfax turned to his captive. "Mark one thing only!" he said grimly. "If through delay caused by your refusal, we are too late to save then Villiers, your country shall pay the penalty. If I execute the death-sentence on him, I will execute it upon you. My decision not to use explosives shall be instantly withdrawn, and I will lay Germany waste from end to end, about warning or respite I will make a desert of the land, and the cities, to the last one, shall be smoking ash-heap. Your whole empire shall pay that price for his murder!"

For the first time the prince turned pale. But he did not give way. "The Hohenzollerns do not yield to force," he said. "I have nothing more to say."

The Condor sped on her voyage at a speed that made the wind roar past her, and the distant line of the sea was already in sight. Kenneth drew Sam aside.

"Don't worry, old chap," said Kenneth; "the chief'll manage it all right."

"But why are we going to Husum?" said Sam, who looked terribly worn and anxious.

"To offer him in exchange, through General Blake. It's the surest way. You see, we can get nothing out of the man himself—you might cut him to pieces before he'd agree to any terms. Obstinate brute!"

"I rather admire him for it," said Sam. "Yes, Husum is the quickest way now, I suppose. But the time's growing terribly short—it's after eleven!"

"We shall be in time," said Kenneth; "and if we're not, by any chance," he added grimly, "you may count on seeing the chief fulfil his words, and make Germany into a burning desert!"

General Blake's force, now a great one, lay directly below; the Condor stopped, and down she went, till she alighted behind the lines.

"I have your parole, of course?" said Carfax to Prince Frederick.

"Yes," replied the prince gloomily.

General Blake came forward as soon as the Condor was at rest, and greeted Carfax. He recognised the Crown Prince, and his face showed his utter astonishment.

"Hallo," he said to the prisoner, "you've got an august messenger there! What in the world does it mean?"

"I'll tell you," said Carfax; "and I want your help, general, as quickly as ever you can render it!"

In a few words as possible he told of Stephen's capture and impending fate.

"Good heavens!" said the general. "Well, you've got to be game in your own hands; but the time is short. Give me your message. I will send it to the German lines by a halloper with a flag of truce, and they will communicate with Erzfeldt by the field telegraph."

"Just so. There is the message that should be sent—I have it written out ready," said Carfax, handing the general a closed despatch. General Blake at once stepped to his tent and rapidly wrote a short despatch himself.

"These two notes will make all sure, if the exchange is to be made at all," he said, quickly sealing the one he had written. "You have a right to dispose of your prisoner as you choose—for he is fully yours—I want no share in him. Stephen Villiers must be returned here safe and sound. Till then, the prince—"

"Stays in my custody!" said Carfax grimly.

"Here are the two despatches said the general.

"Let me be the messenger, sir!" cried Sam eagerly. "I'll take them to the German commander-in-chief instead of your halloper!"

"A good plan!" said General Blake. "You shall do so!"

Five minutes later Sam, with the despatches buttoned inside his service-jacket and a white flag fluttering in his hand, was spurring the fastest horse in Blake's division full gallop towards the German lines, while those left behind waited in tense anxiety for the result.

The Ride to Erzfeldt.

Fighting between the two armies had ceased for the time, save for an occasional exchange of shots between the long-range guns on the far side. As Sam galloped out over the open ground, which was torn and pitted with shell and bullet from previous fierce encounters, he kept the white flag in full view, tied to a sword-scabbard.

Without it, a bullet would soon have brought him down.

He had over a mile to go to reach the nearest German outpost, not counting sharp-shooters, who lay nearer still. Sam drove his horse at the swiftest pace it could muster, nor did he spare the spur. He scarcely dared think how short was the time before Stephen's execution.

"Get on—get on!" he cried to the horse, spurring afresh. The distance diminished rapidly, till the sentries of the first outpost sprang from their trench and stopped the young rider.

"Halt, there!" they cried, in rough Prussian, their rifles levelled. "What's your business, under that flag?"

"Urgent message to your commanding officer!" cried Sam. "Let me through!"

"You can only go into the lines under escort," said the lieutenant in charge of the picket, "and you are not likely to be allowed to return. Are you sent to Field-Marshal Von Strelsau?"

"Yes, if he is the commander of your forces!" exclaimed Sam. "I beg you to lose no time, Herr Lieutenant—the matter is of great importance!"

The officer, with exasperating slowness, as it seemed to Sam, dispatched two of his men with the young messenger, and sent a mounted man on ahead to acquaint the field-marshal with his request.

Sam's two guards went on with him towards the lines, and took a most roundabout way, of course, in order that he should see no more of the German position and batteries than he was meant to. It added to the delay, and at last they passed the inner sentries, and came through the numberless bivouacked Prussian and Hanover regiments to where the tent of the chief-in-command stood behind a sheltering knoll.

Here Sam had a couple of minutes to wait, and as soon as a couple of staff-officers had been dispatched from the tent on some business or other, during which time it took all the young scout's self-control to keep down his impatience, he was admitted to the tent, and found himself face to face with Field-Marshal Von Strelsau, who was pacing the floor, and dictating rapidly to a military secretary, who was writing at a table littered with papers.

Von Strelsau was a big, fierce-looking personage, very erect, and grey as a badger. He glanced grimly at Sam from a pair of red eyes as the young messenger was brought in.

"Well," he said, in German, "who sent you here with that flag of truce? You come to surrender, I suppose!"

At any other time Sam would have smiled at this; but he was too anxious to do anything of the sort. He handed the two despatches to Von Strelsau without a word.

The field-marshal ripped open the first one with his finger, and as he read it Sam saw him change colour. Then he perused the other.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed, half to himself. "This must be some trick!"

He turned angrily to Sam, with a flushed face, when a telegraph-service orderly was admitted, bearing an envelope, and saluted.

"From the field-telegraph, sir," he said, handing the message to Von Strelsau, and departing.

The telegram was evidently of the most urgent kind, and Von Strelsau opened it at once.

"Himmel!" he said, under his breath. "It is true, then!" He turned once more to Sam. "Do you know the contents of these despatches?" he said grimly.

"I do," replied Sam.

"The Crown Prince is a prisoner—in the hands of General Blake?" continued the field-marshal, his face suffused with passion.

"No," answered Sam; "he is in the hands of Mr. John Carfax, aboard the airship Condor, now at Husum."

"It is the same thing!" said Von Strelsau curtly.

Sam thought it was quite another thing, but he did not say so. The field-marshal strode to and fro upon the tent floor, a troubled frown on his face.

"Are you an officer?" he said, turning to Sam, and looking him over.

"Yes," said Sam. "I am a lieutenant of cadets."

"Why are you sent with this message?"

"I volunteered to come, because the English prisoner mentioned in those despatches is my brother."

"Ach!" said Von Strelsau, eyeing him fiercely. "You are the elder Villiers, then? General Blake offers an exchange of prisoners, as I suppose you know."

The field-marshal took four or five paces up and down.

"If it rested with the Prince himself, I believe Prince Frederick would refuse any exchange," muttered Von Strelsau, who had a habit of thinking aloud, "if I know anything of him. Why on earth has he let himself be trapped like this?"

"If I may say so," said Sam, "it does not concern only the Prince. If my brother is shot—"

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"Well, what then?" broke in Von Strelsau, bending his brows fiercely upon Sam.

"The whole of Germany will suffer for it, and the Condor's agreement to project no more explosives from the skies will be withdrawn," said Sam. "I don't know if the despatches mention that, but it is true. And I will prophesy, without any fear, that if this execution takes place at noon, Berlin will have ceased to exist before to-morrow morning."

The field-marshal crushed the despatches in his hand, and the veins swelled on his temples.

"I do not say this as a threat," added Sam; "but just as a plain fact. It will happen, as sure as the sun rises. And as to the fate of the Crown Prince, I can say nothing. He is certainly in danger; if I know anything of John Carfax."

Von Strelsau paused, and tapped the ground impatiently with his boot. He believed in letting nothing stand in the way of military operations, and was the roughest of soldiers. He honestly considered that Stephen, being a member of such a vessel as the Condor, ought to be shot. But he found himself in a dilemma.

"I must get the Prince out of it, of course," he muttered; "there is no choice." But he still paused.

"May I remind you," said Sam, trying to speak calmly, "that it is a quarter to twelve, and at five minutes past the hour you will be too late?"

The field-marshal glared at him in a way that suggested nothing would give him greater pleasure than to order out a firing-party for Sam, too, which was indeed the case. But, glancing at the cased clock hanging on the tent-pole, Von Strelsau turned to his secretary.

"Let a message be sent over the field-telegraph at once, to connect with the main wires, and order Colonel Euse, at Erzfeldt, to forbid the execution of his prisoner."

At last the message was sent. Sam still felt painfully anxious, for it seemed to him only too likely that the telegraph connection would not be made in time. The field-marshal noticed his anxiety.

"You need not look so white," he said gruffly. "The message will probably reach Erzfeldt in time. If it does not—well, there's an end of it. You should have come before."

Come before! Sam thought of the Condor's swift rush through the skies, and his own gallop from Husum. If Stephen met his fate after all, Sam knew Carfax's vengeance would be none the less swift. He would lay the blame—and rightly—on the Germans. But that was not much consolation to Sam.

"It so happens that I am sending a lieutenant of Uhlans and two mounted scouts to Erzfeldt," said Strelsau. "As I am doing the thing, I may as well do it thoroughly, so if you choose you may ride with them, and deliver to Colonel Euse the message which will confirm my telegram," he added gruffly.

Sam was surprised at this, and supposed the field-marshal not to be such a bad sort, after all, under a grim exterior. He jumped at the offer.

"I thank you!" he said. "There is nothing I should like so much!"

"Very well. It will relieve my men of the trouble of bringing your brother back when he's released. You will have to look after him. I will give you a passport that will pass you back, if shown to any of the military who may stop you. But you must keep to the main roads."

He spoke to his secretary, who dashed off a few lines on an officially stamped paper, which Von Strelsau signed and handed to Sam.

"Get out with you; you've wasted enough of my time!" he said shortly. "And, by the way, if your brother has been shot, after all, it's no use coming to bother me about it. I shall not admit you. Sergeant, escort this gentleman to Lieutenant Wagner."

Sam was hurried off and delivered into the care of a long-legged Uhlman lieutenant, and, mounting his own horse

again, was soon riding north-eastwards with the officer and the two scouts.

"How far it is to Erzfeldt?" asked Sam.

"A fifteen-mile ride," replied the lieutenant.

Sam had thought it was a good deal more, though remembered the place where Prince Frederick's column been encountered was far beyond. The strange interest he had had with Von Strelsau puzzled Sam. He did not know what to make of the German leader; but at present his anxiety about Stephen overweighed everything else, and there was no solving the question till they reached their destination.

The Uhlman lieutenant seemed not to be a bad sort, proved a very silent companion, and did not care for conversation—a fact that Sam did not at all mind. He pleased him was that the officer was a hard rider, and to get over the ground; consequently they made the journey quickly, and it was hardly one o'clock when Erzfeldt was in sight.

Sam felt a thrill as he saw the old stone house where he had spent such a risky night's scouting. He longed to leave his escort, and spur ahead at full speed to learn the truth. For either Stephen was alive and under that roof, or else the message was too late, and he had been dead nearly an hour. Sam, many perils he had gone through with his brother, felt quite sick with strain.

They reached the manor-house gates, and the sentry passed them into the courtyard.

Colonel Euse came down, stared with a puzzled frown at Sam. The Uhlman said a few words, and Sam thrust his despatch into the Prussian colonel's hands.

"Is my brother alive?" said Sam.

The Prussian gave no answer, nor took any notice of Sam, except to receive the despatch. He read it, his moustache, shrugged his shoulders, and gave an order to a sergeant and file him.

Five minutes later Stephen was brought down, between two guards, and with a crowd of the brothers gripped him.

Free Once More.

There was no need for words between the two, nor was any place in which to say what they had to say. Sam turned to the Prussian colonel.

"I suppose there is nothing to prevent us leaving, now?" he said.

"Nothing whatever," growled the colonel, "and the sooner the better!"

"I suppose you wish to send some guard with us?" asked Sam.

"I suppose there is nothing to prevent us leaving, now?" he said.

"Nothing whatever," growled the colonel, "and the sooner the better!"

"I suppose you wish to send some guard with us?" asked Sam.

"I do not," said the Prussian gruffly; "you may go the devil, and welcome!"

"More like goin' away from him!" chuckled Stephen, who was in the most buoyant spirits again at his release.

The boys left the place at once and walked rapidly down the road, shaking the dust of Erzfeldt from their feet.

"By James, old boy, but you can't guess what it means to me when I saw 'em bringing you out!" said Sam, drawing a long breath. "All the way from Husum to here, I been wonderin' whether you were shot or not."

"I jolly nearly was!" answered Stephen. "The marching me out into the courtyard, an' the firing-party had loaded with ball and were just falling in, when orderly came with a telegram for the colonel. He read it and stopped the show at once."

"My word! Was he sick about it?"

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