

GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER

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EVERY WEDNESDAY



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BAGGY TRIMBLE SEES IT!

(Read—"THE GHOST OF DREBE MANOR!"—This Week's Grand Extra-Long Christmas Story of the "Jumps of St. Jim's"—Inside.)

THE HAUNTED HOUSE! People at Murranhurst won't go near the picturesque house on the cliffs known as Drere Manor for they declare that the spirit of a dead and gone buccaneer roams restlessly through the rooms, striking down all who come to disturb his peace, with his deadly iron hook! And to this haunted house come Tom Merry & Co. for the Christmas holidays, cheerfully determined to lay—



THE GHOST OF DRERE MANOR!

A Grand Extra-Long Story of
Tom Merry & Co., the Chums
of St Jim's, dealing with their
Adventures during the Christ-
mas Vacation.

By Martin Clifford

CHAPTER 1.

The Early Bird!



CLANG, clang!
Jack Blake yawned and sat up in bed as the first notes of the rising-bell disturbed the silence of the Fourth Form dormitory at St. Jim's.

"Groooooough!" he gasped, as he took one look at the frost-encrusted windows of the dormitory.

It was cold, decidedly cold, and Blake was tempted to snuggle down between the sheets again to enjoy an "extra" five minutes. But he conquered the impulse and turned out. The rest of the Fourth, however, did not show the same desire to greet the new morn.

Clang, clang!

Taggles, the school porter, was doing great execution with the bell-rope. Indeed he kept the bell clanging through the frosty air for three minutes over and above the time a strict interpretation of his duties demanded, doubtless with the idea of keeping himself warm.

Clang, clang!

"Phew!" Blake drew in a deep breath as his bare feet touched the icy surface of the polished floor. But he soon became accustomed to the sharp nip in the air, and was busy with soap and water before the bell had ceased its clangour.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the shining light of the Fourth, poked his elegant nose above the bedclothes and sniffed the cold air.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "It's nearly tweezin'!"

He drew the bedclothes about him tighter and settled down to enjoy another few minutes, and his action was followed by practically the rest of the Fourth. Really, it required no little courage to leap from one's bed on such a cold morning.

Jack Blake turned a ruddy face from the washstand. He had got over the first chilling effects, and his face was a picture of health as he towelled away at it vigorously. But he glared as he saw the Fourth settle down again between the warm sheets.

"Tumble up, you slackers!" he roared.

"Gerraway!"

"Sherrup!"

The Fourth did not take kindly to Blake's suggestion.

"Turn out!"

Blake caught up a sponge and dipped it generously in the cold water jug. Then, with a grin, he advanced on the first bed. It was occupied by George Herries. That junior was ruminating how pleasant it was to live in a warm climate when Blake's grinning face broke in upon these pleasant reflections.

"Turn out!" said Blake.

Herries drew the bedclothes tighter around him

"Gerraway!" he said, with a shudder. "It's thumping cold, and I'm going to hang it out for a bit."

"Your little mistake!" remarked Blake, with a chuckle. "We don't allow slacking in the Fourth."

"But it's c-cold!" protested Herries.

"And so is this sponge!"

Herries caught a glimpse of the dripping sponge for the first time. The sight of it set his teeth chattering.

"Don't you come near me with that!" he hooted.

"I'm going to count three," said Blake. "If you're not out of bed by then we'll see what a little cold water will do!"

"If you dare—" began Herries wrathfully.

Blake poised the sponge over Herries' head.

"One—"

Herries took another look at the sponge and shuddered.

"Two—"

"Hold on!" gasped Herries. "I'm g-getting up!"

He sprang from his bed just in time.

"You silly idiot!" he exclaimed. "Wow! It's freezing!"

Blake chuckled and moved to the next bed. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy eyed him uneasily.

"Don't you dare squeeze that wotten sponge ovah me, Blake—"

"I'm going to count three," said Blake.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "You unfeelin' wottah!"

"One—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy pulled the bedclothes over his head.

"Two—" said Blake relentlessly.

"Gewwaway, you wottah!" came Gussy's muffled voice.

"Three!"

At the word Blake pulled the bedclothes from D'Arcy's bed and squeezed the dripping sponge over that hapless junior's face.

"Yawwoooooh!"

There was a fiendish roar from Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as the stream of cold water gushed in his face. He leaped from his bed like a rocket.

"You wottah, Blake!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The rest of the Fourth saw something funny in Gussy's misfortune, but they turned out quickly enough as Blake advanced along the row of beds. Even Trimble, whose unmusical snore filled the dormitory long after rising-bell had clanged out, scrambled from his bed when he caught sight of that terrifying sponge.

"Keep off, you rotter!" he roared. "Grooooooh! Ain't it cold!"

"It's a ripping morning!" said Blake. "Much too good, anyway, to skulk in bed, my fat pippin!"

"Ow!" Trimble held different views on the subject.

Blake walked on with the sponge. Really, it was surprising how effective this simple weapon was. The Fourth-Formers turned out with alacrity at the mere sight of it at close quarters.

Blake halted at the last bed, and noted with some surprise that Kit Wildrake wasn't in it. What was more, Wildrake was nowhere to be seen in the dormitory at least. Then Blake's attention was drawn to a sheet of paper which was pinned to the pillow and was addressed to himself in a hurried, scrawling hand.

He took the note and unfolded it. The message ran:

"6.35 a.m.

"Dear Blake,—I couldn't sleep for thinking of Buck up at Drere Manor, so I got up early to cycle over to Murranhurst to see that he's all right.

"KIT."

"Well, I'm blessed!" ejaculated Blake.

He crossed over to his chums.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's face was wrathful. He hadn't forgiven Blake for drenching him with cold water.

"You wottah!" he began.

"Shut up, Gussy!" said Blake. "And give your chin a rest!"

"Weally, Blake—"

The leader of Study No. 6 showed his chums the letter Kit Wildrake had left behind him.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy when he had read it. "I can quite undahstand Wildwake's anxiety."

Blake snorted.

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

Arthur Augustus crimsoned.

"No, I don't, deah boy," he said. "But you wemembah when we went with Wildwake and his Western friend to look ovah Dweeah Manah yestahday that we saw enough to make us believe that somethin' out of the ordinawy goes on there."

The juniors were silent for a moment.

Their thoughts went back to the strange events of the day

before when they had accompanied Kit Wildrake and his old ranch chum, Buck Whipcord, to Murranhurst. Buck and the juniors had set out to view Drere Manor, a lonely mansion perched on the cliffs, which was for sale.

There was a legend attached to the manor that it was haunted by a buccaner, who had lived in the place two hundred years or more ago. Buck Whipcord, a man of the plains, had laughed that legend to scorn, and the juniors had certainly felt no fear of ghosts in his breezy company.

But facts were facts, and the facts as they had heard them were strange, to say the least of it. On their arrival at Drere Manor Buck and the juniors had discovered that a rich American was being shown over the house. The American had taken a fancy to the place, and had purchased it on the spot. But inside half an hour of his having bought the manor he had rushed hot-foot into the estate agent's offices and demanded his money back. He had, according to his own story, come face to face with the terrifying apparition of the buccaner, and had been struck down by him. Not for all the wealth in the kingdom would he stay another night in Drere Manor.

Buck Whipcord had straightway stated his intention of buying the place on behalf of Kit Wildrake's uncle. His cheque had been accepted by the house agent, and without delay Buck had taken up his quarters at the haunted manor. Buck did not believe in ghosts, but he was anxious for all that to meet the mysterious apparition that was alleged to roam the manor.

The juniors had returned to St. Jim's, leaving Buck alone at the haunted house, and Kit Wildrake had been naturally anxious on Buck Whipcord's account.

"Of course it's all rot," said Blake, breaking the silence.

"There's no such things as ghosts!"

Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy nodded.

"Still, I wouldn't like to spend a night alone in the place," said Digby.

"Wathah not!"

"You remember the people at Murranhurst said that the American johnny's hair was snow-white when he came out of Drere Manor," said Herries, "and he hadn't been in the place more than half an hour."

The chums of Study No. 6 nodded.

"Something pretty startling must have happened to have caused that," went on Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"No wonder Wildrake is concerned about Buck Whipcord," said Digby. "I should be, in the circumstances."

"From what I saw of Buck," remarked Blake, "I should say that he's more than capable of looking after himself."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus. "But the ghost—"

Blake snorted.

"There's no such thing as a ghost! But there'll be a thumping row when Wildrake gets back. He'll get it in the neck from Latham for cutting breakfast—"

"Unless he gets back in time," said Digby.

"How can he get to Murranhurst and back before breakfast?" said Blake. "It's about fifteen miles each way."

"I'd forgotten that," said Digby.

The chums of Study No. 6 dropped the subject and resumed their toilet. In the cold, sharp air of morning it was hard to give credence to the ghost story of Drere Manor, but, for all that, their thoughts were fixed on Buck Whipcord, and they, too, wondered how he had passed the night.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mystic Message!

"HANG it!"

Kit Wildrake made that ejaculation as he surveyed the punctured tyre on the back wheel of his bicycle.

"Just my luck!" he grunted.

He was about seven miles from St. Jim's on the deserted stretch of road when the bumping of the steel rim of his back wheel on the hard ground told him that his tyre was punctured. In the ordinary course of events, Wildrake would have mended that puncture in less than a quarter of an hour and resumed his journey, but on this occasion he carried no repairing outfit. Really it was annoying. In his anxiety to learn how Buck Whipcord was, he



had risen early and dodged out through the gates, when Taggles' back had been turned, and had pedalled swiftly along the road to Murranhurst. It was a long journey he had set himself, and he had broken the rules of the school to

do it. But the risk he had considered worth while. And now here he was stranded seven miles from St. Jim's and eight miles from his objective with a puncture that he couldn't mend.

"Confound it!" exclaimed Kit wrathfully.

He was about to remount the bike and pedal it along to Murranhurst on its rim, when the roar of a motor-cycle approaching his direction reached his ears.

Kit's face lit up. If he could manage to stop the cyclist and beg the loan of his repairing outfit for a few minutes, he—

He ran into the centre of the road and waited for the motor-cyclist to come up.

It proved to be Cutts of the Fifth at St. Jim's.

The elegant Fifth-Former possessed a motor-bike, and he often exerted himself to the extent of getting up early and leaving the school at rising bell for a short run on his bike before breakfast.

Wildrake let out a whoop and waved his arm vigorously.

"Hold on! Cutts, hold on!"

The Fifth-Former came up with a rush, but he applied his brakes when he saw Kit Wildrake barring his path.

"What the thump do you think you're doing?" he demanded wrathfully.

Cutts had a "short" way with fags, in which category he was pleased to place any Form below the Fifth.

"I've had a puncture," explained Wildrake.

"You'll have a thick ear if you don't get out of the way," growled Cutts. "I've only a quarter of an hour before breakfast, and I don't want to spend it gassing to a blessed fag."

"I've had a puncture," repeated Wildrake, "and I haven't got a repairing outfit. Will you lend me yours for a few minutes?"

Cutts' face broke into an unpleasant grin.

"So you've got a puncture, have you," he drawled, looking at Wildrake's damaged bike. "An' you've got the cheek to ask me to lend you my repairing outfit?"

"I don't see any cheek in that," said Wildrake quietly. "I'm in a hurry. If you'll oblige me, Cutts—"

"Not dashed likely!" retorted Cutts. "You can walk back to the school. It'll do you good, you cheeky fag!"

Wildrake's eyes blazed. He had not expected Cutts to loan him the necessary repairing outfit willingly, for Cutts was not an obliging sort. But he hadn't reckoned on being left by a St. Jim's man to walk seven miles pushing a punctured cycle. That was not the code of the road. Had the positions been reversed, Wildrake would have been the first to help Cutts out of his difficulty, as much as he disliked the supercilious Fifth-Former and his shady ways.

"Now, will you get out of the way?" asked Cutts, with a mocking grin. "You'll have to get a move on, anyway, if you want any breakfast."

The Fourth Form junior did not budge. A wild idea had come into his mind.

"Get out of the way, you cheeky rotter!" hooted Cutts, "or I'll give you something to make you!"

"Will you?" said Wildrake, his eyes gleaming.

And before Cutts could realise what was happening, the Fourth Form junior made a grab at Cutts' cap and flung it away as far as he could.

"You rotter!" roared Cutts, getting off his motor-bike. "I'll smash you for that!"

He came at Wildrake with eyes glinting savagely. But Wildrake backed away.

"Come here!" roared the enraged Fifth-Former, striding after him.

"Go and boil your head!"

Cutts broke into a run as Wildrake retreated, little suspecting that Wildrake's one idea was to get him as far away from the motor-cycle as he could. But he saw the move when he had been lured away about twenty yards, for the Fourth-Former suddenly wheeled and dashed back to the motor-bike as fast as he could lay heel to the ground.

"Don't you touch that bike!" spluttered Cutts.

But Kit wasn't likely to take heed of that order. He reached the bike, panting, and Cutts was pounding along only a few yards away now.

Wildrake kicked hard on the starter, and for once in a way, Cutts' motor-bike responded first time. There was a deafening roar as the engine burst into motion. Next moment Kit had settled himself in the saddle and put the machine into gear.

"Get off my bike!" roared Cutts.

His outstretched fingers came within six inches of Kit's back, but a miss is as good as a mile, for the bike suddenly shot away with Kit astride, and all Cutts got for his pains was a choking volume of smoke from the exhaust.

He stood in the middle of the road gasping and spluttering his wrath. Then he started off at a run in pursuit.

Kit, looking back, throttled down and allowed the enraged Fifth-Former to get within a few yards of him.

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"Get off that bike!" roared Cutts.

Wildrake grinned.

"Try that walk back to St. Jim's you were telling me about," he yelled. "It will do you good! You'll have to get a move on if you want any breakfast, you know!"

"Get off—" began Cutts furiously.

But his words were lost as Kit opened up the machine and sent it away at a rare speed.

Next time the Fourth-Former glanced back over his shoulder he saw Cutts, a small figure in the distance, waving his fist in impotent rage.

"Serve the rotter right!" muttered Kit, as he settled down comfortably over the racing handlebars.

It was poetic justice with a vengeance, but Cutts did not see it in that light. The prospect of walking seven miles before breakfast made the Fifth-Former grind his teeth with rage. He couldn't even use Wildrake's punctured bike, for the frame was far too small to allow any comfort for his long legs. With feelings too deep for words, Cutts swung off in the direction of St. Jim's, promising Wildrake the hiding of his life when he returned to school.

Meantime, Kit was eating up the miles to Murranhurst. It was pleasant enough scorching along through the country roads at that hour of the day, and the sting of the cold air was exhilarating. But Kit was uneasy. He was thinking of Buck Whipcord. Suppose something had happened to him?

He gritted his teeth and managed to squeeze another five miles an hour out of the bike.

With a zip and a roar, he sped through the narrow main street of Murranhurst, and forged along the road to Drere Manor. Then, remembering that there was a short cut, he dismounted and propped the bike against a tree.

He set off at a run across a field until he came to a big belt of trees. On the other side of the trees he knew lay Drere Manor.

Half-way through the belt of trees he suddenly espied a figure that made him search his memory to place where he had encountered the man before. But for once Kit's memory failed him.

The man looked sharply at Kit as he dashed past and started. A peculiar expression came over his face, and his eyes narrowed. But Kit did not notice these things. He sped on, unconscious that the man had stopped and was watching him. Then the massive pile of Drere Manor, perched on the summit of the cliff, came in sight.

Kit halted and gazed at it searchingly.

It looked less eerie and awe-inspiring in the early-morning sun than it had done the previous afternoon; but Kit felt instinctively that there was something uncanny about it. What was its secret?

His eyes ran over the battlements where the day before he could have sworn that he had seen a ghostly form outlined against the sky. But they looked as deserted as a graveyard now.

Next minute he was pounding up the weed-covered drive and pulling on the bell by the side of the iron-studded door.

The clanging of the bell echoed and re-echoed in the house. Kit waited anxiously, breathlessly. Next moment came the sounds of firmly-planted feet, and the junior's heart steadied with relief as he recognised the heavy tread of Buck Whipcord.

The door opened, and Buck Whipcord peered out.

His eyes nearly started from their sockets when he beheld Kit at that hour in the morning.

"Jumping snakes!" he exclaimed. "Sure, I must be dreamin'! Why, it's Kit!"

Wildrake grasped the Westerner's horny hand, and shook it warmly.

"I couldn't stand the suspense any longer!" he panted.

"I simply had to come and see that you were all right, Buck!"

"Waal, this sure beats the band, sonny!" drawled Buck. "But come right in, sonny! Reckon you've been worryin' yerself 'bout this spook business!"

Kit felt half ashamed as he followed the picturesque Westerner into the oak-panelled library. A log fire was blazing merrily on the hearth, and its warmth was comforting.

Buck took Kit by the shoulders, and stood looking down at him, a kindly expression in his mahogany-coloured face.

"Ye're a real little bit o' gold, sonny," he said, "comin' 'long ter sec how yore ole pard Buck were. But you kin see that no blamed ghost has had a night's excitement out o' me!"

"Nothing—nothing happened at all?" queried Kit.

"Nothin' at all!" drawled Buck, shaking his head regretfully. "It's a durned pity, 'cos I lost a whole heap o' me beauty sleep waitin' up fer this spook." He tapped the two six-shooters that were holstered to a broad leather belt round his waist. "I hed a dandy li'l k.o. fer the blighter!"



"Stop!" Mr. Ratcliff danced down the quad with upraised cane, his gown flimsying out behind him. "Stop!" "Go and fry your face!" roared Blake. "Happy Christmas!" sang out Figgins derisively. "Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tom Merry & Co. (See Chapter 6.)

Kit smiled. He began to censure himself for allowing his fears to prey on his mind. Looking at Buck now he wondered what ghost would have the temerity to appear before this fierce-looking man of the plains. Indeed, had Buck shown himself at night on the battlements with that flaming red shirt of his, the broad-brimmed sombrero, the two six-shooters slung at his waist, and those knee-boots of raw hide, any of the village folk chancing to see him would doubtless rebuild the legend of Drere Manor, so to speak, and make it known that a tall, fierce-looking cowboy, with two six-shooters, had ousted the ghostly buccancer and reigned in his stead.

"Then I've had my journey for nothing," said Kit, with a smile. "I had a fear, Buck, that something had happened to you."

"Waal, just take a pinch o' me to make certain!" grinned Buck. "But ain't you s'posed to be at lessons or somethin'?"

"Oh, I took french leave," said Kit. "And I borrowed a chap's motor-bike without his permission."

"Yer seem to be pilin' up a whole heap o' trouble on my account," said Buck gravely.

"Oh, those are small things!" said Kit. "The main thing is that you're all right."

"An' hev you bitten any brekker, sonny?" asked Buck. Kit shook his head.

"Waal, reckon you'd best join me, Kit," drawled Buck. "I'm that peckish meself that I could scrag a ghost even."

He led the way into the spacious kitchen. A big fire was crackling in the kitchen range. Atop of it a kettle was singing merrily, and a frying-pan, which contained half a dozen sizzling sausages, threw off an appetising odour.

"Sha'n't be two shakes!" said Buck, as he turned the sausages. "Reckon this sort o' feed is a whole heap better'n your hotel breakfasts. Never could get wise to them sheets of linen they give yer to shove round yore neck, 'case you spill anythin', just like a blamed kid!"

Kit laughed, and busied himself in laying the table.

The room was getting warm as a result of the big fire Buck had heaped up in the grate, and Kit was about to open one of the windows when a strange thing happened.

"Look!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Buck! Buck! Look!"

Buck nearly deposited the contents of the frying-pan into the fire as Kit's wild shout rang out.

"Here, steady on, younker!" he growled. "You sure startled me! What's bitin' yer?"

For answer Kit pointed a shaking finger at the window.

Across the glass, as if written with a magician's invisible pen, appeared a number of thin, spidery letters, crimson in colour, that formed themselves into a legible message:

"HO! YE DISTURBERS OF MY PEACE, BEWARE!"

"Snakes!" This time the sausages did find their way into the fire, as Buck, in his astonishment, relinquished his grasp of the frying-pan.

"Wha-a-nt is it?" gasped Kit.

Buck scratched his head in perplexity.

"Darned if I know!" he admitted. "There ain't nobody about playin' tricks, is there, sonny?"

Kit licked his dry lips.

"How can there be anyone playing tricks?" he said hoarsely, "when we both saw those words forming? It's—it's uncanny!"

Wildrake felt a shiver run down his spine, as he looked at that ghostly message. How it had appeared he couldn't for the life of him imagine. He had heard of ghostly phenomena from Skimpole of the Shell, and had openly laughed at it. But now—

The letters seemed to fascinate him. They were spidery and irregular enough to suggest that if there were such things as ghostly phenomena then he was indeed gazing at an illustration of them at close quarters.

Wildrake shuddered.

Buck's face was a study. He had seen for himself that

the message had appeared on the pane without the aid of any human agency. Yet he did not admit that it was the work of the supernatural.

He strode up to the window fearlessly, peered at it, his nose an inch away from it, opened it outwards, and then stared out into the shrubbery that backed the kitchen. But save for the gentle sighing of the trees and the monotonous swishing of the waves as they broke over the rocks below, all was still.

Buck strode back to Kit.

"Brace up, younker!" he said, with a grin. "Guess that kind o' trick don't cut no ice wiv me!"

"Trick!" exclaimed Kit. "Then you saw something, Buck, to explain it?"

Buck shook his head.

"Not so much as a fly did I see," he answered. "But I'm powerful sure that that goldurned message ain't genuine. 'Cos why? 'Cos there ain't no sich things as spooks. An' if there was they wouldn't play the blamed goat like that!"

Buck may have reassured himself that the message was trickery of some sort; but Kit Wildrake could not share that comfort. How could it be a trick, he asked himself. How—

His eyes were drawn again to the window which Buck had left open.

"Where's it gone?" he exclaimed suddenly.

"Where's what gawn?" asked Buck gruffly.

"The message!"

Both of them looked at the window which had provided them with that eerie sensation. It furnished them with another now, for there was no sign of the message; it had disappeared as magically as it had appeared.

"I—I—I don't like this!" muttered Kit Wildrake. "It's positively uncanny!"

"Uncanny!" hooted Buck. "I calls it unholy! My! I'd like to git my hands on the doggone hobo who's chucking this game at us! I'll—"

"Then you're not scared, Buck?" asked Kit, with a shudder.

"Scared!" Buck braced his shoulders and slapped his hips. "I'd jest like ter see the ghost that kin scare me, sonny? Don't you take no notice of this tomfoolery. I'll get to the bottom of it before long, take it from me!"

And Buck meant what he said.

Kit did not stay to breakfast, after all. For one thing, the sausages had been burnt to a cinder, which meant that Buck would have to lay in fresh supplies from the village store; and, for another, Kit was anxious to get out of the place and back to St. Jim's.

"I'd better be getting along," he said to Buck. "I can just manage to get in before first lesson, if I scoot!"

"Right you are, sonny," drawled Buck. "But don't you git worritin' 'bout me being on my lonesome here, 'cos I kin take care of meself and the blamed ghost as well. I'll be telegraphing your uncle to-day, an' mebbe he'll put you wise as to what he's doin' over the Christmas. 'Spect he'll invite you and your pals to stay over the vacation."

"We break up for the Christmas vac on Thursday," said Kit. "I've already suggested to Tom Merry and the others that Nunks will ask us down here. Won't be so bad ghost-hunting, if there's a crowd of us."

"Something in that!" drawled Buck.

He walked down the drive with Kit, and saw him to the spot where he had left the motor-bike.

"Off you git, sonny!" he said kindly. "An' don't git scared 'bout me!"

He gave the junior a reassuring smile, and waved him off, and Kit, for the nonce, put aside all thoughts of Drere Manor and its ghost in an endeavour to reach St. Jim's before first lesson.

CHAPTER 3.

Cutts Asks for It!



"WHERE'S that ass Wildrake?"

Blake whispered the words to Digby as Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth at St. Jim's swept into the Form-room, to take first lesson.

"He's not back yet," replied Digby, with a glance at Wildrake's empty place.

Mr. Lathom looked up sharply.

"You were talking, Digby?"

"Was I, sir?"

"You will take a hundred lines!"

"Oh, yes, sir!"

Digby ventured no more remarks after that. Evidently Mr. Lathom, usually the mildest tempered of

masters, was on the warpath that morning.

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The master of the Fourth proceeded to call the roll:

"Blake!"

"Adsum!"

"D'Arcy!"

"Adsum!"

"Wildrake!"

There was no answer.

Mr. Lathom's brows knitted a trifle.

"Wildrake!"

Silence!

"Bless my soul!" snapped the master of the Fourth. "The boy is not here!"

At that moment the door of the Form-room was swung open, and Kit Wildrake dashed in, breathless. His face fell when he saw the assembled class and Mr. Lathom's frowning brow.

"Wildrake!" thundered Mr. Lathom. "How is it that you are late? And why were you not at breakfast?"

"I had to go out of gates, sir," said Wildrake meekly.

"Indeed, sir!" snapped the master of the Fourth. "And had you permission to be absent from breakfast?"

"No, sir!"

"And now you make your offence worse by presenting yourself for first lesson five minutes late!" said Mr. Lathom severely. "Have you no excuse to offer?"

"Nothing, sir," answered Wildrake, "except that my business kept me later than I expected."

"And that business, sir, I take it you regard as being more important than your lessons?"

Wildrake was silent. It was not judicious to tell Mr. Lathom that that business had been considered more important than three-quarters of an hour with Latin.

"Come here, boy!" snapped Mr. Lathom, reaching for his pointer.

Wildrake advanced to the Form master's desk.

"You boys are aware," said Mr. Lathom, "that Dr. Holmes has had occasion to find fault with the slackness of this Form just recently. That does not reflect credit on myself. I will not countenance any further slackness, although it happens to be the last week of term. Hold out your hand, Wildrake!"

Swish!

Wildrake winced as the cane bit deep into his palm.

"Now the other hand!"

Swish!

"Now go back to your place, and kindly remember, Wildrake, that punctuality is a virtue!"

And Kit Wildrake went to his place with a smart in each palm. Really, it was the worst of bad luck that had made him late for class, for he had scorched all the way from Murrinhurst, and had whizzed through the gates at St. Jim's, only to find Cutts waiting for him by the bike shed.

He had dodged the enraged Fifth-Former, but precious moments had been wasted.

"Hard cheese!" muttered Blake, as Wildrake passed him.

"Blake, you were talking!" Mr. Lathom's voice cut through the atmosphere like a knife.

"Yes, sir!"

"What did you say to Wildrake?"

"Hard cheese, sir," said Blake, with a blush.

Mr. Lathom stared, and a titter ran round the class.

"H-hard e-cheese!" stuttered the master of the Fourth. "What on earth do you mean by that, boy?"

"It's an expression of—of sympathy, sir," said Blake.

"Indeed!" snapped Mr. Lathom. "Am I to understand from that that you think Wildrake's punishment calls for sympathy?"

This was a poser, and Blake, unable to reply, fidgeted first on one foot and then on the other.

"Your silence indicates that it does," said the master of the Fourth. "It implies, therefore, that you think I have done Wildrake an injustice."

It hadn't implied anything of the sort as Blake had meant it, but, as had already been seen, Mr. Lathom was in an irritable mood. He picked up the cane again.

"Stand out in front, Blake!"

The leader of Study No. 5 did as he was bid.

Swish, swish!

The cane swooped down twice, and Blake was sent back to his place, with hands tucked up under his armpits and an extraordinary expression on his face. Needless to say, no one had the temerity to openly express his sympathy at Blake's fate.

The lesson proceeded in a tense atmosphere. Mr. Lathom was sharper than ever that brisk, cold morning, and he came down heavy on any junior who was unwise enough to talk while he expounded the hidden beauties of Latin. As a matter of actual fact the master of the Fourth had been called over the coals by Dr. Holmes at the bad term reports

of his Form, and he was feeling a trifle sore with his class in consequence.

Dr. Holmes had pointed out that the boys were at St. Jim's to learn, and Mr. Lathom had, in turn, pointed out that that view had been drummed into the Fourth. But, apparently, the Fourth, not unlike other junior schoolboys through the ages, held different views of the matter.

Both master and boys were glad when morning break came round. The juniors filed out in an orderly manner, and Blake & Co. waited for Kit Wildrake.

"Well?" said Blake, when Kit came out. "How's Buck?"

"Right as a trivet," said Wildrake.

"No more ghost walking?"

"Nothing happened at all," replied Kit. It was on the tip of his tongue to speak about the mysterious message that had appeared on the kitchen window of Drere Manor, but he thought better of it.

"But how did you get back so soon?" asked Herries.

Wildrake grinned.

"I borrowed Cutts' motor-bike," he said.

And he told Blake & Co. of the puncture to his back tyre, and of the subsequent meeting with Cutts.

"He'll be after your blood!" chuckled Blake.

"He's tried to nab me once," said Kit. "That's why I was late in class."

"The silly owl!" hooted Blake. "And that's why old Lathom went on the giddy warpath! Really, it's all Cutts' fault."

"Well, if you like to put it like that," grinned Wildrake, "I have no objection."

"If he comes snooping around here," growled Blake, "we'll slaughter him."

"Yaas, wathah!" agreed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I vegard Cutts as a fwrightful boundah!"

The juniors trooped back into the Form-room as the bell rang for second lesson, and their faces lit up with pleasure when it was seen that the threatened snow had begun to fall. Morning lessons passed swiftly after that, and with a whoop and a roar the Fourth Form, practically to a man, swooped out into the quad.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake suddenly, pausing in the net of rolling a snowball. "Here's Tom Merry & Co.!"

The Terrible Three came down the stone steps of the School House talking amongst themselves.

Swoooosh!

Plop!

Swish!

Three snowballs, beautifully aimed, caught Tom Merry & Co. upon their respective faces.

"Yaroooh!" howled Tom Merry, as the snow began to trickle down his collar.

"Whoop!" gasped Manners, clawing a mass of snow from his eye.

"Grooooooh!" roared Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake & Co. "Caught you napping that time, my pippins. You Shell chaps go about with your eyes closed!"

"Go for the rotters!" exclaimed Tom Merry, stooping and gathering up a handful of snow.

"Give 'em beans!"

"Sock in to them!" roared Lowther.

In a moment the air was thick with flying snowballs. As the Shell juniors came out from classes into the quad they joined in the snow fight, and Blake & Co. were forced to retreat.

"Stick it, Shell!" called out Tom Merry.

"Back up, Fourth!" howled Blake. "Back up—Yooooooop!"

His call to arms was cut short as a well-directed snowball caught him full in the mouth.

The juniors were making the most of that snowfall. The

air was thick with flying missiles, and grunts and howls rose on all sides as the snowballs found their billets.

And into the battle area, so to speak, wandered Cutts of the Fifth in search of vengeance. He had seen Kit Wildrake in the quad from the big window at the side of the School House steps.

The elegant Fifth-Former made a circuitous route to dodge the line of fire, but snowballs went perilously near him for all that. He came up behind Kit Wildrake at last, however, and caught him by the collar.

"Got you, you little rotter!" he hissed.

Wildrake recognised the voice, and he began to squirm in Cutts' strong grasp. But the Fifth-Former had the advantage of position and weight.

"Rescue!" roared Wildrake, as Cutts' knuckles began to grind into his neck.

Hostilities ceased as that appeal went up.

"Cutts!" hooted Blake.

"Fifth Form swanker!" roared Tom Merry. "Can't have any of the Fifth handling a Fourth Form man!"

"No fear!"

The two factions united in a common cause, and at the word from their respective leaders they charged down upon Cutts of the Fifth.

"If you fags dare to lay a hand on me—" began Cutts.

And that was all he had time to say. Next minute scores of hands were plucking at him.

Bump!

"Whooooop!"

Cutts of the Fifth descended to the ground with a swarm of Fourth and Shell juniors on top of him.

"Lemme gerrup!" he howled. "Yooop! Mmmmmmm!"

Someone obligingly shoved a handful of snow into Cutts' wide-open mouth, and the Fifth-Former's words ended in a gurgle.

Kit Wildrake scrambled up and jerked his collar straight.

"Roll the rotter in the snow!" suggested Blake. "Like his cheek to handle a Fourth Form man!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Roll him over!"

"Yow! Stoppit!" shrieked Cutts.

But he was rolled over by willing hands. Cutts was just beginning to

realise that he had been a trifle hasty in seeking vengeance. He was rolled over and over until he resembled a snow man. Snow was rubbed in his ears, down his neck, up his sleeves, in his mouth.

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

"Give him socks!"

"Yooop! Yow-wow! Whoop!" howled Cutts.

"Now give him a volley!" gasped Blake, as the Fifth-Former was allowed to scramble to his feet.

"You rotters—" began Cutts, gasping for breath.

The juniors were scooping in the snow, making snowballs. "Save your jaw and get on the fun," said Blake. "Perhaps that'll give you a start."

Plop!

A snowball landed between Cutts' collar and his neck.

"Yaroooh!"

Cutts of the Fifth "got on the run." Indeed, he ran as if he were on the cinder-track, and snowballs followed him all the way, fast and furiously.

The elegant Fifth-Former did not look so elegant when he reached the sanctuary of the School House. He was dripping wet and breathless.

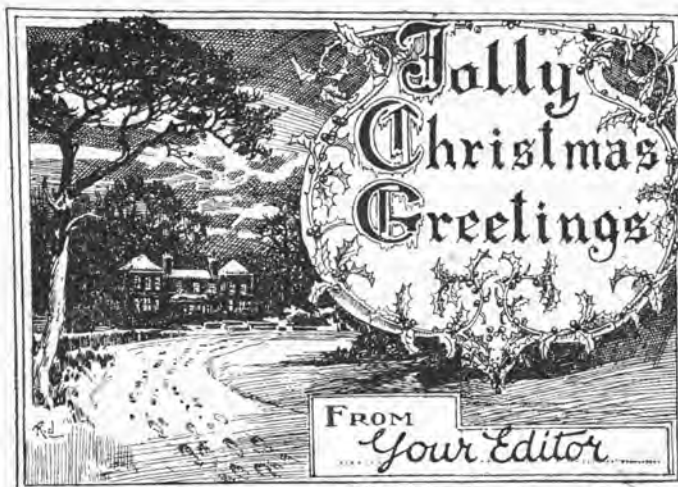
"Ha, ha, ha!"

A roar of laughter went up from the quad as Cutts disappeared from view.

"Any more swanking Fifth-Formers waiting for trouble?" said Monty Lowther, tossing up a hard, crisp, snowball.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But there was a dearth of "swanking Fifth-Formers" in the quad that morning, it being considered *infra dig*



for a senior to engage in a common snowfight with members of Lower Forms. And the Fourth and Shell had the quad and the snow to themselves until the bell rang for dinner.

CHAPTER 4.

The Story of Drere Manor!



"LETTER in the rack for you, Wildrake!"

Ralph Reckness Cardew passed Kit Wildrake in the passage that same evening, and offered the information.

"Thanks!" said Kit.

He had seen the evening post come in, and he rather expected a letter from his uncle. He was not disappointed. An expressed letter was in the rack, and its outer covering bore Nunk's well-known caligraphy.

Kit slit the envelope and drew out the missive. It ran:

"My dear Kit,—Have just been on the phone to Buck, and have heard

about the purchase of Drere Manor, and the 'alarming' events that led up to Buck buying the place. I've had my eye on that manor for some time now, and have a great fancy to spend my first Christmas in England there. Now, Christmas without you, my dear boy, will not be complete, so I hasten to ask you, and as many friends as you care to bring along, to spend the Christmas vacation with me and Buck. I'm not taking 'no' for an answer.

"Your affectionate

"UNCLE."

"P.S.—Enclosed may be of use to you, sonny."

Kit looked into the envelope again, and drew out three rustling five-pound notes. He let out a whoop of satisfaction.

"The old brick!" he exclaimed.

He hurried off to Study No. 6 to tell the good news. Now that Nunks and Buck and a crowd of St. Jim's juniors were to be at the manor, it seemed to lose all its ghostly terrors.

Wildrake found Study No. 6 at home. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was studying with great care a coloured catalogue he had received from his tailor showing all the latest styles in gentlemen's clothing. Herries was busy polishing his beloved cornet, Digby was engrossed in a copy of the "Holiday Annual," and Blake was baking chestnuts on a shovel over the fire.

"May I come in?" asked Wildrake, with a grin.

"Trot in, little stranger," said Blake invitingly, "and help yourself to the chestnuts."

"Thanks, I will!"

Kit tried the chestnuts and found them to his liking. Then he came to the business in hand.

"You know I mentioned to you chaps that I expected Nunks to ask me and a crowd of St. Jim's fellows down to Drere Manor for the Christmas vac?"

"You did!" said Blake.

"Well, Nunks has turned up trumps. He wants me to take my friends along with me. Would you chaps care to come?"

"What-ho!" exclaimed Blake readily.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Study No. 6, without exception, accepted the invitation with grateful thanks.

"We'll be able to lay that ghost," said Blake, munching chestnuts. "That'll be rare fun."

"Yaas, wathah, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with enthusiasm. "I have been doin' a bit of thinkin', you know."

"Have you really?" asked Herries, closing one eye at Blake.

"Yaas," said Gussy. "And I have come to the conclusion that this ghost business is eithah the pproduct of an excitable imagination or twickewy or—"

"A real ghost!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies, pway don't take the words out of my mouth."

"You think that, do you, Gussy?" said Blake admiringly. "Marvellous!"

"Yaas, I considah that it is eithah one of those three things," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "You see, I've worked it out, you know!"

"Oh, my hat!" gurgled Digby. "Isn't he a corker."

"What did you say, Digbay?" asked the swell of the Fourth suspiciously.

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"I said what a worker," said Digby, controlling his facial muscles.

"Yaas, I flattah myself that I have found the solution in one of those three things," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "When we get to Dweah Manah I shall be able to put these theowies to the test. What are you laughin' at, Hewwies?"

"This funny picture in the 'Holiday Annual,'" said Herries readily. "It shows that fat chap Bunter, of Greyfriars, looking for his glasses, and the silly ass has got them on his nose all the time. Some people can never see the obvious without putting themselves to a lot of unnecessary time and trouble."

"You're right!" said Arthur Augustus, and Kit Wildrake—who couldn't hold his laughter any longer—beat a hasty retreat from the study and went in search of Tom Merry & Co. in the Shell passage.

He passed Baggy Trimble in the passage, and that fat youth was roaring.

"What's up, fatty?" asked Wildrake.

"That beast Tom Merry kicked me," he gasped. "Me, you know!"

"What for?" asked Wildrake.

"Just because I put my head round his study door."

"Well, I can understand that in a way," said Kit thoughtfully. "You see, that face of yours wants getting used to. I'm used to it, because they've landed you in my study. A case of familiarity breeds contempt."

"Yah!" hooted Baggy. "That beast Merry got a whacking cake, and he thinks I want to butt into the study just because of that."

"And didn't you?"

"Yes, I mean no. As if I want his mouldy cake."

The fat Fourth-Former snorted and rolled on down the passage. Kit grinned and stepped it out for Study No. 10. The door was thrown open a little, and Kit put his head round it. Next moment he staggered back with a wild yell as a football landed on his nose.

Bump!

"Whoooooop!"

Wildrake sat down in the Shell passage with a bump and a roar.

There was an ejaculation of dismay from inside the study.

"That wasn't Trimble, Monty, you ass!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The door of Study No. 10 was flung open and the Terrible Three appeared on the threshold.

They stared at Kit Wildrake in dismay.

"You silly asses!" roared Kit. "You burbling jabber-wocks! What did you want to do that for?"

Monty Lowther stepped forward and helped Wildrake to his feet.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said penitently. "You see, I thought it was Trimble."

Tom Merry chipped in.

"I've got a cake, Wildrake," he explained, "and Trimble found out about it as he does most things."

"And the fat rotter kept nosing his way into the study," finished Manners.

"We'd chucked him out twice," added Monty Lowther.

"And I thought it was the fat barrel returning."

Kit Wildrake grinned.

"It's all right," he said. "I came to ask you chaps if you'd like to spend the vac with me and Blake & Co. down at Drere Manor. Nunks wrote me to-night saying that I could take as many fellows as I liked."

"Count on us," said Tom Merry.

"Rather!" said Lowther.

"And don't forget little me," said Manners, who had not been of the party that had journeyed over to Drere Manor the previous day. "I'm keen to see those hundred steps."

"Good!" said Kit Wildrake. "Lemme see, that'll be eight of us, including myself. That's not enough for a Christmas party. I think I'll ask Figgins & Co. of the New House."

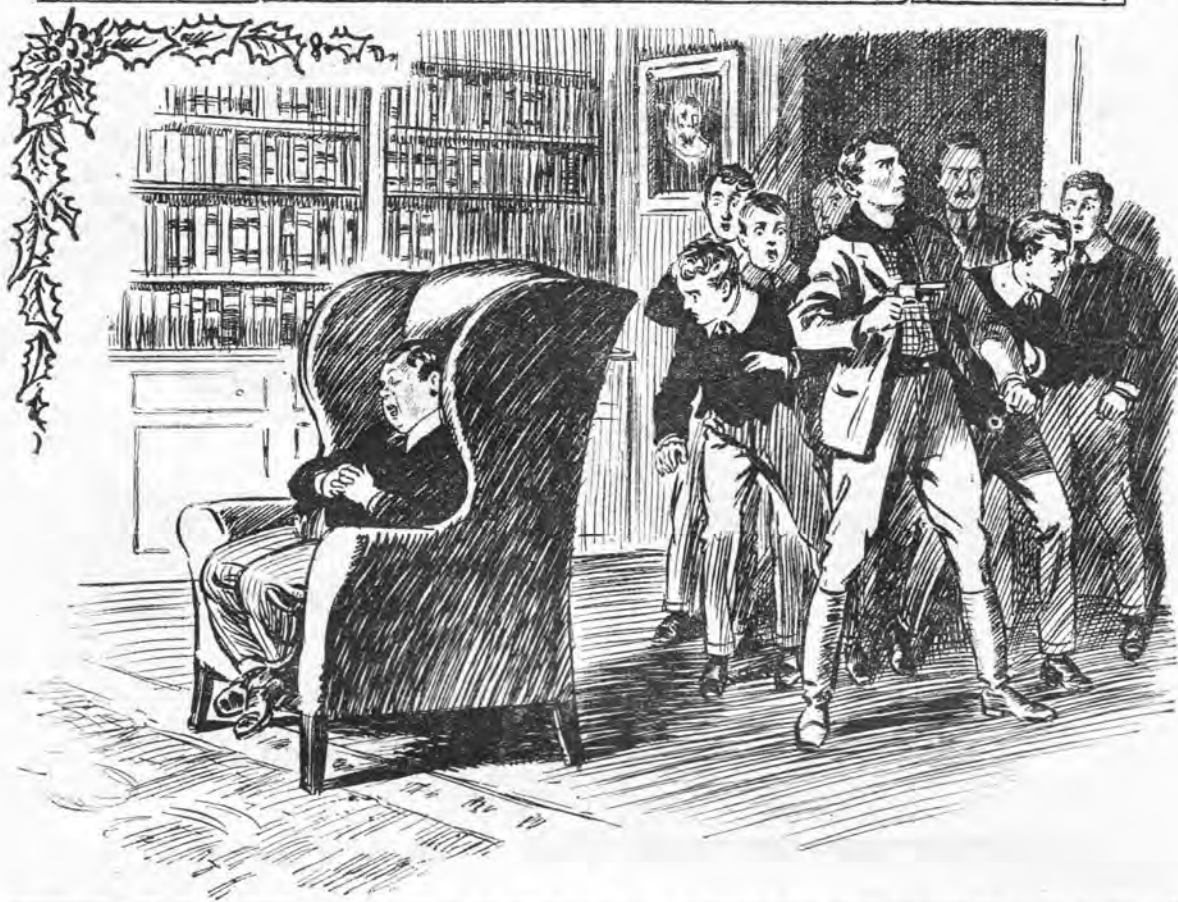
"Good egg!"

"The more the merrier!"

And Kit Wildrake, full of his Christmas party, bent his steps towards the New House.

Figgins, Kerr and Fatty Wynn jumped at the invitation, for they had been speculating what to do with the Christmas vac. Figgins wanted his study-mates to stay at his place; Kerr was determined that they should spend the vac at his home in Scotland, whilst David Llewellyn Wynn had insisted that Figgins and Kerr should visit his home in Wales.

Really it was impossible to do all three things, for the Christmas vac would have been spent in a railway train, so to speak. And here was Kit Wildrake with a suggestion that suited all three parties.



The door of the library swung open and Buck, a loaded six-shooter in his hand, stepped into the room, closely followed by Tom Merry & Co. and Nunks. "Ooooooooooaww!" As that rumbling sound rang out again, from somewhere quite close at hand, the juniors nearly jumped out of their skins, for there was no sign of any ghost. They did not know yet that Baggy Trimble was responsible for those "ghostly" noises and he was fast asleep in the chair! (See Chapter 9.)

"Thanks very much," said Figgins. "I should like to come."

"And me," mumbled Fatty Wynn, between mouthfuls of rabbit pie. "There'll be plenty of grub, I suppose?" he added anxiously.

Kit Wildrake laughed.

"As much as you can eat, Fatty."

"Good. Then count me in, old chap!"

"And you, Kerr—" began Wildrake.

"If you'll have me," said the Scots junior.

"Of course, you silly chump!" grinned Kit. "Then that's settled. I'll let you know the time of departure to-morrow."

"Good man!"

And, with a nod, Kit Wildrake returned to his own quarters. With Figgins & Co. his party would number eleven—enough to make any Christmas vacation a lively one.

When he was gone, Fatty Wynn turned to Kerr.

"Is that at Murrinhurst, the place the fellows have been talking about?" he asked.

The Scottish junior nodded.

"Yes, I heard it from Tom Merry this morning. The place is called Drere Manor—"

"Creepy name, isn't it?" muttered Fatty Wynn.

"And according to the inhabitants," continued Kerr, "the manor is haunted by the spirit of a buccaneer who sank his ship with her crew aboard her two hundred years or more ago, and then tried to live like an English squire up at the manor."

"The dirty dog!" growled Figgins.

"But the bo'sun, so the story goes," said Kerr, "escaped, and he came in search of his captain. He found him in the manor and fought with him. It's been handed down from generation to generation that the captain—I think his name was Hawk—and the bo'sun fell from the battlements locked in each other's arms."

"Where does the ghost bizney come in?" asked Figgins.

"It's said that the spirit of the dead and gone buccaneer roams the manor frightening away everyone who goes near the place. He is supposed to strut about with a drawn cutlass in his right hand and a hook—"

"A hook?"

"Yes, he lost his hand in a fight with Spaniards and so he adopted a steel hook. With this hook, so the legend has it, he marks his victims."

"What, during his ghostly ramblings?" grinned Figgins.

The Scottish junior nodded.

"Gammon!" hooted Figgins.

"That's what I think," said Kerr. "Still, there's something out of the ordinary going on at the place, because Tom Merry told me that that fellow Buck Whipcord, who was here yesterday, only managed to buy the manor because an American chap, who had already bought it, was scared out of his wits and refused to live in the place."

Fatty Wynn forgot the rabbit pie for the moment.

"Did he see the ghost of the pirate merchant, then?"

Kerr grinned.

"He says he did. Anyway, he was mighty keen to get out of the place, and he had only been there about half an hour."

Figgins was interested.

"I say, it will be great fun hunting this ghost, won't it?" he exclaimed.

Kerr nodded.

"Rather! It will give an old-time touch to our Christmas!"

"Bed-time, kids!"

Kildare, the captain of the school, looked in at the study door.

"Right-ho, old bean!"

"Just coming!"

And Figgins & Co., of the New House, went up to their dormitory. It may have been the rabbit-pie, or it may have not, but Fatty Wynn found sleep a regular nightmare. In his disturbing dreams he could see the figure of a ferocious buccaneer captain with a glinting cutlass and that terrible, menacing hook. It was in the small hours that the Fourth Form dormitory in the New House shook to a violent concussion.

"Groooooough!" Fatty Wynn, sprawling on the floor with the bedclothes around him, had dreamed that the pirate

captain had ordered him to walk the plank. At the critical moment when Fatty was descending through space as a meal for the hungry sharks awaiting him in the sea below, he had awakened, for his head had come into contact with the dormitory floor.

"Yow!" muttered Fatty Wynn, clawing his way through the dark. "Blow the ghost! Blow Drere Manor! It's beastly cold!"

And groping his way into bed again, the fat junior settled down to dreams anew—much more to his liking this time, for, in company with the buccaneer captain, he was raiding Mrs. Taggles' tuckshop!

CHAPTER 5. Turned Down!



"I SAY, old chap!"

"Kit, old man!"

"Wildrake, old scout!"

These affectionate greetings were frequent with Kit Wildrake next day. It had soon spread round the Lower School that he was taking home a party to his uncle's place at Murranshurst. Really it was surprising how many friends Kit found he possessed now he was in the happy position of being able to take home as many pals as he liked.

Racke and Crooke smiled their sweetest smiles. Mellish was very obliging in the study, offering to do the hundred lines Mr. Lathom had awarded Kit that same morning. Mulvaney cordially invited Wildrake to tea in his study, and at the same time hinted that he didn't know what he was going to do for Christmas. Durrance smiled affectionately on Kit Wildrake when they chanced to meet, and inquired after his health.

Never had the junior from British Columbia been so popular. He came down the Fourth Form passage surrounded by seekers after invitations to spend the vac at Drere Manor.

"I say, old chap!" said Trimble.

"Kit, old man!" said Scrope of the Shell.

"Wildrake, old scout!" smiled Crowle of the New House.

"Oh, can it!" said Wildrake, trying to tear himself away. But the seekers after invitations did not mean to let their prey escape so easily.

"I say, old chap—" began Trimble.

"Say on, old fat man," grinned Wildrake.

"About the Christmas vac," said Trimble. "Of course you've made up your party?"

"Right first time!" assented Wildrake.

"You've put me down?"

"No, fatty. But I'll oblige you if you like."

Baggy Trimble smirked and linked his arm in that of Wildrake.

"You're sure you want to be put down?" asked Kit.

"Of course, old chap!"

"Then here goes!"

Bump!

"Whooooooop!" Baggy Trimble suddenly found himself sitting on the cold, hard, unsympathetic linoleum.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wharrer you do that for?" roared Trimble.

Kit Wildrake grinned.

"You said you wanted to be put down," he said, "and I obliged you. I'm an obliging sort, you know."

"You silly idiot!" spluttered Trimble. "I didn't mean put me down. I—I—I meant put me down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Isn't he lucid!"

"I mean I wanted you to put my name down!" howled the fat Fourth-Former, scrambling to his feet.

"Sorry! My mistake!" chuckled Wildrake. "You should make things clearer, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He, he, he!" cackled Trimble.

"Hallo! Is that an alarm-clock?" asked Wildrake, looking round.

"He, he, he! I can take a joke, old chap," said Trimble. "But seriously, though. Is my name down on the list for your Christmas party?"

"No jolly fear!" returned Kit. "I have as much of you at St. Jim's as I can stand without carting you home with me during the vac."

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"Really, Wildrake!" said Trimble. "I was counting on you."

"I don't see why you should."

"Well, I refused an invitation from Lumley-Lumley to spend the vac with him on the Continent."

"Did you really, you fat clam?" drawled Lumley-Lumley, coming up with the party in the passage.

"Hallo, Lumley!" said Trimble, with a blink. "I d-didn't see you there!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean, I turned down an invitation from Julian, you know," said Trimble. "He pressed me with—with tears in his eyes. But I said no firmly. I told him that I couldn't desert my old pal Wildrake."

"You told him that, did you?"

"Yes. Then there was Glyn. He wanted me to stay at Glyn House to keep him company and to look after his sister. She's rather struck on me, you know. But I simply couldn't let you down, old chap."

"You needn't have bothered about me," said Wildrake. "I should only have been relieved to hear that someone had taken you off my hands."

"Hem!" Trimble affected not to hear that frank statement. "Then there was Grundy of the Shell. He told me, in strict confidence, of course, that he didn't want those rotters, Wilkins and Gunn, hanging around his place at Christmas. Said they were too slovenly. Grundy wanted a chap with distinguished bearing and good manners to take home. He wanted to make a good impression. See?"

"Oh, my hat!" laughed Wildrake. "Grundy said that, did he?"

"Yes. But I turned it down, much as he implored me to stay with him," said the fat junior. "I simply couldn't desert an old pal like you."

"Well, you'd better scoot round and accept one of those invitations," said Wildrake, "otherwise you'll be left here to keep Taggles company. And Taggles is rather particular, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Then you mean you ain't to take me?" hooted Trimble. "After all I've done for you, you're not including me in your party?"

"Not if you were the only boy in the world, as the song says," remarked Kit coolly, "would I take you home with me for the vacation. Is that plain enough?"

Apparently it was. Baggy Trimble's eyes glittered, and his podgy hands clenched.

"Yah! You rotter!" he roared. "You ungrateful rotter! I hope the blessed ghost keeps you awake all night!"

And with that charitable remark the fat Fourth-Former rolled away disconsolately down the passage in search of another likely victim.

He rolled into Cardew's expensive study.

"Get out!" roared three voices.

"Oh, really, you chaps—"

Cardew, Levison, and Clive, who shared Study No. 9, glared.

"Vamoose!"

"Absquatulate!"

"Depart!"

Trimble heard, but heeded not. He advanced farther into the study.

The chums of Study 9 were bending over a large map of the South of France, where it was proposed they should spend their Christmas vacation. Cardew's uncle owned a villa there, and he had placed it at the disposal of his nephew and friends.

"I say, Cardew old man," said Trimble, with an ingratiating grin, "I'll come with you to the South of France, you know."

"Will you, really?" drawled Cardew. "Do we want the fascinatin' society of Trimble, Ernest, old man?"

Levison shook his head.

"No fear!" he said emphatically.

"Are you keen, Sidney, dear boy?"

Sidney Clive shook his head more vigorously.

"You see, Trimble," explained Cardew, with a listless wave of the hand, "neither Sidney nor Ernest are exactly pinin' for your charmin' society. So there's no need for me to go to the fag of givin' you my opinion."

Trimble grinned a fat grin, and rolled towards the dandy of the Fourth.

"Leave Clive out, and take me instead," he whispered in Cardew's ear.

Cardew looked surprised.

"Dear man, is that a genuine suggestion?"

"Yes," said Trimble. "He's a common beast, anyway. When you get to the South of France you'll want chaps

who will reflect credit on you. Keep up the good name, you know, and all that."

"Yaas," drawled Cardew. "An' you think you'll fill the bill, what?"

Baggy Trimble pulled himself up.

"I'm certain of it!" he declared. "And I'll tell you what. You push out that beast Levison as well. We'll do the vac together, old chap."

"Push them both out, what?"

"That's it, old chap. We'll paint the town red, you know. We'll have a little flutter at the casino, and we'll have a few bottles of fizz, and a smoke when we want it. No silly, footling school rules there, you know. He, he, he!"

Cardew nodded lazily.

"An' you promise me all this if I take you instead of Ernie and dear old Sidney?"

"That's it," said Trimble eagerly. "Just push 'em out, you know."

"Push them out!" said Cardew, and there was a glimmer in his eye. "That's far too much of a fag, old fat barrel! But I tell you what I'll do."

"What's that?"

"Push you out!" said Cardew; and he gripped the fat Fourth-Former by the collar and rushed him towards the door.

"Yarooooo! Whoooooop! Leggo!" roared Trimble.

"Don't get excited, dear man!" said Cardew coolly. "You simply asked for it, you know. It's an awful fag to kick you, and it's apt to spoil the shape of a fellow's shoe, but I think you deserve a kick."

"Leggo, you beast!"

Cardew looked at Levison and Clive, who were laughing.

"One of you fellows mind kickin' Trimble!" he asked. "Hard as you like!"

"Certainly!" said Levison, with a grin.

"Yoooooop! Whoooooop!" roared the fat junior as Levison's shoe landed in the region of his nether garments.

Cardew released his hold of Trimble's collar at the same time, with the result that Baggy Trimble pitched to the floor of the passage on his hands and knees. He sat there roaring.

"Yah! Rotters! Beasts! I wouldn't come on your mouldy trip to France if you asked me on bended knees!"

"Mind kickin' him with the other foot, Ernest?" drawled Cardew languidly. "He's makin' an awful noise!"

"Not a bit!" said Levison, appearing in the doorway.

But Trimble scrambled to his feet and scuttled away down the passage as fast as his legs would carry him. He had had enough of Levison's boot. One thing was certain, however, the fat junior of the Fourth was not likely to spend the vacation in the company of the chums of Study No. 9.

Really, it was hard lines that a fellow of Trimble's distinguished manners and bearing should be turned down right and left. But there it was. Up and down the Shell and Fourth Form passage went the fat junior, inviting himself to every party that was being made up for Christmas. But no one wanted Trimble, and most of the juniors told him so with more force than politeness.

It really seemed as if the fat junior of the Fourth would have to stay at St. Jim's in the company of Taggles, the school porter, a prospect that appalled him, and doubtless a prospect that would have been equally appalling to Ephraim Taggles.

CHAPTER 6.

Christmas Boxes!

"SNOW!"

Tom Merry stood at the top of the School House steps after dinner the following day, and surveyed the quad, clad in a thick mantle of snow, with an appreciative eye.

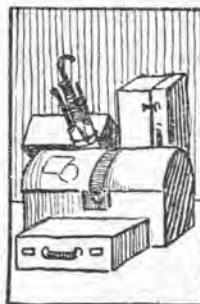
It was snowing hard.

"Whippin'!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Top-hole!" exclaimed Blake.

It was breaking up day at St. Jim's, and several members of the school had already departed for their homes.

The party for Drere Manor were waiting for the brake to arrive. Kit Wildrake was keen to drive the



party in a horse-brake. It fitted in with his idea of Christmas and his inborn love of horses and anything connected with them.

The idea had been greeted with unanimous agreement by Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co., and an order had been given to the Wayland hostelry the previous evening.

The luggage was all ready at the foot of the School House steps, and Taggles, who had just dumped D'Arcy's seventh suitcase on the pile, wiped the sweat, real or imaginary, from his brow.

"Which it's 'ard work a-cartin' of these 'ere trunks about, Master D'Arcy," he said.

"Yaas," said D'Arcy, feeling in his pocket for a tip.

"I 'opes as 'ow you young gentlemen'll 'ave a 'appy Christmas!" said the old school porter.

"Thank you, Taggy!" chorused the juniors. "And the same to you!"

"Which Christmas don't mean very much to me 'ere at this school. The gates 'ave got to be looked after, jest the same."

Whether Taggles expected someone to walk off with the massive iron gates of St. Jim's is not known; but what he did expect just then was a generous whip round from the "young hings" he was pleased to report for various offences committed during term. But on breaking-up days St. Jim's saw a different Taggles. He was as solicitous of the welfare of the departing scholars as if they were his own children—if the said scholars tipped him handsomely. Really, it was remarkable what a paternal smile would spring to the grizzled face of Ephraim Taggles when a crisp ten-shilling or pound note was pushed into his horny palm. On such occasions the school porter would say:

"Oh, thank you, sir! I 'opes as 'ow you'll have the 'oliday of your life!"

He surveyed the huge pile of luggage at the foot of the School House steps with a calculating eye. In all there were ten big suitcases or cabin trunks, not counting the seven belonging to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Taggles reckoned that each trunk would bring him, at the least, half-a-crown. That meant a useful sum that could be expended in seasonable revelry at the village inn, while Dame Taggles, doubtless, looked after the gates.

Knox of the Sixth came out to the School House steps and signalled to the old porter.

"Taggles," said the prefect, with a sneer for the benefit of Tom Merry & Co., "I want my boxes brought down."

(Continued overleaf.)

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"Yes, sir," replied Taggles, not too willingly, be it said; for Knox's trunks were heavy, and his tips were light.

Taggles stumped off, growling to himself, and Knox came down into the quad, at least that was his intention. But he suddenly lost his footing on the snow-clad steps, and went slithering out into the quad, a flying figure of arms and legs.

"Oh, my hat!" chuckled Tom Merry.

"Knox!"

"Do it again, Knox!" said Monty Lowther, with a grin. "We didn't catch the first part of the stunt."

"But the finish was good!" sang out Blake.

The unpopular prefect scrambled to his feet and dusted the snow from his clothes. His face was crimson with rage and humiliation.

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

"Shut up, you noisy little sweeps!" snapped the prefect.

"Shut up yourself!" retorted Figgins.

"And shut up for keeps!" added Monty Lowther.

The prefect was carrying a light walking-cane, which he had still retained in his precipitous flight down the steps. He swished it through the air menacingly.

"I'll put this about some of you if you don't behave yourselves!" he hissed.

"Try it on and see!"

"Who said that?" demanded Knox, wheeling sharply.

"I did!" said Kerr.

The prefect took a stride towards him.

"You cheeky young rascal!" he snapped. "What you want is a good hiding!"

"What you want is a good ragging!" retorted Kerr. "And you'll get it if you start any of your funny tricks to-day!"

"Hear, hear!"

Knox glared round at the juniors.

"Go and boil your face, Knox!" said Monty Lowther sweetly. "It won't hurt it, even if it doesn't improve it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Knox made a stride towards the grinning juniors, and he singled out Monty Lowther.

The light walking cane swished through the air and descended smartly on Monty Lowther's shoulders.

"Yooop!" howled Lowther. "Chuck it!"

But Knox lost his temper. He raised his cane again, but the blow never fell, for at the critical moment a snowball, hurled by Figgins of the New House, took the Sixth-Former full in the eye.

The prefect staggered back with a roar, gouging snow from his eyes.

"You young scoundrels!" he hissed.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The "young scoundrels" laughed heartily. They were not afraid of Knox at any time, least of all on breaking up day.

Plop!

This time a snowball left the hand of Blake. It made a beautiful splash of white against Knox's shiny silk topper, and sent it zigzagging over his eyes.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Plop! Plop! Plop!

Snowballs fell thick and fast after that as Tom Merry & Co. entered into the spirit of the thing. Knox, in his capacity of prefect, had been up against Tom Merry & Co. all through the term. These juniors had been licked and gated and reported for petty offences that any decent prefect would have blinked his eyes at. Here was a splendid chance of levelling accounts, as it were.

Plop! Plop! Plop!

"Yow! Stop it! You young scoundrels—Yoooooop!"

Knox of the Sixth was literally covered with snow as the snowballs rained about him. With an imprecation falling from his lips he charged at the grinning juniors.

"Stand firm!" commanded Tom Merry. "When I say the word—fire!"

Knox rushed on blindly.

"Fire!" roared the captain of the Shell.

Eleven snowballs landed on various parts of Knox's anatomy with stinging force. His hat was knocked flying and snow oozed down his neck.

"You young hooligans! Yow! You scoundrels! Wow!"

"Let him have another!"

Knox turned and bolted up the School House steps, and as he went eleven snowballs hurtled after him.

"B-bless my soul! Yoooop!"

In addition to the wailing voice of Knox, the prefect, rose another. And a moment later the juniors, to their utter dismay, saw Mr. Ratcliff, the master of the New House, come staggering out to the top of the School House steps. His mortar-board was cocked over one eye like a comedian's hat; his sour, hatchet features were daubed with snow; and his trailing gown bore ample evidence of violent contact with some of the eleven snowballs the juniors had hurled after Knox as he had disappeared into the shelter of the House.

"Ratty!" marmured Figgins.

"Oh, my hat!"

"His hat, you mean!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "Look at it!"

Mr. Ratcliff clawed the snow away from his face. His eyes glinted savagely at the eleven juniors responsible for the outrage.

"How dare you!" He articulated with difficulty, for his wrath was great. "How dare you! Assaulting your Form master!"

Tom Merry stepped forward.

"We're awfully sorry, sir," he said apologetically, "but we didn't know it was you, sir!"

"We were snowballing Knox," volunteered Figgins.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mr. Ratcliff jammed his hat on straight and pursed his thin lips.

"Disgraceful!" he stormed. "Young hooligans! How dare you!"

The juniors were silent.

"Figgins!" suddenly hooted Mr. Ratcliff, catching sight of the leader of the New House for the first time. "Kindly go to my study and fetch me a cane."

Figgins did not move.

"You hear me, Figgins?"

"I heard you, sir," said Figgins, "but I'm not fetching any cane."

"Wha-a-at?"

"We've finished with school for this term," said Figgins doggedly. "You have no authority to cane us. And, besides, you know it was an accident!"

"What! What!" Mr. Ratcliff fairly danced his rage as he heard that defiant answer. "Boy! Figgins! Fetch my cane this moment!"

"Fetch it yourself!" said Blake, with a curl of the lip.

"What did you say, Blake?"

"You heard what I said," retorted Blake. "You know the whole thing was an accident. We're not standing for any caning. Haven't you ever flung a snowball yourself?"

Mr. Ratcliff rubbed his ears as if he didn't hear aright. It was more than likely that Mr. Ratcliff, even in his younger days had never thrown a snowball, although it was practically certain that if in his younger days he was as sour as he was in years of maturity more than one snowball had been flung at him!

"I will report this insubordination—this rank defiance—this hooliganism to Dr. Holmes!" he stormed.

"Then you'll have to report it by telegram," grinned Monty Lowther, "for the Head left in his car half an hour ago!"

"Insolent boy!" thundered Mr. Ratcliff. "You shall pay dearly for this!"

"Bow-wow!"

"Hallo!" ejaculated Wildrake. "Here's our brake! Look sharp, Taggles, and put our trunks aboard."

Taggles, who had just returned with Knox's luggage, dumped it unceremoniously in the snow and began to shoulder the pile belonging to Wildrake's party.

Mr. Ratcliff snorted and whisked away to his study—to fetch a cane himself.

"Get a move on!" snapped Tom Merry. "Ratty will be back in a moment, and we can't stop him if he starts wading in with the cane."

The luggage was piled aboard in record time. Taggles grunting and puffing profusely. Then the juniors clambered in, having first provided the old school porter with a handsome tip apiece.



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The man who had driven the three-horse brake gave the reins to Kit Wildrake. That junior flicked his whip and looked round.

"All aboard?"

"Yes. Get busy," said Tom Merry. "Here comes Ratty!"

"Oh, my hat!" Kit touched the flanks of the leading horse with his whip and the brake got on the move.

"Stop!" Mr. Ratcliff danced down the quad with upraised cane, his gown flimsying out behind him. "Stop!"

But no one paid any heed to the commands of Mr. Ratcliff just then. His authority for that term had ceased an hour ago.

"Go and fry your face!" roared Blake.

"Happy Christmas!" sang out Figgins derisively.

"Stop!" hooted Mr. Ratcliff. "I order you to stop!"

"If he doesn't stop in a minute I'll bung a snowball at him," said Monty Lowther, gathering into a ball the thin layer of snow that had collected on the sides of the brake.

Tom Merry caught his chum by the arm.

"Don't do that, old chap," he said. "It's gone far enough. The first Christmas-box old Ratty received was a pure accident. But this one wouldn't be."

Monty lowered his arm.

The horses quickened their stride, and the brake swept out of the gates of St. Jim's in rare style.

To Mr. Ratcliff's final command to stop the juniors replied with a deafening cheer. And that was the last the New House master saw of the party for Drere Manor. The master of the New House possessed a long memory, however, and it was certain that he would make the juniors suffer when they returned to St. Jim's next term. Doubtless that reflection afforded Mr. Ratcliff some consolation, for his thin face broke into a smile, and he swished the cane viciously through the air before he retraced his steps to the privacy of his own study.

But Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co. had no thoughts of next term as they bowled along the country lane under a thin mantle of driving snow. They were healthy-minded, care-free youths whose motto was:—

"Let the morrow take care of itself."

Certainly there was no cheerier company of travellers on the highway that cold, crisp morning than Kit Wildrake's party, and pedestrians passed on the road smiled their appreciation of youthful good spirits as the

St. Jim's brake forged along bound for Murrainhurst and Drere Manor.

CHAPTER 7.

Ponsonby's Challenge!



"HALLO! Who the dickens are those chaps?"

The St. Jim's brake had just slowed down in order to negotiate a dangerous cross-road when Tom Merry uttered that ejaculation.

Turning out from one of the roads came a small two-horse brake, with five schoolboys aboard. An elegant-looking youth held the ribbons, and his supercilious features were familiar to more than one member of the St. Jim's party.

"Bai Jove! I've seen that fellow before!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, screwing his monocle into his eye, and subjecting the brakeload of

schoolboys to a piercing scrutiny.

"So have I!" said Monty Lowther thoughtfully.

"I've got it!" exclaimed Tom Merry suddenly. "They're Highcliffe chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"You're right," said Blake. "I can recognise their colours now."

"That chap with the reins is Ponsonby, I believe," remarked Figgins. "I remember seeing the chap when we were over at Highcliffe playing Frank Courtenay's crowd at footer."

"That's him," said Tom Merry. "And according to accounts he's a bit of a bad egg."

"He looks it, too!" grunted Kerr. "Hallo! They're coming in our direction!"

With a rattle and a thudding of hoofs on the crisp, hard road, the Highcliffe brake swept up to the St. Jim's party.

Cecil Ponsonby leaned over as the brakes drew level.

"Race you St. Jim's rotters to the Wanderley Bridge," he drawled.

The St. Jim's juniors looked at each other. It was a challenge, but a glimpse of the road showed them that there

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was barely sufficient room for the two brakes to pass. What would happen in the event of any traffic proceeding from the opposite direction while a race was in progress, it was difficult to foresee, except that a smash of some sort would be inevitable.

Cecil Ponsonby sneered.

"Funky?" he called out in a loud voice, and his chums grinned.

"Why, you rotter!" exclaimed Wildrake. "I'll race you! I'll race your head off!"

"Go it, Wildrake!"

"Up, St. Jim's!"

"Would you like to wager on the result?" drawled Ponsonby. "You'd like to pick up some easy money, wouldn't you chaps?" he added, turning to Gadsby, Monson, Vavasour, and Drury, who were behind him.

"Yaas!"

"Rather!"

"Oh, absolutely!"

The Highcliffe juniors grinned. They had no doubt about the issue if the race came off, for Cecil Ponsonby, elegant as he was, certainly knew how to handle the ribbons.

"Cheeky sweeps!" growled Kit Wildrake. "We'll race you quickly enough. But we don't gamble. We leave that for dingy rotters like yourselves."

"Go it, Kit!"

It was the St. Jim's juniors' turn to laugh.

Cecil Ponsonby scowled. Suddenly his hand holding the whip went up, and before the St. Jim's juniors were fully aware of what was happening, its stinging lash came down on the flanks of the leading horse of the St. Jim's brake.

"You cad!"

The horse squealed and began to rear, and Kit Wildrake had all his work cut out to hold the animal in hand.

The Highcliffians grinned.

"Perhaps that will help you to start," drawled Ponsonby, with a supercilious smirk.

And he jerked at the reins of his pair and sent the Highcliffe brake off at a steady canter.

"After the cad!" roared Tom Merry.

But there was no need for the injunction. Kit Wildrake's blood was up. To give him his due, he was an expert "whip." With a deft touch on the reins he set the St. Jim's brake in pursuit.

Cecil Ponsonby's chums grinned as they saw the brake in pursuit.

"Put it on, Pon," yelled Gadsby. "The cads are comin' after us!"

Ponsonby put it on. His two horses stepped out at a lively pace. They were thoroughbreds, and knew their job.

And Kit Wildrake knew his. True, the three horses he controlled were not thoroughbreds, but they were game and in fine fettle. And Kit soon showed that a master hand governed them.

Clatter, clatter!

The ringing sounds of the flying hoofs made quaint music on the hard surface of the road. The wind rushed by in exhilarating force as the St. Jim's brake swept on. Inch by inch it gained on the Highcliffe brake.

Cecil Ponsonby was whipping his charges now, and his savage nature was revealed to the full. But Kit contented himself with nursing his horses, and he took advantage of every turn in the road where a few feet could be gained by clever driving.

"Go it, Kit!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

"We've got the rotters!"

But Cecil Ponsonby, who had seen by this time that he had met his match when it came to a matter of racing against Kit Wildrake, deliberately drew into the centre of the road, thus shutting off Kit's chances of passing the Highcliffe brake.

"The rotten cad!" roared Blake. "He's not going to give us room to get past!"

"The worm!"

That obviously was Ponsonby's intention. So long as he kept ahead and took more of the road than he need have done, it was impossible for the overtaking brake to pass him.

Gadsby, Vavasour, Monson, and Drury saw his cunning plan in a moment, and their grins irritated the St. Jim's party.

"What price Highcliffe now?" hooted Monson.

"Get over to the left!" yelled Figgins.

"Go and eat coke!"

The St. Jim's juniors were wrathful, with the possible exception of Kit Wildrake. There was a lurking grin on his clear-cut features, but his eyes never left the road ahead, ever seeking a chance that would allow him to let his horses have their heads in a vigorous spurt that would leave the Highcliffe brake behind.

The chance that he was waiting for came along. The

high, wide bank on his offside wheels suddenly dropped almost to a level with the road. In a flash Kit had touched the flank of his leader with the whip.

The response was instantaneous. The leader stretched out at an increased pace, and Kit pulled in sharply to the bank. The brake lurched a little as the offside wheels pulled over the raised bank and the juniors aboard found themselves almost jolted from their seats.

"Hi! Steady on!" growled the man from the stables, who was sitting next to Kit.

"Go easy, Kit!" roared Tom Merry.

But Wildrake only grinned. The brake, with one side "up in the air" was gaining on the Highcliffe brake. Inch by inch, foot by foot, it crept up. The faces of Ponsonby & Co. were not so cheerful. Kit looked like beating Ponsonby at his own game, after all.

"What price that!" roared Kit, as his leading horse came level with the Highcliffe pair. "Here, you rotten cad—"



The chance for which Kit had been waiting came along. In a response was instantaneous. The St. Jim's brake shot ahead with a rattle of wheels and a thudding of hoofs. "Bravo, Kit!" the smaller brake.

His words broke off and he pulled sharply on the reins, for the rascally Ponsonby, seeing that he was beaten, pulled his brake over to the right. It was touch and go. Barely a quarter of an inch separated the wheels of the two vehicles, and but for Kit's prompt action, there would have been a smash in which Tom Merry & Co. undoubtedly would have fared the worst.

"The dangerous maniac!" yelled Blake, shaking his fist almost under the nose of the terrified Gadsby.

And that was all he had time to say, for Kit, giving encouragement to his horses, sent the St. Jim's brake ahead with a well-timed spurt, and then, being a couple of lengths clear, drew to the near side of the road.

"Bravo Kit!"

The St. Jim's juniors were wildly jubilant.

"St. Jim's for ever!"

Cecil Ponsonby's face was a picture. He had issued the challenge; he had resorted to foul means and those despicable means had not served him. He was beaten in the race. But there was a dark strain of ruthlessness in the elegant Ponsonby that came surging up to the surface now in full force. The bridge—Wanderley Bridge—that spanned a narrow, fast-running stream, was in sight. And Ponsonby knew that the structure on the near side of that bridge was sadly in need of repair. A despicable scheme shot into his mind to make the cheery St. Jim's crowd sorry for having worsted him.

He stood up on the box and began to thrash his horses mercilessly.

"Here, steady on, Pon, old man!" said Gadsby, as he saw the savagery Pon put into his work.

"Shut up, you fool!" snarled the Highcliffe dandy.

Swish, swish!

The whip fell like a flail, and the horses pulled at their bridles as if they were running away from a forest fire. The light brake began to sway from side to side as its speed increased.

"You'll have us over!" panted Monson, with a fearful glance at the rushing ribbon of road below him.

But Ponsonby heeded him not. His eyes were fixed on the brake and the bridge ahead.

Kit Wildrake, looking back, saw that the Highcliffians were going to make a final effort, but he little guessed the sinister motive that prompted Ponsonby to attempt it!

"Don't let them beat us," said Monty Lowther. "That chap Ponsonby is thrashing his horses—he's coming up hand-over-fist!"

There was no doubt about it, Ponsonby's thoroughbreds



had touched the flank of the leading horse with the whip. The price that?" roared Wildrake, as he passed Ponsonby & Co. Tom Merry & Co. "St. Jim's for ever!" Ponsonby & Co., in led. (See Chapter 7.)

were beginning to show their extra quality under the lashing of that merciless whip.

The Highcliffe brake drew nearer.

The bridge was only a hundred yards ahead.

From the tail of his eye Kit Wildrake judged the possibilities, with first a glance at the bridge ahead, and then at the two-horse brake pounding up behind him. It was next door to a practical certainty that the St. Jim's party would pass the bridge first. And, in any case, the narrow bridge allowed only the passage of one vehicle at a time.

Kit grinned.

"Don't get anxious, you chaps," he said. "We shall reach the bridge first, although I'll admit Ponsonby won't be more than a foot behind us. But he'll have to slow down there, because there's only room for one of us to pass at a time."

That seemed logical enough. But Tom Merry & Co. hadn't reckoned with the unscrupulous Ponsonby.

Clatter, clatter!

The Highcliffe brake, swaying perilously from side to side, forged on. Its occupants weren't grinning now. In fact, with the exception of Ponsonby, the juniors were clinging to the brake wherever they could find handhold.

"Chuck it, Pon, you ass!" gasped Vavasour.

But Ponsonby paid no heed. His eyes were glinting, his lips were drawn in a thin red line. He was watching the bridge ahead with the eyes of a lynx. Only ten feet separated his animals from the tailboard of the St. Jim's brake.

Now was his chance.

The whip began to flail about the sweating horses with renewed force, and they galloped the faster. Foot by foot they narrowed the gap between the two brakes.

Only a foot of daylight was to be seen between the straining heads of the Highcliffe horses and the tail of the St. Jim's brake as the latter rumbled over the last six yards of road approaching the bridge.

Swish! Swish!

Again the jerk rose and fell.

The horses jerked at their bridles and narrowed the gap still further. Then, still under the lash, they pounded level, and then drew ahead of the St. Jim's brake.

Alarmed shouts rose on all sides.

"Chuck it, you mad fool!"

"We both can't get past!"

"There's no room, you idiot!"

But the brakes were moving too fast now for either Kit or the rascally Ponsonby to pull them up in time. And Kit, realising what was likely to happen, dragged on his reins with all his strength, hoping against hope that the impending smash would be averted.

There was a cynical smile on Ponsonby's hard features.

His frightened horses were now a length clear of Kit Wildrake's leading animal as the two brakes thudded on to the narrow bridge.

"Look out!" roared Kit. "We're going to crash!"

"Hold on for your lives!"

Crash!

The wheels of the two brakes met with a force that sent the St. Jim's brake reeling to the left on its near side wheels, almost overturning it. It looked for all the world as if Ponsonby's rascally plan was to bear fruit; it was touch and go whether Tom Merry & Co. charged through the rotten woodwork of the bridge to the icy stream running below. The horses of both brakes were squealing with terror, and then the unexpected happened.

The shock of the impact must have strained one of the traces belonging to the Highcliffe brake, for it suddenly parted with a snap, and before any of Ponsonby's companions knew what was happening, the remaining trace broke as if it were cotton.

"Oh, heavens!"

"Look out!"

Ponsonby was jerked clean off the box into the middle of the road, the reins still clutched in his hands. The terrified horses galloped on, and Ponsonby only just had presence of mind to release his grip on the reins.

But the fate of his companions was worse.

The brake, now absolutely out of control, ran full tilt for the woodwork of the bridge. The terrified juniors on board could do nothing but sit huddled there, for things were happening too quickly for them.

Crash!

The woodwork crumpled up under the violent impact, and the brake, with Gadsby, Monson, Vavasour, and Drury in it, together with several trunks and suitcases, toppled over into the stream below.

Swoooooosh!

Splash!

Four separate splashes told their own tale as the Highcliffe juniors struck the icy water. And four howls rent the air as their heads showed above the surface again.

"Grooooooh!"

"Ow! Yow!"

"Yoooooop!"

"Yaroooooh!"

By something like a miracle the St. Jim's brake had avoided a further collision. Kit Wildrake, hauling in on the reins with all his strength, just managed to bring his tired horses to a standstill.

Tom Merry & Co. were clambering out of the brake next moment. In a body they rushed over the bridge and gained the bank of the stream.

Wildrake captured the two frightened thoroughbreds and soothed them. Then he tethered them to a tree and rushed back to the St. Jim's juniors.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Serve the rotters right!"

A rousing laugh that echoed strongly in the cold, sharp air, told him that nothing very serious had happened to the Highcliffe juniors. He reached the bank of the stream.

Gadsby, Monson, Drury, and Vavasour—not looking very elegant now—stood shivering there, the water dripping from them in streams. The expressions on their faces were worth a guinea a box, as Monty Lowther put it.

"Grooooooh!" wailed Gadsby, through chattering teeth.

"Wow!" panted Monson.

"Yow!" groaned Drury.

(Continued on page 17.)



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THE WRONG P.-O.!

The town was alive with Christmas shoppers, when suddenly an old lady approached a policeman on point-duty. "I say, constable," she said, prodding him with her umbrella, "do you mind going into that draper's shop and getting me one of their catalogues?" "Sorry, I cannot, madam," replied the arm of the law politely. "But why do you ask me? Cannot you get one yourself?" "Well," replied the old lady, "it says in this newspaper, 'Send a P.C. for a catalogue,' and as you seem to have a nice, kind face, I thought I'd send you!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Oliver Parkes, 66, High Street, Bow, E. 3.

HEARD AT THE PANTO!

Jack: "Of Mr. Bigger and Mrs. Bigger, who's the bigger?" Joe: "Give it up!" Jack: "Why, Mr. Bigger, because he is the Father (far the) Bigger. Now, if Mr. and Mrs. Bigger had a son, who would be the bigger then?" Joe: "Give it up!" Jack: "Why, the son, because he would be a little Bigger. If Mr. Bigger died, who would be the bigger then?" Joe: "Give it up!" Jack: "Why, Mrs. Bigger, because the son would be fatherless (far the less) Bigger!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Miss V. Madge, 5, Tolverne Road, West Wimbledon, S.W. 20.



A SUITABLE PAIR!

Cavalry recruit (about to take his first lesson in horsemanship): "Sergeant, pick me out a nice, gentle horse." Sergeant: "Have you ever ridden a horse before?" Recruit: "No." Sergeant: "Ah! Here's the very animal to suit you, then—never been ridden before. You can start out together!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Alfred Watson, 8, Linclive Terrace, Linwood, by Paisley, Scotland.

EXACTLY!

"Johnny," said the teacher, on the eve of breaking up for the Christmas holidays, "can you tell me what are weights and measures?" There was a long silence, and teacher got rather impatient. "Come, come, Johnny! Surely you can answer a simple question like that?" "Please, teacher," replied the little one suddenly, "weights are people who come howling outside the house on Christmas Eve, and measures are what dad takes to stop them!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to A. F. Climie, 19, Barrie Terrace, Ardrossan, Ayrshire.



MISS BLONDE, THE LION-HEARTED!

Circus Manager (at Christmas fair): "Who is making that unearthly noise in the dressing-room?" Assistant: "Oh, sir, it's only Miss Blonde, the lion-tamer. She's just seen a mouse!"—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to G. Debonnaire, 25, Bolina Road, South Bermondsey, S.E. 16.

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TUCK HAMPER COUPON.

THE GEM LIBRARY. No. 13.

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THE GHOST OF DRERE MANOR!

(Continued from page 15.)



"Ow!" gasped Vavasour.
 "Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.
 They could see at a glance that nothing more serious than a ducking in icy cold water had happened to the Highcliffe juniors, therefore it was not unfeeling to laugh in the circumstances.
 "Hallo!" said Wildrake. "Where's that rotter, Pon?"
 "He's bunked down the road," said Tom Merry. "He's not exactly pining to meet us at close quarters after that dirty trick he attempted."
 "He might have killed the lot of us," said Manners, with a glint in his eyes. "The dangerous maniac."
 Tom Merry & Co. nodded. Then they turned their attention to the wretched, shivering Highcliffe juniors.
 "If you stand there all day you'll catch your death of cold," said Tom Merry.
 "Groooooough!" wailed Gadsby. "My—my suitcase has gone!"
 "And mine!" groaned Vavasour. "Wow!"
 "And my trunks!" gasped Drury.
 "And mine!" panted Monson. "And all m-m-my clothes are in it! Yow!"
 "Well, you've said good-bye to them," said Monty Lowther. "If you take my advice you'll cut off and get a rub-down somewhere."
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "It's all Pon's fault!" hissed Vavasour, through chattering teeth. "I'll—I'll slaughter him!"
 "Well, we'll leave you to it," said Tom Merry, with a grin. "Only leave a little bit of him for us the next time we see him."
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Come on, you chaps!" said Wildrake. "Let's get on."
 And the St. Jim's juniors drew off, leaving the shivering Highcliffians standing on the bank vowing all manner of threats and penalties on the devoted head of Cecil Ponsonby.
 If all that they said was destined to come to pass, then Ponsonby was indeed booked for a very lively Christmas.

CHAPTER 8.

The Uninvited Guest!

"HURROOOOOO!"

That stentorian yell rang out crisply on the afternoon air as the St. Jim's brake rounded a bend in the road a mile outside Murranhurst.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Kit Wildrake.

"Here's Buck!"

"Hurroooooo!"

Again that piercing yell rang out as Buck Whipcord, mounted astride a rakish-looking chestnut horse, waved his picturesque sombrero in the air and pulled his mount to a standstill, so that it almost slithered on its haunches.

"Greetings, buys!" he roared, his mahogany-coloured face breaking into a hundred smiling wrinkles. "Buck



jest thought he'd take a bit o' exercise an' meet yer on the trail!"

"Good old Buck!"

The St. Jim's juniors gave their greeting in their own individual fashion, and Kit introduced Figgins & Co. of the New House.

"A pretty li'l party," said Buck approvingly. "Gee! We'll sure hev some fun this Yuletide."

"Is Nunks at the manor?" asked Kit.

Buck shook his head.

"Guess the ole man don't arrive until the five-thirty. That's an hour of the clock away. Reckon we'll do a bit o' shoppin' in the blamed villidge wiles we're waitin' for him, unless you buys is extra keen to git to the manor."

"Oh, we'll wait for Nunks," said Kit, with a glance at the party.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Buck turned his mount and trotted along by the side of the brake, as Kit got his horse into action again.

"Reckon you shore haven't forgotten how to handle the tapes, sonny," he called to Kit.

"No fear!" grinned Kit; and Tom Merry, who was nearest Buck, told him of the race against Ponsonby & Co. of Highcliffe, and its dramatic ending.

"Gee!" exclaimed Buck, with a wry face. "What a durned pity I wasn't there to see the fun!"

The party drove on, and with a rattle and clatter entered the quaint, old High Street of Murranhurst. Pedestrians turned and stared at the party of schoolboys in the brake and the picturesque figure of Buck on horseback, for it was an unusual sight, and quite a crowd of urchins gathered round the brake when Kit drove in at the main hostelry.

"Guess we'll see to our own stomachs," remarked Buck, when the horses had been fed and stabled. "Who says tea?"

"Tea!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

Buck smiled.

"Right, sonnies! Reckon there'll be a slap-up banquet up at the manor to-night, 'cos I've jest had a whole heap of servants and butler guys down from London. Ole man engaged 'em hisself for the Christmas. An' the fodder he's laid in would give yer eyes a fair treat to see!"

"Good old Nunks!" grinned Kit. "He remembers that he's been a boy hisself."

"An' he's still a boy!" exclaimed Buck. "Bless him!"

In a chattering, light-hearted throng the juniors made for the local teashop. Here Buck distinguished himself by ordering a royal spread, and the juniors, who were sharp set, fell to with great gusto.

And while they satisfied their inner men the connection from Wayland Junction ran into the station at Murranhurst, and amongst those who alighted from the train was a podgy, fat figure, wearing a St. Jim's cap, and carrying a bulging suitcase.

It was Baggy Trimble!

The fat Fourth-Former blinked about him uncertainly.

"Murranhurst!" he muttered. "I know this is the right station. I wonder where Tom Merry and those beasts are?"

The stationmaster eyed him suspiciously. Trimble showed no inclination to pass the ticket barrier.

"You jest got off this train?"

Baggy started as the stationmaster spoke to him.

"Yes, my man!" he replied loftily.

The stationmaster winced at the "my man."

"Ticket, please!" he snapped.

The fat junior blinked at him uneasily. As a matter of fact, the ticket that reposed in his pocket only carried him as far as Wayland Junction. There he had managed to dodge into a carriage without paying the necessary excess. Trimble considered the railway company "fair game" when it was a matter of getting the utmost value out of his money, and he had preened himself on his strategy. But here was another stumbling-block. If he couldn't manage to dodge this suspicious railway official he would have to walk to Drere Manor—wherever that might be—instead of taking a taxi. And the thought of a long walk—Trimble felt for a certainty that the walk would be a long one, because he knew the manor was perched on the cliffs by the sea—made him shudder. The fat Fourth-Former hated anything in the nature of exertion.

The stationmaster smiled in a superior fashion. He felt instinctively that this podgy schoolboy was a "bilk." Certainly Trimble made no show of presenting his ticket.

"Ticket, please!"

The fat Fourth-Former dived a grubby hand into his pocket and made a pretence of looking for the required ticket, and all the time his fat brain was working swiftly.

"I've got the beastly ticket somewhere," he remarked, and at the same time he started to roll towards the ticket barrier.

The stationmaster walked with him.

They halted at the barrier.

Then, to the stationmaster's astonishment, Trimble's hand came out of his waistcoat pocket and a ticket was revealed. The railway official did not know that its usefulness had ended at Wayland Junction, for the simple reason that Trimble kept the side of the ticket bearing the name of destination underneath. And the date of issue, the stationmaster saw at a glance was correct.

He took the ticket and was about to examine it further when Trimble suddenly turned his head and stared as if fascinated at an imaginary object on the side of the platform.

The stationmaster turned his head to see what it was that interested the fat junior so much. His eyes sought every portion of the platform and failed to see anything out of the ordinary, and then, his thoughts returning to the ticket, he looked at it and discovered that it only entitled the traveller to proceed as far as Wayland Junction.

"Well, I'm blowed! The bilk! Where is he!"

The spot whereon Trimble had stood half a minute ago knew him no more. Only his suitcase remained. The fat junior's simple ruse had proved effective, for he had slipped through the barrier while the stationmaster's attention was drawn elsewhere, and had gone while the going was good. In his haste he had completely forgotten his suitcase, but it was to prove to him at no great distant date that honesty indeed was the best policy.

The fat Fourth-Former of St. Jim's had seldom moved with such speed. He jumped into a waiting taxi and instructed the driver to proceed to Drere Manor with all speed.

"He, he, he!"

While the astonished stationmaster scratched his scanty locks and gazed about him like a man in a dream the cab drove off, and Baggy Trimble, now at a safe distance, indulged in the unmusical cachinnation he termed a laugh.

It never occurred to his fat mind that he had been guilty of dishonesty, for Trimble was more fool than rogue, and his sense of right and wrong was tempered to the needs of the moment. The fact that he had left his bag behind hadn't occurred to him yet, either.

"He, he, he!" he cackled. "The fellows will be jolly surprised to see me. They thought I wasn't coming. But they're wrong. Just as if they could leave me out of the party!"

In this pleasant frame of mind Trimble was driven on towards Drere Manor. He could hear the dull roar of the sea now. Suddenly the car came to a standstill. Looking out of the window, Trimble saw two massive iron gates loom up in front of him. And suspended across the overhead framework of wrought iron was a name-plate which bore the legend:

DRERE MANOR.

"What have you stopped for?" Trimble asked the taxi-driver.

The man came down from his seat and opened the door of the cab.

"This is Drere Manor, sir," he said.

"Well, drive me up to the door," said Trimble, catching a glimpse of the house at the end of a long weed-covered drive.

The taxi-driver took one glance at the house and shook his head.

"I'm not going up that there drive," he said.

Trimble snorted. If the man didn't take him up the drive it meant that he would have to pay for the cab himself, whereas, if Kit Wildrake and his party had arrived, there was every possibility of the taxi-fare being paid by one of them if the cabman drove him up to the house.

Trimble tried all his persuasion on the cabman, but it made no difference.

"I'm not going up that drive if you give me a quid!" said the driver resolutely. "I don't go an inch nearer the house than these gates."

The fat junior snorted. Really the obstinacy of this driver was going to prove costly.

"Three-and-six, please!"

The driver intimated that he wanted to be off, and Trimble, with a growl, looked round for his bag. Then he jumped, for there was no sign of the bag.

"Oh, lor!" he groaned. "Where's my bag?"

"Dunno 'bout a bag, sir," said the driver. "Which you didn't have a bag when you stepped into this cab."

"Oh, lor!"

The awful truth dawned on Baggy Trimble then. In his eagerness to "bilk" the railway he had completely forgotten his bag. True, it was of little use to anyone but Trimble himself, but that reflection afforded the fat junior scant consolation.

"I left it on the station!" he muttered to himself. "Oh crumbs!"

It was poetic justice with a vengeance.

"Three-and-six, please!"

Trimble came back to earth with a start as the voice of the taxi-driver again reminded him that the fare had to be paid.

With a groan, he dived his hand into his pocket and produced the sum of three shillings and ninepence, exactly. He extracted the required three-and-six from that amount and handed it to the taxi-driver.

"There you are, my man!" he remarked magnanimously.

The driver was too taken aback to say anything as he mechanically took the bare fare; but he said a "mouthful," as the Americans say, when he had recovered from the first shock. But by that time the discreet Trimble had passed through the iron gates of Drere Manor, and was rolling up the drive.

The loss of his suitcase had given him a shock, but worry didn't dwell with the egregious Trimble for long. The case only contained a suit of clothes and a few collars and shirts, and these articles of apparel the fat junior hoped to borrow of Tom Merry & Co. until such time as he could find someone willing enough to collect that bag from the stationmaster.

As these comforting thoughts roamed leisurely through Trimble's podgy brain he rolled towards the iron-studded doors of the manor. An air of gloom hung over the place, but Trimble did not notice it.

He rang loudly at the bell, and heard it clanging through the house.

But no one appeared in answer to the summons.

Clang, clang!

The fat junior jerked at the bell impatiently.

Only the echo came back to him.

"What's the matter with everyone?" he muttered.

And then it dawned on him that perhaps the St. Jim's party hadn't arrived.

Clang, clang!

He rang again.

"Haven't arrived!" he muttered. "He, he, he! They'll get the surprise of their life when they find me here before them!"

And then by accident he jammed his arm against the door. To his surprise it was open.

"This is a go, and no mistake!" he said, with a grin. "Jolly careless of people to leave a big house like this open!"

It certainly was, for it admitted Trimble. He rolled into the spacious hall and glanced round the oak panelling with a critical eye.

"I'm going to be at home here!"

The fat junior possessed the happy faculty of making himself at home wherever he was. He roamed about the house as if it belonged to him, and finally he arrived at the large dining-room.

"Oh, my hat!"

The fat junior's eyes almost goggled out of his head as he beheld the preparations that had been made there for the arrival of the St. Jim's party.

A large dining-table was laid for thirteen people. Gleaming cutlery and polished glassware were ranged before each chair. Flowers there were in abundance, and the walls were decorated with bunches of holly and mistletoe and Chinese lanterns. These things, pleasing to the eye of youth, held Trimble's gaze for a few seconds only. His attention was fixed on the four dressed chickens, the potato salad, the fruit salad, and the bottles of ginger-ale and lemonade that graced the large serving-table.

"My hat! This is prime!"

The more the fat junior looked at these tempting dishes the more his mouth watered and his eyes glistened.

He crossed to the electric-light switch and flooded the room with light. Then he rolled to the fire, which blazed and crackled merrily, and warmed himself.

"This is something like!" he muttered. "Hallo! What's that?"

His inquisitive gaze was drawn to a folded sheet of paper pinned to the table napkin in front of the host's chair at one end of the table.

It was no business of Trimble's to read that note, for it was addressed to Malcolm Wildrake, Esq. But that little circumstance did not upset Baggy Trimble. Curiosity was his besetting sin. The note, somehow or other, became unattached from the table napkin. Then, before he quite knew what he was doing, the fat junior was perusing it. It was a strange missive, obviously written in haste, and it ran as follows:

"Malcolm Wildrake, Esq.

"Dear Sir,—We heard the history of this house on our way here, but paid no attention to it. But in the short

ANSWERS

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CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE!

Breaking-Up For Christmas!

*The Christmas spirit's in the air,
And every heart rejoices;
There's hustle, bustle everywhere,
And happy schoolboy voices.
We pack our trunks with eager glee,
And cram our big portmanteaux;
The Christmas vac's arrived, you see—
The time of pranks and "panto"!*

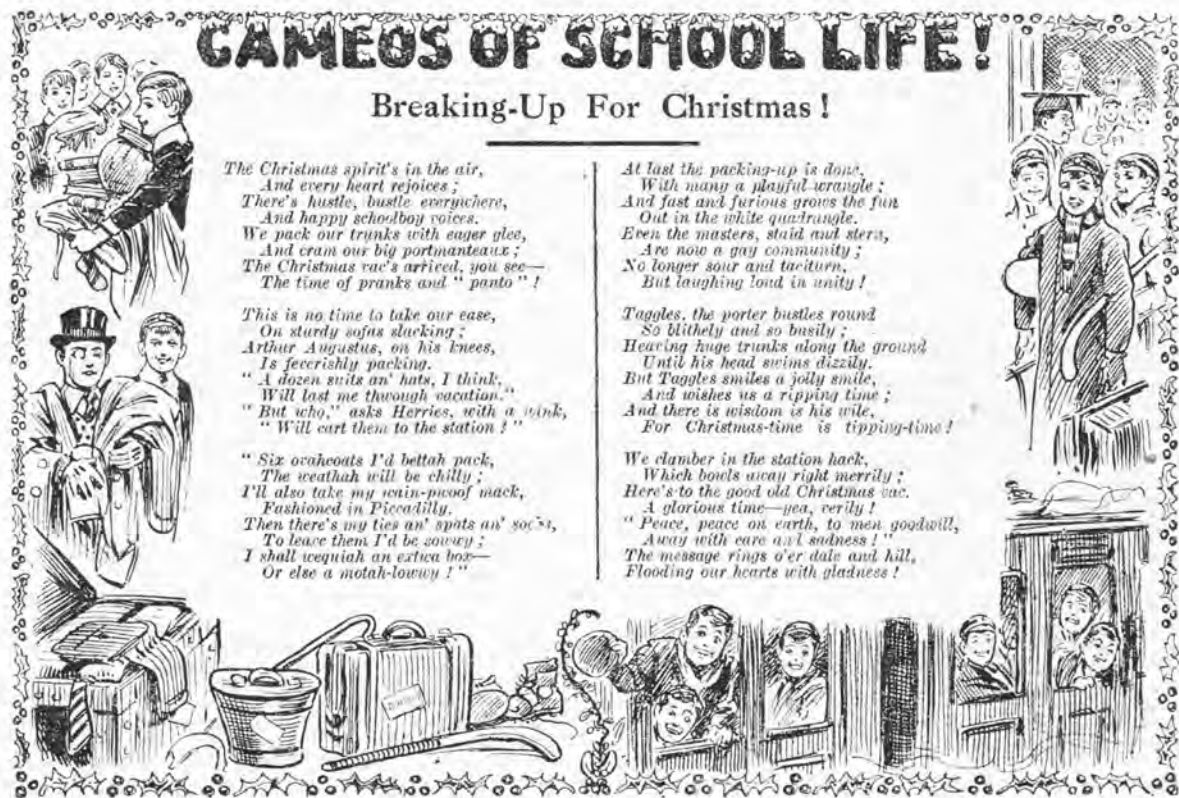
*This is no time to take our ease,
On sturdy sofas slacking;
Arthur Augustus, on his knees,
Is feverishly packing.
"A dozen suits an' hats, I think,
Will last me through vacation."
"But who," asks Herries, with a wink,
"Will cart them to the station!"*

*"Six overcoats I'd better pack,
The weather will be chilly;
I'll also take my rain-picoof mack,
Fashioned in Piccadilly.
Then there's my ties an' spots an' socks,
To leave them I'd be sorry;
I shall require an extra box—
Or else a motah-lowwy!"*

*At last the packing-up is done,
With many a playful wrangle;
And fast and furious grows the fun
Out in the white quadrangle.
Even the masters, staid and stern,
Are now a gay community;
No longer sour and taciturn,
But laughing loud in unity!*

*Taggles, the porter bustles round
So blithely and so busily;
Hearing huge trunks along the ground
Until his head swims dizzily.
But Taggles smiles a jolly smile,
And wishes us a ripping time;
And there is wisdom in his while,
For Christmas-time is tipping-time!*

*We clamber in the station hack,
Which bowls away right merrily;
Here's to the good old Christmas vac.
A glorious time—yea, verily!
"Peace, peace on earth, to men, goodwill,
Away with care an' sadness!
The message rings o'er dale and hill,
Flooding our hearts with gladness!"*



time we have been in your service we have heard and seen enough to convince us that the house is haunted. I have been unable to prevail upon the staff to await your arrival; they are terrified of staying here a moment longer than is absolutely necessary, and, in consequence, have packed their bags and departed for London. Left alone in this house, I have experienced the worst half-hour of my life. I can wait no longer.—Yours faithfully, JAMES BLENKIRON."

"What on earth is the fellow talking about?" muttered Trimble, eyeing the note again. "Who is he, anyway?"

That the letter was from the butler whom Kit Wildrake's uncle had employed never occurred to Trimble's fat mind for a moment. Indeed, the matter of servants had never entered his head.

"Haunted!"

Trimble took a swift look round the room and shivered. He had heard the story of Drere Manor from the juniors at St. Jim's, but he had not been over impressed by it at the time.

"Oh, lor'!"

The thought of being alone in that vast house threw the fat junior into a state of nerves, and he was in the act of bolting from the place when his eyes again encountered the tempting array of food on the serving-table.

That did it! Haunted or not haunted, those chickens looked jolly appetising. And Trimble was hungry—very hungry. He had only had enough pudding for six juniors at dinner that day, and the two dozen tarts he had consumed at Wayland Junction were a mere bagatelle to a fellow of his gastronomic abilities.

His eyes lingered on the contents of the serving-table, and then they returned to the letter he held in his hand.

"I might have a snack before I go, anyway," he reflected. "Besides, the fellows will be here soon. I'll just sample one of those chickens. I must say they look appetising."

Quite unconsciously he screwed up the note and threw it into the fire. Next moment he had rolled to the serving-table. The biggest chicken was taken from it and placed on the dining-table; the potato salad followed it, and a generous portion of the fruit salad also. A couple of bottles of ginger-ale were opened. And then Baggy Trimble sat down.

For half an hour his jaws worked incessantly to the detriment of the chicken, the potato salad, and the fruit salad. At the end of that time Trimble's fat face was sticky and shiny.

"Not much on that chicken!" he reflected, as he surveyed the carcass. "I think I'll try another!"

The second chicken went the way of the first. The big

bowl of fruit salad disappeared at an alarming rate, and two more bottles of ginger-ale quenched Trimble's thirst.

"That's better!"

Trimble leaned back in his chair. His terrific hunger had abated, and he felt delightfully satisfied and restful. His waistcoat buttons threatened to burst off at any moment.

He got up from the dining-chair with difficulty and rolled towards the door.

The library, with the deep leather armchair and the cosy fire, looked inviting as he peeped in, and the combination of these things drew Trimble like a magnet.

He sank into the armchair and stretched his feet towards the blaze. Five minutes later a deep, unmusical snore rumbled through the room.

Trimble was asleep.

CHAPTER 9.

A Scare for Trimble!



"NUNKS!"

Kit Wildrake darted forward as the five-thirty train drew to a standstill at Murrarhurst and a bronzed, broad-shouldered man of middle age stepped out on to the platform.

"Kit!"

Malcolm Wildrake seized his nephew's outstretched hand in a grip of iron and wrung it warmly, and his gaze dwelt affectionately on the face of the lad who was the apple of his eye.

The rest of the St. Jim's party stood at a respectful distance until Kit hastened to introduce them.

"Powerful glad to meet you, boys!"

The rancher shook hands warmly with the juniors in turn and slapped Buck on the back.

"Waal, you old dog," he said, with a grin, "you bought the place! Trust Buck to do ye a job if ye want it done well. And how are the servants getting along, Buck?"

Buck scratched his head.

"Gettin' long my nerves," he said. "It's 'Mr. Whipcord' this, and 'Yes, sir!' and 'No, sir!' an' bowin' an' scrapin'. Mebbe it suits some o' the gents, but it don't suit yours truly. Buck likes ter see a man a man."

Mr. Wildrake smiled indulgently. He knew Buck for what he was—a straight, loyal, honest-to-goodness fellow

with a heart of gold. No matter how long Buck stayed in England he would always remain the same—one of Nature's unchangeable creatures.

"That's their job, Buck," said Nunks, with a grin. "It pleases some folk to be served with the butter laid on thick, same as it suits those who do it, for that matter."

"Mebbe!" grunted Buck. "I left the whole durned tribe o' them gettin' the dinner ready."

"Good!" said Nunks. "Just lead me to that dinner, Kit!"

The party surged out of the station, and Nunks chartered three taxicabs. He noted the expressions on the faces of the drivers as he named his destination, but he paid little attention to it.

The juniors crowded into the cabs, Nunks, Buck, Kit and Tom Merry occupying the first one.

Then they drove off.

As in the case of Trimble, the drivers of the taxis refused to take their cabs farther than the outer gates of the manor.

Buck laughed as he noted their apprehensive glances at the big, sombre-looking house.

"Take no notice of these fellows," he said to Nunks. "Why, the whole blamed villidge is that scared 'bout this place that the tradespeople won't come up to the front door."

The juniors laughed at Buck's words. They knew the legend of the manor, but it held no terrors for them in the presence of this hardy, courageous, common-sense man of the plains. And Nunks treated the whole matter as a joke, for he laughed heartily as he paid the drivers off.

Then the juniors, with Buck and Nunks in the van, headed up the unkempt drive.

"Reckon'll be some spade work put into this drive soon as I get busy," remarked Nunks, as the party halted before the great doors of the manor. "Jest hank on that bell, Buck, there's a good feller."

Clang, clang!

Buck rang, but no servant appeared.

"Aw, shucks!" drawled Buck, pulling a key from his pocket. "Let's let ourselves in!"

He turned the key in the lock and the party entered.

An eerie silence seemed to pervade the old house.

"Don't seem much sign of life hereabouts," remarked Nunks, entering the dining-room, in which the light was still burning. "Where's all the servants?"

"Dunno!" said Buck. "Gosh! There was a whole army o' 'em here when I left."

The juniors crowded into the room.

They noted with some surprise that the remains of two chickens were on the table, but they had no thought just then of how those skeletons came to be left there when there was supposed to be a "whole army of servants" about the place.

Buck looked at the table, noted the carcasses of the chickens, and his brow puckered.

"Durned funny servants!" he remarked. "Seem to have made themselves at home, I should say. Those chick'ns was for us."

"Go and beat 'em up," said Nunks frowning.

Buck went out of the room what time Tom Merry & Co. made themselves comfortable. When Buck returned there was a perplexed expression on his weather-beaten features.

"Waal, this beats Washington," he said. "There ain't no sign of a blamed servant in the house!"

"What?"

"Reckon I'm speakin' gospel truth," drawled Buck. "Why, even the luggage they brought with 'em is gawn."

"Oh, my hat!"

Nunks looked puzzled.

"This is a fine greeting," he said to the juniors. "I must apologise. Durn me," he added, turning to Buck, "the mysteries are startin' already. What can have happened to these blamed servants?"

Buck shook his head.

"Arsk me 'nuther!" he replied.

"I'm afraid you boys will have to make the best of things," said Nunks, "until I can find out what's happened—"

"Don't you worry about us," said Kit. "We can get along all right."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We'll all pile in an' give a hand, you know."

Kit Wildrake looked thoughtful. He remembered the strange message he and Buck had seen on the window in the kitchen and he wondered whether a similar occurrence could account for the disappearance of the servants. Buck had said that even their baggage was gone. That went to show that they had gone for good. And yet—

It opened up so many channels of disquieting thought that Kit Wildrake tried to dismiss the matter from his mind.

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"Waal, reckon we'd best fall to," suggested Buck. "That's the first job!"

The juniors fell to. The two large chickens made an ample meal, although there was a scarcity of potato salad and tomatoes. Faces beamed all along the big table and Nunks was the life and soul of the party. For the nonce, the mystery of the missing servants was forgotten.

It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who broke the happy chain of laughter and comment that ran round that festive board.

"Bai Jove!" he remarked suddenly.

"What is it, Gussy? Swallowed a bone?" asked Monty Lowther, with a grin.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah, I have been countin'—"

"Not the number of helpings I have had surely?" protested Monty.

"Don't be an ass, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus severely. "I've been countin' and I have discovered that we are pwecisely thirteen."

Tom Merry frowned his disapproval at the swell, but D'Arcy prattled on.

"You know some people wouldn't sit down to table with thirteen guests—not for all the wealth in the county," he remarked.

"The unlucky number!" ejaculated Manners, with a nervous start.

"Yaas!"

The old superstition came home with startling significance in that big house which had already provided so much in the way of superstition, and an uneasy silence settled on the party.

Nunks broke it.

"Reckon that sort of superstition don't upset my appetite," he said, with an attempt at jocularity.

"Nor mine!" declared Buck loyally.

"No fear!" grinned Tom Merry.

The juniors chorused Tom Merry's statement with a show of emphasis. And then, as a moment of silence settled on the party again, a peculiar rumbling sound echoed through the house.

"What's that?" Manners started to his feet in alarm. Perhaps of the entire party he was the most highly strung.

"Did you hear that?" whispered Tom Merry.

"Oooooooooawk!"

That strange sound came to the juniors' ears stronger than ever.

All the party were on their feet now. Buck and Nunks gave each other a grim glance.

"The ghost!" muttered Buck, drawing his six-shooter. "Reckon me an' thet ghost is goin' to quarrel mighty soon."

"There it is again," said Blake as that strange rumbling sound echoed and re-echoed round the room.

"Come on, boys," said Buck, with a grim laugh. "Let's git this straight soon an' early."

He made a dash for the door. Tom Merry & Co. with strained faces followed him.

In a listening, highly-strung group, they paused in the passage while Buck tried to locate the sound.

"In here!" he yelled suddenly, making a dash for the library. "That's where the blamed noise is comin' from!"

The door of the library was swung open, and Buck, a loaded six-shooter in his hand, stepped inside the room.

The juniors packed in at his heels.

"Oooooooooooooooooawk!"

As that rumbling sound rang out again from somewhere quite close at hand, Tom Merry & Co. nearly jumped out of their skins. But they were determined to see the thing through, unnerving as it was.

Buck made a sweeping movement with his right hand, and the loaded gun covered every section of the room in turn. But there was certainly no sign of a ghost.

"Oooooooooooooooooawk!"

Buck's keen eyes were drawn to the big armchair before the fire, the back of which was all that could be seen. Then he jumped forward, and Tom Merry & Co. followed him with a rush.

Crash!

The chair was spun round on its castors.

"Trimble!"

At the sight of the fat Fourth-Former still snoring in the depth of the armchair Tom Merry & Co. almost collapsed.

"Trimble!"

"Oh, my giddy aunt!"

"The ghost!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A hearty peal of laughter floated round the library, and Buck and Nunks joined in as loud as any. The noise awoke Baggy Trimble.

He sat up in the chair with a start.

"You silly chumps!" he snorted. "You might have given a chap a fright waking him like that!"

"You've given us a fright all right!" said Kit Wildrake, with a smile of relief. "We thought you were a ghost!"

"Eh?" blinked Trimble.

Tom Merry explained, and a fat, superior smile dawned on Trimble's podgy face.

"Scared out of your lives—what?" he said. "Good job I'm here to look after you!"

"But who told you to come here?" asked Wildrake.

Baggy Trimble smiled.

"I knew it was a mistake that you hadn't invited me!" he said. "Still, I'm a sensible chap! You forgot me in the rush, I know. Now I'm here everything's all right. Introduce me to your uncle, Kit."

Really, there was no competing with Trimble. The only effective way to deal with Trimble was to employ force. Doubtless, if he found himself sitting outside the large gates of the manor he would then begin to realise that his fascinating society wasn't wanted. But Kit could hardly do that in the presence of his uncle. And, again, Kit thought of the unlucky number. With Trimble one of the party, that superstition would die a natural death.

Almost unconsciously, he found himself introducing Baggy to his uncle.

Nunks did not look favourably impressed as the formalities of the introduction were concluded. But as Trimble was a St. Jim's boy it was up to him to be polite.

"Friend of yours, Kit?"

Wildrake looked round at Tom Merry & Co.

"Ye-es," he said.

Trimble beamed his friendliest smile.

"Study-mates, in fact," he added. "Great pals, Kit and I!"

Nunks nodded.

"Well, if you'd care to stay along of us for the vacation, Grimble—"

"Trimble, sir, Bagley Trimble."

"Trimble," resumed Nunks. "You are welcome!"

"Thank you, sir!" smiled Trimble. "These fellows want someone to take care of them, you know. Yarooooooop! Wharrer you treading on my foot for, Tom Merry?"

The captain of the Shell crimsoned.

"Did I? So sorry!"

Buck exchanged a wink with Nunks, and the two of them withdrew. Buck was thinking that Kit and his chums would like to be left alone with Trimble for a few moments. And he was not mistaken.

The second Nunks and Buck were gone the juniors turned on Baggy Trimble as one man.

"You fat barrel!"

"You frightful boundah!"

"Of all the nerve—"

Trimble eyed the exasperated juniors with an apprehensive grin.

"Oh, really, you fellows," he said, with an attempt at a grin. "I—I'm invited, you know!"

"Bump the fat rotter!"

Kit Wildrake smiled grimly.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "Now that Nunks has asked the fat toad to stay, we can't do anything."

"Except to hope that the blessed ghost will scare him out of the place!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

Trimble smirked.

"I'm not afraid of any ghost," he said. "You fellows leave it to me. He, he, he!"

"What are you cackling about?" roared Tom Merry.

"He, he, he! You chaps were scared out of your wits because you thought I was a ghost!" grinned Trimble.

"Why, I'd soon settle the hash of any ghost that came near me!"

"What's that?" said Blake suddenly, as a peculiar noise echoed strangely through the house, reminiscent of someone sharpening a carving-knife on a steel.

"The ghost!" said Kit, with a wink at Tom Merry & Co.

"My hat!"

Tom Merry & Co. looked startled—for the especial benefit of Baggy Trimble, for they had recognised the sound now.

"Oh, crumbs!" Baggy Trimble's jaw dropped, and his hair almost stood on end. "Is that the g-g-ghost?"

"Yes," breathed Monty Lowther, seizing the fat junior by the arm. "That—that's his cutlass. He sharpens it—on his steel hook, you know!"

The chums had the greatest difficulty in keeping straight faces as they saw the look of terror that crept across Trimble's podgy features.

"Leave it to Trimble," said Monty Lowther, in a tense voice. "He'll frighten the g-ghost away!"

"Save us, Trimble, old chap!"

"Protect us!"

"Wow!" gasped Trimble, as the noise grew louder.

"Here it comes!" whispered Tom Merry, as the door of

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the library opened and that peculiar grating noise floated in the room. "S-save us, Trimble!"

"Yoooop!"

With a howl of terror, Trimble dived for the big table in the library and crouched under it, palpitating like a fat jelly. The ample folds of the table-cover almost concealed him from view.

"Keep him off!" gasped Baggy. "D-don't let him come near me! Wow!"

"He's coming straight towards you," said Tom Merry. "There's a gleaming knife or something in his hand!"

This information was true in substance, for the door had opened to admit Buck Whipcord, and Buck was sharpening a carving-knife on a steel. But it sent Baggy Trimble into fresh paroxysms of terror.

"Yow! Keep off!" He could hear the approaching pad of footsteps as Buck came into the room. He could hear, too, the grating noise of the knife against the steel. "Help! Murder! Fire! Oh, crumbs!"

"Waal, this fair beats the band!" said Buck, as he saw the grinning juniors and a portion of Trimble's ample figure that peeped out between the floor and the drooping table-cover. "What's the game, boys?"

"It's Trimble!" explained Monty Lowther. "He's protecting us from the ghost."

"What ghost?"

"You're the ghost!" said Kit, with a grin. "Trimble was dyin' to meet a ghost and scare him away. So—so we gave him a chance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Buck grinned broadly.

"Reckon you young raskils had better put him wise!" he remarked. "Otherwise that fat clam'll lose his appetite!"

Trimble heard the laughter and Buck's nasal voice, and he summoned up enough courage to peep out from under the table.

"W-where's the ghost?"

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

"Reckon there ain't no ghost," said Buck. "Guess yore pals were jest pullin' yore leg, sonny."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baggy Trimble satisfied himself that there was indeed no ghost or sign of one in that spacious library, and then he crawled out from under the table.

"You silly asses!" he said warmly.

"Scared you, what?" chuckled Blake.

"Not a bit of it," retorted the fat junior. "He, he, he! Pulled your legs that time, didn't I?"

The juniors stared.

"Pulled our legs!" hooted Tom Merry. "Why—"

"I knew there wasn't a ghost," said Trimble. "Just my fun, you know!"

"Well, of all the cheek—"

"He, he, he!" cackled Trimble. "I'd like to see the ghost that would frighten me. Fairly took you in, didn't I?"

"B-r-r-r!"

Words failed Tom Merry & Co., and but for the presence of Buck they would have fallen on the cackling fat junior and bumped him there and then.

"Reckon you'd best git back to grub," said Buck, with a grin, and he moved to the door.

Baggy Trimble's face lighted up.

"Rather!" he exclaimed. "I feel quite peckish! There wasn't much on those two mouldy chickens—"

The juniors started.

"Do you mean to say that you wolfed those two chickens?" roared Kit. "And the salad and the—"

"If you're going to be mean about it," said Trimble warmly, "I shall refuse to stay as your guest. I was hungry after the journey, and I just had a small snack while I was waiting for you chaps to arrive."

"Of all the cormorants—"

"The guzzling porpoise—"

"The gweedy wottah—"

Baggy Trimble looked round on the angry juniors and grinned. He knew he was safe with Buck in the room.

"And that reminds me," he said. "I've left my suitcase at the station—"

"Pity you didn't leave yourself with it!" growled Monty Lowther.

"Hear, hear!"

Trimble affected not to hear that remark.

"I haven't any pyjamas and things," he continued cheerfully. "Still, my old pal Kit will fix me up—"

"You cheeky ass!"

"And one of you chaps can call at the station to-morrow and collect my luggage. I— Yoooop!"

Trimble did not mean to say that, but the exasperated juniors had reached the limit of their patience. Really, it was a bit too thick for a self-invited guest who had wolfed half the grub to expect them to run round obliging him.

Not even the presence of Buck Whipcord saved Baggy Trimble then. The chums of St. Jim's swooped down on the fat junior like an avalanche.

Bump!

"Whooooop!"

Trimble went to the carpeted floor of the library with a bump and a roar.

Buck Whipcord chuckled and silently withdrew.

"Give the rotter a bumping!" roared Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Leggo! Wow!" gasped Trimble. "Yoooop! Oh crikey!"

Bump!

The library fairly shook to the concussion, and Trimble's howls rose crescendo.

Bump!

"Yaroooooh!"

"Give him another!" exclaimed Kit. "That'll teach him to behave himself if he's going to stay here!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Trimble was given another one. In fact, he was given more than one, and his roars of anguish brought Buck on the scene again.

"What about finish' dinner?"

Trimble ceased to roar. He scrambled to his feet, forgetting his aches and pains at the mere mention of the word dinner.

"I'm coming!"

The fat Fourth-Former of St. Jim's, the self-invited guest, so to speak, was across the room in the twinkling of an eye.

And with feelings too deep for words, Tom Merry & Co. followed him.

CHAPTER 10.

The Ghost!

"GROOGH!"

Baggy Trimble shivered.

It was midnight, and Drere Manor lay wrapped in a mantle of snow.

With the exception of Trimble, the St. Jim's party were deep in slumber.

"Ain't it cold!"

The fat junior stepped gingerly out of bed and stealthily looked round on the sleeping forms of Blake, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, Herries, and Digby.

The five single beds looked like the Fourth Form dormitory at St. Jim's in miniature.

Tom Merry and the rest of the party were sleeping in the other rooms.

The roar of the sea, as it beat

against the cliffs upon which Drere Manor stood could be plainly heard.

"Beastly cold!"

Trimble looked round him for a wrapping of some sort.

His eyes alighted on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's multi-coloured silk dressing-gown, and he calmly lifted it off the hook in the wall and donned it.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's slippers were borrowed next, and having slipped them on, Trimble stood listening.

No sound broke the stillness of the room save the deep breathing of the slumbering juniors, and the murmur of the sea below.

Trimble rolled softly towards the door.

He was hungry, very hungry, although his gastronomic feats at the dinner-table had amazed Buck Whipcord and Nunks.

And hunger was one of the few things that spurred Trimble to energy. What his host would have thought had he seen Trimble just then it is impossible to conjecture.

Click!

The door of the bed-room opened to Trimble's touch, and he padded out on to the cold landing.

Darkness greeted him on every side.

But the fat junior had taken his bearings, so to speak, before retiring, and he felt for the massive oak rail of the banisters, and found it with little difficulty.

Then he descended the stairs, his slipped feet scarcely making a sound on the thick pile carpet.

"Now, where the thump is the kitchen?"

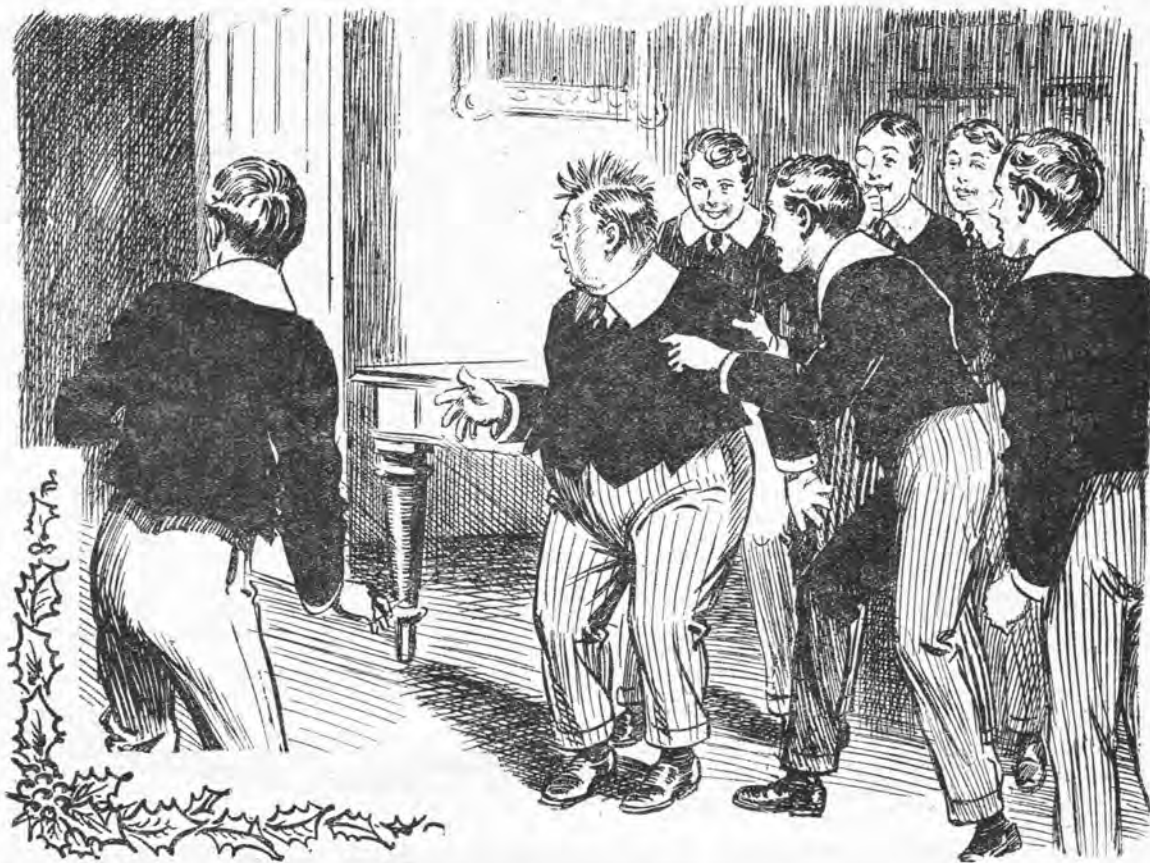
Trimble paused at the foot of the stairs and peered into the gloom of the hall. Then he rolled towards another stairway that led down into the servants' quarters, and descended them.

Once he gained the large kitchen the finding of the pantry presented small difficulty to a fellow of Trimble's keen sense for locating grub.

And what was more, he discovered the electric-light switch which helped him considerably.

"This is prime!"





"I'd soon settle the hash of any ghost that came near me!" said Trimble, with a grin. "Ho, he, he!" "What's that?" exclaimed Blake suddenly, as a peculiar noise echoed through the house, reminiscent of someone sharpening a carving-knife on a steel. "The ghost!" said Kit, with a wink at Tom Merry & Co. "P-protect us, Trimble!" The fat junior's hair stood on end. "Oh, crumbs!" he gasped. "The g-g-ghost? Wow!" (See Chapter 9.)

The contents of the pantry made Trimble's eyes glisten. A fresh ham and a large dish of tomatoes stared him in the face, as it were. It was the work of a few moments for the fat junior to remove these tempting morsels to the kitchen table. And then followed a glass jar of tongue, a tin of anchovies, and a jar of brawn.

"Ho, he, he!" chuckled Trimble softly. "This is a feed and no mistake!"

He drew up a chair to the table, and the "feed" began rapidly to diminish under his powerful jaws. But everything has its limits, and Baggy Trimble's jaws began to move less briskly when the tongue and the brawn, the anchovies, tomatoes, and a considerable portion of the ham were gone.

With a regretful look at the remaining ham, the fat junior pushed his plate away from him and rolled to his feet. He lighted a stub of candle he found on one of the shelves, and then moved across to the door. Switching out the light, he began to ascend the small staircase.

He was panting with the exertion when he reached the hall.

"Blow these stairs!" he grumbled. "I—"

He stood stock still and his eyes nearly started from their sockets as a faint, mocking laugh echoed out from somewhere close at hand.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

Trimble shivered like a jelly, and beads of perspiration began to trace their way down his terrified face, and the candle he was carrying nearly dropped from his shaking fingers.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

Again that eerie laugh rang out, and the fat junior felt a tremor run down his spine.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

It was positively uncanny, and Trimble's mind jumped to the legend of Drere Manor.

"The g-g-ghost!"

Some power seemed to hold the fat junior rooted to the spot. His hair almost stood on end, and his round little eyes stared out into the gloom as if he were mesmerised.

Suddenly a faint glow, not three yards away from where he stood shivering, took shape in the jet blackness.

"Wow!" gasped Trimble.

The glow seemed to be moving towards him, and Trimble nearly jumped out of his skin as his terrified eyes made out the shape of a burly figure clad in a bedraggled seaman's costume of olden times. But what terrified him most was a gleaming cutlass that swept upwards threateningly as the apparition came towards him.

"Yow! Mercy! Help!"

Trimble found the full power of his lungs as terror seized him.

"Help! Help!"

The horrible apparition was moving towards him, swaying like a wrath, and that gleaming cutlass was poised on high, ready, it seemed, to cleave the terrified junior from head to foot.

"The h-h-hook!"

The left arm of the ghostly figure came into view, and the terrified junior saw a length of shining metal, curved like a claw, attached to the sleeve. The hook was raised, and it seemed to beckon him.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

The laugh rang out mockingly, and Trimble felt the marrow freeze in his bones.

"Help! Help! Oh, help!"

"I'm comin', deah boy!"

From the landing above came the sound of moving feet, and Arthur Augustus, clad in his pyjamas, rushed to the top of the stairs.

"Hold on, Twimble!" he gasped. "I—"

His words trailed off as his eyes, becoming accustomed to the gloom, made out the ghostly apparition that held Trimble in a state of paralysis.

"Help!"

Arthur Augustus pulled himself together. His hand felt for the electric light switch, and he jerked it down. The staircase and most of the hall below was flooded in a bright white glow instantly.

"Bai Jove!"

That exclamation came from D'Arcy's lip unconsciously as he stared down on to the landing. Where, only a few

seconds before, he had seen that strange figure, there was nothing now.

"Help!"

Trimble leaned against the banisters in a state of collapse. D'Arcy jumped the stairs three at a time, and rushed to support him.

"The ghost!" wailed Trimble. "I thought it was going to kill me!"

"Poor old chap!" said D'Arcy kindly. "It's all wight now!"

"What's all the rumpus about?"

This time it was Tom Merry's voice. In company with the rest of the party, he had awakened at Trimble's frantic cries for help.

"This way, you chaps!" panted Arthur Augustus.

The juniors came racing down the stairs, with Buck and Nunks in close attendance.

They stared in amazement at the sight of Trimble, his face the colour of chalk, leaning against the banisters, with Gussy's arm supporting him.

"What's happened, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry, through chattering teeth.

"I heard Twimble yellin' for help," explained Arthur Augustus. "So I—"

"It was the ghost!" gasped Trimble. "The ghost! It was coming for me!"

Buck pushed his way through the crowd of juniors, and Nunks followed him.

"What's all this twaddle 'bout a ghost?"

"It's true!" howled Trimble. "I—I saw it!"

Buck laughed heartily.

"Reckon ye was a victim o' nightmare, sonny! An' I'm not surprised after what I saw you shift at the table."

Trimble blinked at him indignantly. He was recovering from the shock now.

"What were you doing out of bed, anyway?" asked Kit Wildrake.

"Really, Kit, old chap," gasped Trimble. "I—I felt peckish, you know; so—so I had a snack in the kitchen. Wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No wonder you saw a ghost!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Tell us another! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you it was a ghost!" insisted Baggy. "He had a horrible hook where his left hand would be. And in his right hand was a cutlass!"

"Ha, ha!" Buck seemed to find something funny in that description, and Nunks joined in.

"Now, that's what I call a real nightmare!" chuckled Buck. "But listen here, sonny," he added kindly. "You jest git back to by-byes and sleep it off!"

"But I tell you it was the ghost!" exclaimed Trimble. "It was all of a glow, and its laugh was horrible!"

"So it was a laughin' ghost, eh?"

"I heard someone laughin'," said D'Arcy quietly, "before I heard Twimble callin' for help."

The juniors looked at Arthur Augustus in astonishment. Despite the legend of Drere Manor they did not believe that Trimble had actually seen any apparition. He had had nightmares many a time and oft at St. Jim's, as a result of over-feeding. And the present occasion was regarded as simply another instance. That his mind would conjure up a picture of the dead and gone buccaneer was only natural, in the circumstances, for the juniors had been discussing the legend just prior to turning in for the night. But that Arthur Augustus should bear out something of what Trimble declared he had heard was astonishing, to say the least.

"You heard?" exclaimed Tom Merry incredulously.

The swell of St. Jim's crimsoned.

"I know it may sound swange to you fellows," he said.

"But I wepeat I heard someone laughin' before I heard Twimble yellin' for help. An', what is more, I thought I saw somethin' in the hall just before I switched the light on!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors were openly sceptical of that remarkable statement, and they roared with laughter. Buck and Nunks exchanged a wink.

"Reckon there was two of yer with a nightmare!" chuckled the former.

"Weally, Buck!" protested Arthur Augustus. "I assure you that I heard that laugh. An' I feel certain that there was something in the hall just before I switched the light on!"

"Go it, Gussy!" chortled Monty Lowther.

Baggy Trimble snorted.

"You can cackle!" he roared. "But I tell you I saw the ghost!"

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"An' I wepeat that I heard someone laughin'!" declared Arthur Augustus. "I don't believe in ghosts, but—"

There was a silence. Arthur Augustus was so much in earnest that the chums of St. Jim's could not help being a little impressed.

Buck came to the rescue.

"Waal, I reckon you buys had best git back to your beds, or you'll be laid up for the Christmas wi' a nice packet of colds!"

It came home to the juniors then that they were indeed courting trouble, for they were clad only in their pyjamas, and the night was bitterly cold.

"An' I guess yer needn't worry 'bout no more ghosts for to-night," said Buck cheerily; "cos me an' the ole man'll sit up fer the blamed thing, won't we, boss?"

Nunks nodded. He was vastly amused at the whole affair; but he could see that Trimble at least was terrified, and that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was impressed.

The juniors trooped back to Kit Wildrake's room. It was the largest of the three bed-rooms in use, and Tom Merry & Co. crowded in. Then Baggy Trimble was asked to tell his story over again.

He told it impressively.

"This is what comes of being a greedy little beast!" said Blake, when the fat junior had finished. "If you hadn't stuffed yourself at dinner, you wouldn't have imagined all this!"

Trimble snorted.

"Nothing of the kind!" he retorted. "I saw the ghost as plainly as I see you now. And Gussy said he heard those horrible laughs."

Arthur Augustus nodded in assent.

"You're sticking to that?" asked Tom Merry, eyeing D'Arcy sharply.

"I am, deah boy!" declared Arthur Augustus stoutly.

Trimble's story alone made little impression on the juniors; but with Arthur Augustus' backing, so to speak, it assumed a vastly different complexion. The juniors were silent. Kit Wildrake was thinking of that ghostly message he had seen on the window of the kitchen two days ago, and he was troubled.

"Penny for 'em, Kit?" said Tom Merry, catching sight of Kit's puckered brow.

Wildrake made up his mind to tell his chums of what he had seen. They listened to him in incredulous amazement.

"You're not pulling our legs?" asked Blake, when Wildrake had finished.

Wildrake shook his head.

"I'm telling you exactly what I saw," he answered. "Honour bright!"

"Well, it's trickery of some kind, that's pretty evident," said Kerr, who was perhaps the most practical-minded fellow in the room.

"Then let us make it our business to get to the bottom of this affair," said Wildrake. "I guess Buck will do his best; but if we all pile in we may be able to put paid to this rotten ghost legend for keeps."

Baggy Trimble shivered.

"I'm not looking for any blessed ghost!" he stuttered. "I've seen enough to-night!"

But nobody minded Trimble just then. It was agreed that the ghost of Drere Manor was to be treated as a mystery—a material mystery to which there was a material solution. The supernatural was dismissed as something non-existent. At least, that was the view the assembled juniors adopted while they were in Kit Wildrake's room.

But when they stepped into the passage outside, to go to their respective bed-rooms, something happened which shook that view considerably.

For a faint sound floated from the darkness—the sound of a soft, mocking laugh.

The juniors, plucky youngsters as they were, stood stock still, as if frozen to the ground by that uncanny sound. There was a moment's strained silence.

Manners gripped Tom Merry's arm in a convulsive grasp.

"The—the ghost!" he gasped.

"Run for it!" howled Trimble.

That broke the tension which was growing well-nigh unbearable. There was a rush of feet and the sound of keys turning in doors—and the passage was empty.

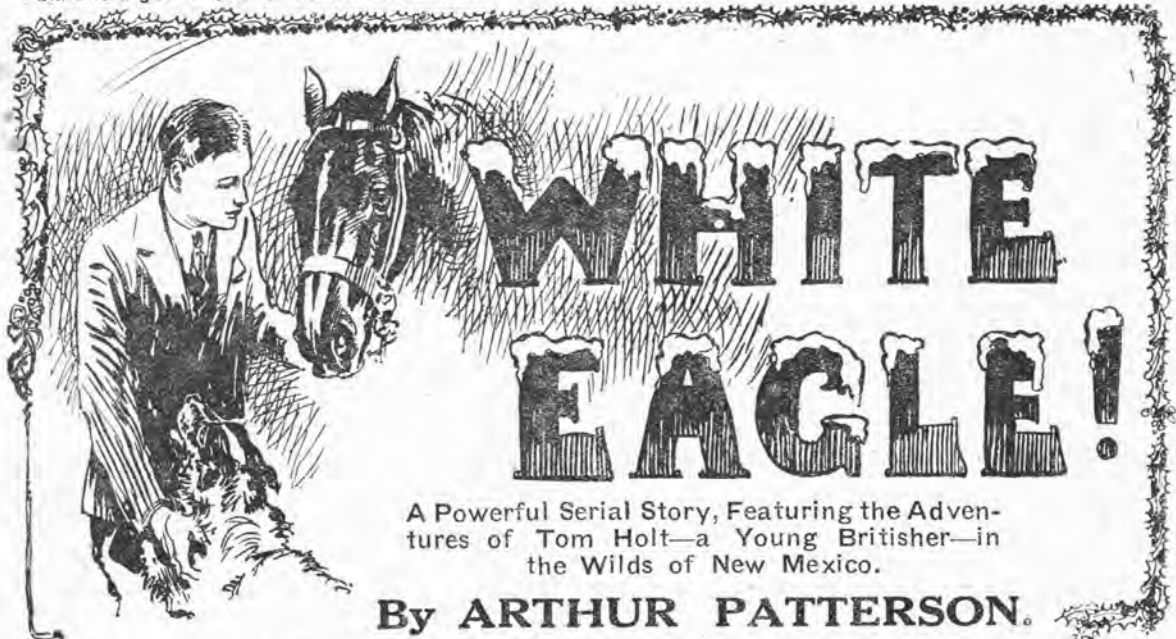
And through the dull murmur of the sea beating against the cliffs below, and the moaning of the wintry wind around the old house, there came again the sound of that eerie laugh—this time with a half-note of triumph in it:

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

THE END.

(This is a sensational beginning to the chums of St. Jim's stay at Drere Manor, but it's nothing to what is in store for them! Mind you read "The Mark of the Hawk!" next week's grand yarn dealing with Tom Merry & Co's. holiday adventures.)

CAUGHT IN A FOREST FIRE! For miles around the country is a blaze of flame and belching smoke—the puma and the jackal, the wolf and the antelope run side by side to escape from that raging inferno! And somewhere 'midst the blaze is a girl . . . Tom Holt's friend!



Fire!

"YOU have no contract with me. Go—if you wish."

The tone in which the words were spoken was as cold as the speaker's face. But Tom was not in the least deceived. He just stepped out of his chair and sat down on the arm of the colonel's.

"You come first—all the time. You know that, sir," he said reproachfully.

A faint twinkle began to dawn in the keen brown eyes.

"Say, but that's news, boy! What about Sadie and the racing colt yesterday morning? You knew she had orders from me never to mount him. But it appears you saddled him for her, and went along yourself."

Tom laughed.

"I saw she would do it whether or no, and I thought it safer to cinch him myself. My company was not asked for, and she gave me the slip. But nothing can get away from your Roman-nosed bay, and I followed on him. The colt behaved, though."

"Ah!" Chapin said quickly. "Because you were around. How do you suppose I am going to fix her if you get away? I don't believe she is in bed now. She threatened to go off first moonlight night on your mare. Look at the moon now!"

They went to the window. Outside it was nearly as bright as day. It was an Indian summer moon, making all things weirdly beautiful, as if the whole landscape were lighted with electricity.

Tom laughed again.

"Send the maid to find out presently, sir. If she has gone, Hunks shall find her. Anyhow, I can guarantee she's safe."

"Yes—now?" was the sharp rejoinder. "But when you're gone, first thing we know she'll tie those two wolf cubs the boys got the other night to a bob-sleigh, and navigate the

Chiquita upon a Santa Claus stunt to the Eskimos at the North Pole."

Tom thrust a hand through the colonel's arm.

"Then I am not going," he said.

"But you want to!" the elder man exclaimed jerkily. "Boy, that's where it cuts!"

Tom opened the window; the room seemed to stifle him. His head was aching with many thoughts which he ought to express, but did not know how.

"I—I don't think I do," he said slowly. "I want to tell you just how I feel. But—" He stopped helplessly.

The colonel caught him up.

"You are sure I shall not understand. Now, don't deny it! That is your feeling. We can't get away from the thing, so let us face it. I guess it is true, too. When you see an Apache you want to shake hands with him. When I see one of the brutes I want to shoot him, or something like it."

"Not White Cat."

"Yes; White Cat. I know he cares for you, and all that. But he looks at Sadie far too often, and much too hard."

Tom gave a little shout of amusement.

"Sorry, sir! Couldn't help it. Would you like to know what he thinks about her? He told me this afternoon."

"Well?" said the colonel, frowning.

"That yellow flower," Tom went on, imitating perfectly an Indian's toneless voice. "'she more man than woman. Huh! Me see her slap the face of her father once. A woman-demon!' He put it stronger than that. 'Me afraid of her.' He is, too!"

"Glad to hear it!" growled the colonel. "I don't trust him—What's the matter?"

Tom had stepped out of the window, and was sniffing with his nose in the air like a dog.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE!

A stranger in New Mexico, TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen, in company with his faithful terrier, Hunks, joins up with a wandering tribe of Apache Indians. BLACK HAWK, their chief, who cherishes a hope of wiping out the "whites," offers to take Tom on the trail and show him how to become a successful rancher, his motive being to collect certain information before a successful raid can be made on the white settlements. Knowing nothing of the sinister motive underlying all this, Tom acquits himself well, and becomes the fast friend of WHITE CAT, Black Hawk's son. Arriving in Serita, Tom falls foul of MICK MANDER, a belching desperado, by publicly declaring his friendship for the Redskins amongst whom he has been living. Mick attempts to shoot the young Britisher, but before he can pull the trigger, White Cat knives him, with the result that the Apache is

arrested and charged with attempted murder. Realising that the cowboys' bitter hatred of the Indians will prejudice White Cat's chances at the trial, Tom seeks the aid of COLONEL CHAPIN—a big power in those parts. Accompanied by the colonel and his daughter, SADIE, to whom he is very much attached, Tom arrives at the courthouse. White Cat's life hangs in the balance, but thanks to Hunks, who plays an important part in the trial, he is eventually acquitted. Anxious to show their gratitude, the council of the Apache nation offer to bestow upon Tom the title of White Eagle, a chieftainship, providing he will spend the winter with them. Not too keen to leave Sadie, Tom tackles the colonel on the subject.

"You have no contract with me," responds the old warrior coldly.

"Go—if you wish!"

(Now read on.)

"There it is again!" he said, as if he had not heard the words. "You said it would come, sir, with the dry weather," he added thoughtfully.

"What are you talking about?"

The colonel had sniffed till he sneezed, but with no result.

"You have the nose of a wolf! What is it?"

"Fire! From the east, too! That low country north of the river!"

The colonel whistled.

"Then it will be a fire and a half! No rain since July, and everything as dry as tinder. Sage-brush for three miles, too. Bad—very bad!"

The smell of burning could be detected now, and presently the foreman, Sandy Bowker, came in from the stables to talk about it. He was always a privileged visitor, and was immediately pushed by the colonel into a rocking-chair and supplied with a night-cap of whisky.

"Guess it's Indians!" he remarked shortly. Sandy was not an admirer of the great Apache nation. "I heard from one of the boys working on Temper's round-up that, about ten miles out, a whole crowd of Reds hev swarmed up from somewheres. What fur—no one knows. But to start a fire is jest what they would do!"

"Black Hawk there?" the colonel asked, with a glance at Tom.

"Bet your boots on it, colonel! After what he made out of the settlement six weeks back, he'll never leave us. But it's more than him. Badger Head is among them. Seems they have some big pow-wow on, and want us to know it! That always means trouble!"

"It is a peace council!" Tom said sharply. "I happen to know!"

The foreman cocked his eye, and drank the colonel's health.

"Here's how, boss! We-el, young Eagle, you may. But there's some who knows, and some who thinks they knows. You've a smart way with the bucks, not a doubt of it! But you weren't born as soon as me!"

There was a knock at the door, a sharp single rap, and Uncle Ephraim swept into the room almost at a run. He looked as if he had been drinking. His mouth was wide open, his eyes half out of his head, and he leaned heavily upon the table before he spoke.

"Oh, Marse Joe," he cried, addressing his master by the name he had not used since they were boys together, "she's gone—gone to it, marse, sure's death she has!"

Tom and Sandy leapt to their feet. But the colonel never moved. His face was marble.

"If you mean Miss Sadie, eh—say so! Keep still, will you, and behave yourself!"

The sharp words brought back the old negro's self-control, as they were meant to do.

"Yes, marse—certainly!" he gasped; and, bringing his hands to his sides, stood at attention.

"Jest this minute, she, Mamie, the maid, she come to me—missie not in her room. Not been in her bed. I go to stable—knowin' missie's way. There meet that young Red boy—White Cat. He tell me fire break out 'long de ribber, and dat he meet missie ridin' Marse Tom's mare for to see it. He tell her to go back; but she love fire, and go on. So he run here. Fire very swift and dangerous!"

"That will do," the colonel interrupted. "Thank you, Eph! Ah, White Cat—you!"

A short figure had glided in through the window. Unlike the negro, it was very still and quiet; but as the boy came into the light they saw that his mouth was wide open and his chest heaving convulsively.

"You—come," he whispered. "On—best horse. Me—take—you!"

He was now swaying from side to side on the verge of collapse, but he had turned to go back when Colonel Chapin caught him by the shoulder.

Western men say little in a crisis; but as their nerves harden, their perceptions sharpen to a fine edge. He saw that the Indian, though utterly exhausted, had not the faintest idea of giving in, and he remembered with a pang what he had thought about the boy only a few minutes ago.

"Saddle up," he said to Tom, "the black, the bay, and the colt. I follow in a minute. Now—to White Cat as the others chased to the stable—drink this!"

He poured out a drink and stood still, his hand on White Cat's shoulder, as the boy swallowed it down.

"Better?"

White Cat nodded with a deep breath.

"Lean on me, then, and go slow."

He drew the Indian's arm within his own and led him through the house by a short cut, in the course of which proceeding they met more than one of the servants, who

nearly fainted at the sight of their revered master arm-in-arm with an Apache Indian.

The stable-yard was now full of mounted men, as it had been the night before White Cat's trial. But this evening all were silent. Such orders as Sandy gave were in a half-whisper. They were cowboys who, hearing the news, had rushed from the bunk-house just as they were, many without hats or coats, half their horses bareback; the only thought in their hearts to save the life of the child so dear to them all.

A little apart, two negro grooms and Tom were swiftly saddling up the three horses taken from the colonel's private stable, and as Chapin came into the yard with White Cat they had just completed their work. The men glanced meaningly at each other when the boss appeared, still supporting the Indian, who, however, was nearly himself again. But there was not a whisper as the colonel mounted his black stallion, put White Cat upon the colt Sadie herself had ridden yesterday, leaving Tom to mount the Roman-nosed bay.

"Thanks, boys!" Chapin said curtly, looking round. "There's a chance, for the Indians are fighting the fire! Her life"—he raised his voice with a tone the boys never forgot—"rests with these Apaches! White Cat gave them word and came on. God bless him!"

He shot through the gate after Tom and the Indian, who had already started, and the men followed in a stream.

The two boys kept their lead for a time; but when the black stallion got into his racing stride the colonel drew level. Tom's heart bled for him.

"She has Hunks!" he shouted. "And Malinka has been through a prairie fire once!"

Tom himself was beset with grimest dread, for all he loved most were involved; but he thought of the stricken father first. The colonel waved his hand in reply, and tried to smile.

They crossed the river below and struck forth for five miles; then White Cat, with a warning cry, began to pull in and bend low over the colt's side. He had come to the place where he had met Sadie, and was following her tracks. This was easy for him, as the ground was very soft. The whole cavalcade now drew up to them; but at a sign from Colonel Chapin, kept well away, White Cat leading alone.

The country was richly-grassed prairie land, with here and there a stretch of bare black soil flecked with white which had a ghostly look in the moonlight. These were alkali beds, the famous "salt lick" of the Rocky Mountains. The whole of this expanse for ten square miles was the colonel's latest purchase. It rose to the north in gradual undulations, until it reached the part of the range of hills where Tom and Hunks had stopped the runaway horse; but where they were now it was scarcely higher than the bed of the Chiquita river, which ran in broad curves in a south-easterly direction. It was rich land, the finest pasture in the country, and, therefore, at this time of the year, after a long spell of dry weather, the most liable to ravage by fire; for at intervals there were plantations of pine-trees, stubby cottonwoods, larch, and fir which would burn like tinder and carry sparks far ahead.

Fire on such prairie, when the wind is high, spreads with incredible swiftness. There lay the danger. Tom, having no experience, had secretly wondered at first why Sadie, mounted upon an animal as courageous and reliable as Malinka, should be at such risk in following her impulse, madly adventurous though it was, to see with her own eyes what she had so often heard her father and the boys describe.

But a few words dropped by Sandy as they ran to the stable, enlightened him. Fire in the Wild, whether jungle, bush, or prairie, does not run in a straight line. Here, some bare place may check it; there, the river, or a water-hole stops its progress altogether for a certain distance. But, like the tide which creeps round sand-dunes or rocks on the seashore, leaving them behind it and turning them into islands, which in time will be submerged, so fire, with the wind urging it on, finds its way past all obstructions, and makes the unburnt places into death-traps, where those who take refuge die slowly from suffocation from smoke or roasting heat.

If Sadie had taken warning of the fire and turned back in time, she would have been at Calumet before the party left the ranch; for White Cat, when finding that no protestations of his could stop the girl, had run back until he met, by fortunate chance, another Apache, and sent him flying in for help from the rest, who were camped not far away. Then, turning, the boy had run at full speed to warn the colonel and Tom.

It was now certain that the child, deceived by some open space ahead of her, had gone too far, and when she had turned at last found herself surrounded by the flames. In some tracts of prairie land the oases of bare soil are large enough to give protection to those who reach them, and who, understanding their position, do not try to run the gauntlet of the fire in the hope of reaching safety beyond; but few such spaces were to be found on Colonel Chapin's land. Unless the Indians were able to reach the child, or a miracle happened, Sadie's fate was certain, and with it that of Malinka and the dog.

The trail of Malinka followed an easterly course at first, then curved south, as though Sadie had decided not to go too far from the river. There was a crumb of comfort in that, for while the Chiquita at this time of the year was too shallow to afford adequate protection, there were deep pools here and there, with stretches of marshy ground.

The speed of the party fell from lope to trot; from trot to the pace. Then, White Cat pulled up short, and they all stopped.

"No good more trailing," he said to the colonel. "Too many tracks here. See!"

They all saw plainly. On each side, and about their feet was movement, and the rush of terrified creatures. Though the fire was still a mile away, the swifter animals were flying from it, and, with terror in their hearts, had lost fear of anything else.

Prong-horn antelope, in spectral bunches of a score or more, came within a few yards before they darted away, and even then they went as quietly as startled sheep might have done. Prairie wolves, singly and in pairs, trotted past, tame as dogs, wrenching Tom's heart every time in remembrance of Hunks.

A herd of branches came trampling up, whinnying to their kind, and some of the men thought they had struck the Indian camp. Once an old bear, who must have wandered far from water, or in search of some dainty food, came lumbering past in the grey light, so close that they could hear it growling to itself, taking no more notice of them than if they had been cattle. Small deer, hares, rabbits, and prairie chicken moved everywhere, and twice Tom saw a fox slink past.

There was no further possibility of following any track. The only thing to be done was to cross the river-bed itself and follow down the right bank.

"We meet warriors soon," White Cat declared. "We call them."

He raised his head and gave the war-cry of the Apache scout, the sound of which made more than one of the older cowboys set his teeth with a shiver. They had heard it before under different conditions! This is not the war-cry of Indian attack, which is little more than a shrill, peculiar whistle. The Indian scout's signal is the howl of the coyote (prairie wolf), with a certain difference of intonation which only a skilled ear can detect. It is a series of three short barks, a long bay, going up and up to a very high note, and then breaking off suddenly, with one short, dry bark as at first. The advantage of it is that it can be heard for a considerable distance, and, for Indian purposes in war, that it harmonises with the ordinary cries of the night; for if there is one thing a coyote can do besides kill sheep it is to howl!

To-night it brought an instant response—a series of howls—not far ahead to the south.

The men had turned their horses' heads in that direction altogether. Then, springing off his horse, White Cat lay flat on the earth. He was listening as only Indians can listen, his ear to the ground. Everyone watched him except Tom, who followed his example; but, apart from confused sounds of feet trampling far and near, he only heard the beating of his own heart.

It seemed an age before White Cat moved; but when he rose at last there was a look on his face which made the colonel draw a sharp breath.

"You do not hear it?" White Cat said slowly, as Indians do when most excited. "It is Hunks."

Then, as Sandy Bowker gave a sceptical grunt, he said more sharply:

"Oh, yes! Hunks, not wolf! But long way off, and much near fire. We in wrong place here. Those warriors"—pointing to the direction whence the wolf-cries had come—"are in their camp."

(It was obvious to all concerned that Sadie was in dire peril and needed help! Be sure you read next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful adventure serial, chums!)



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YOUR EDITOR'S DEPUTY!

GREETINGS to my readers in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland; in Australia, Canada, New Zealand; in Africa, India, China—greetings to readers of the GEM all over the world, whether they be girls or boys, old or young!

Before I go any farther, let me introduce myself, otherwise you will run away with the impression that it's your Editor speaking. I have been forced into the editorial chair for this special number of our paper, and have been requested to "say something" to the boys and girls who read my stories, from which statement you will gather that Martin-Clifford is my name, and author my station, so to speak. Mind you, I didn't require much forcing into the said editorial chair, for I've often hankered after having a few words with you chaps. And, between you and me—the Ed.'s not looking—I stood by that chair and hoped that he would ask me to speak to you. You see, I knew he was about to write the Chat.

So here we are, all merry and bright, and all looking forward to Christmas, I'll wager. Expect you have all helped to prepare the Christmas puddings. Oh, yes, and I expect you've sampled all the ingredients! "Skin the almonds," my mother once said to me. Only once, you

will observe; for when I had finished "skinning almonds" these that hadn't found their way into my mouth in this process of skinning could be numbered on the fingers of my right hand!—Yes, I still like almonds. If I remember rightly, dad came in on the scene just then; and made some remark about "skinning" me. But Christmas saved me.

Still, these preparations are part and parcel of the glorious time which, alack and alas! comes only once a year. You've stirred the puddings, of course. That's a job to exercise the muscles of the arm, isn't it? And the excitement of it all—isn't it grand? And those raids on the shops with generous mothers, fathers, sisters, cousins, aunts, and uncles, all falling over each other to buy presents. No wonder we all look forward to Christmas! No wonder the years seem to fall away from the middle-aged! No wonder Uncle Tom—ninety next birthday—skips about like a boy in his teens! It's catching, this spirit of Christmas, and rightly so. This is the season when we shelve for the nonce, at any rate, all the unpleasant things of life which we have to face in the ordinary course of events. Troubles and worries are out of place at Christmas; eyes are sparkling, faces are cheery; happiness and the joy of life settles on us all. Besides, the New Year is in the offing, and human nature looks forward to that New Year for much the same reason that we turn off an old suit which has done good service and don a new one. But I'm getting away from the main things I had to say, and your Editor has just reminded me that I've nearly reached the end of the Chat space for this week.

Well, then, here are the things I wish you—jumbled atop of one another, maybe, but sincere, for all that. May the fun be fast and furious; may you have more presents than fingers upon which to count them; may the roast turkey, the chicken, and Christmas pudding be served up piping hot and to your taste, and may the shadow of indigestion and Boxing Day remorse pass you by.

Your sincere friend,

Martin Clifford.

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