

Review
A BICYCLE OFFERED FOR A GOOD JOKE! (See page 13 within.)

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KERR'S AMAZING DISCOVERY!

(A dramatic episode in "THE SECRET OF THE HUNDRED STEPS!"—This Week's Special Christmas Story, featuring Tom Merry & Co., the Chums of St. Jim's.)

THE MISSING WORD! Engraved upon ninety-six of the hundred steps leading from Drere Manor to the foreshore eighty feet below appear old Egyptian characters! Translated, these characters spell a message which refers to a hidden treasure! But without the last four characters the message is useless, for they supply the keyword!

THE SECRET OF THE HUNDRED STEPS!



The Concluding Extra-Long Complete Story in the Special Christmas series dealing with the adventures of the Chums of St. Jim's at Drere Manor.

By Martin Clifford.

CHAPTER 1. Christmas Morning!



"CHRISTMAS DAY!"

Tom Merry turned a drawn and haggard face from the window of the library at Drere Manor and gazed miserably at his chums.

"Christmas Day!" he reiterated, but there was a noticeable lack of enthusiasm in his voice which found reflection, as it were, in the faces of his chums from St. Jim's.

Figgins & Co. and Blake & Co. nodded glumly. Monty Lowther and Manners tried to force a smile, but failed miserably.

Only one member of the party that had come to spend the Christmas vacation at Drere Manor with Kit Wildrake and his uncle seemed normal on that glorious Christmas morn, and that was Baggy Trimble. The fat junior was curled up in an armchair before the blazing log fire fast asleep, and his unmusical snore reverberated through the room.

"It's rotten!" grunted Blake at length.

And the juniors nodded.

All of them looked hollow-eyed and pale, plain indication that they had not slept, and it was pretty obvious that Christmas morning and all that it usually meant to high-

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spirited schoolboys failed to stir them to any show of enthusiasm on this occasion. Far from being Christmas Day it might have been the Day of Doom judging by the air of dejection that had settled on the party.

"I can't stand this!" muttered Tom Merry, beginning to pace up and down the carpeted floor.

"Can't we do something?" said Blake, in a listless voice, which suggested that he had uttered the same remark more than once.

The juniors looked at each other miserably, and there was a general shaking of heads.

"I wonder where Wildrake and Kerr could have got to?" said Figgins.

"Goodness only knows," muttered Fatty Wynn, whose chubby features wore a lugubrious expression on them that seemed sadly out of place.

"Vanished!" Tom Merry was speaking half to himself as he paced up and down restlessly. "Both of them! Where could they have got to?"

That was the question the party had asked each other all through the night without any satisfactory answer being forthcoming. Kit Wildrake and George Kerr, who had been in the company of Tom Merry & Co. at midnight, could not be found anywhere in that vast house at five minutes past twelve. The earth might have opened and swallowed them, so completely and utterly had they vanished.

"And we believed that the ghost of Drere Manor was all bunkum," muttered Digby.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy nodded and looked about him fearfully.

"I've—we've seen too much in this house now to put the ghost stow down to bunkum an' tommywot!" he remarked slowly. "It's ghastly."

His chums nodded.

Drere Manor was certainly a place out of the ordinary run of houses. Strange things had happened there ever since the party from St. Jim's had arrived. The legend attached to the old house, that it was haunted by the restless spirit of a former owner who had died a violent death, had been treated with scorn by Tom Merry & Co. at first, for with the usual buoyancy of youth they had held no belief in the powers or the existence, of the supernatural.

And yet Drere Manor said to be haunted by the spirit of a dead and gone buccaneer who wielded a cutlass, and a terrible steel hook which did duty as a left hand, had begun to undermine their belief, for there was ample evidence now that uncanny and eerie happenings were part and parcel of the place.

Perched on the summit of an eighty-foot cliff Drere Manor could look forbidding enough with its battlemented roof towering against the blackness of the night, and the roar of the sea as it beat against the cliff, and the eerie music of the wind as it swirled round that ancient house all lending strength to the opinion of the people at Murrnhurst that it was indeed haunted.

Tom Merry & Co. during their short stay at the place had seen the manor in various aspects. In the daylight, with the sun streaming down on the battlements, with the sea beating relentlessly against the foot of the cliff upon which the house was built, and the hundred steps carved in the rock itself that led down from the house to the small strip of sand eighty feet below, the old house and its acres of ground looked picturesque and pleasing to the eye, despite the dilapidation into which the property had been allowed to run.

Yet it was aptly named Drere Manor, they had all agreed, for it held them in awe even when they admired its uncommon attributes. There was a something—elusive yet ever present—that placed Drere Manor above the common or garden residence. Its very isolation from the village of Murranhurst, two miles away, seemed to point to the mysterious.

"No wonder the people at Muwvanhurst won't come near this place," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breaking the silence that had settled on the party. "I am of the same belief as them now that the manor is haunted—"

Blake tried to grin.

"Come off it, Gussy," he said. "You don't mean to say that you believe in the story of Captain Hawk—the pirate merchant who lived here two hundred years ago?"

Arthur Augustus moved uncomfortably in his chair.

"I don't know about Captain Hawk, dear boy," he replied slowly. "The Muwvanhurst people may be wight when they say that he tried to become respectable and settled down as an English gentleman on the proceeds of his piracy."

"And the story of how he sank his ship with all his crew aboard," said Horries, "might be true. There's no reason why it shouldn't be, anyway, or the fact that his bo'sun escaped from the ship and came here and fought with his old captain."

The juniors nodded. They had discussed the legend of the place on innumerable occasions. They almost knew it by heart now; how the bo'sun and Captain Hawk had fought on the battlements and how they had been seen by the villagers to fall from the roof to the cliffs below, locked in each other's arms. That had been the starting point of the weird history that went with the manor, for it had been handed down from generation to generation in Murranhurst that the restless spirit of the old buccaner roved the manor striking down all who disturbed his rest.

More than one tenant had been literally driven out of the place by this dreaded apparition with the gleaming cutlass and the terrible pointed hook, and in each case a crimson circle of torn flesh had been torn from his forehead—sure sign, so the villagers had it, that Captain Hawk had left his "mark."

Mr. Wildrake, who had only arrived in England a short while ago from his ranch in British Columbia, had taken a violent fancy to Drere Manor on account of its unique architecture and its historical ghost. Accordingly, he had instructed his ranch foreman, Buck Whipcord, to purchase it.

Buck had acted to orders, and here was Drere Manor the property of Malcolm Wildrake. But already Nunks, as the juniors called Mr. Wildrake, had repented of ever buying the manor. Even the servants he had employed to keep house for him and the party of guests that Kit

Wildrake, his nephew, brought with him from St. Jim's, had refused to stay in the place. Indeed, the butler was at this moment in an asylum, near to being a raving lunatic as a result of the ghostly manifestation he had witnessed in that house.

"Those beastly warning messages that have appeared since we came here point to the supernatural," said Blake. "I've never heard of anything like them before in my life."

Tom Merry knitted his brows. Even now, despite all the facts, something told him to rule out all suggestions of the supernatural. Yet he could not forget the mystic messages that had appeared in turn on the windows of the kitchen, the dressing-table mirror in the bed-room, and so recently as midnight of Christmas Eve on the mirror over the sideboard in the reception-room. Indeed, these ghostly messages that came and went so mysteriously had baffled all the party. Thin and wraithlike, written it would seem with an invisible pen steeped in crimson ink, repeated messages of warning in the name of Captain Hawk, the dead and gone buccaner, had stood out clearly on the glass and then, as mysteriously as they had appeared, so they had vanished.

"You remember that the message Trimble said he saw on the dressing-table yesterday told us to 'Ware the Mark of the Hawk at midnight,'" said Tom Merry.

The juniors nodded.

"We didn't pay too much attention to it then," continued Tom, "although we were given reason to believe in it when midnight came round."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shivered.

"I shall never forget that dreadful laugh that rang out all over the house a minute or so before midnight," he said with a shudder. "It was upstairs one moment and downstairs the next positively uncanny."

"It was uncanny," agreed Monty Lowther. "And what's more uncanny is the complete disappearance of Kit and old Kerr."

"And I shall never forget that message which appeared on the sideboard mirror when we discovered that Wildrake and Kerr were missing," muttered Digby. "It bore out the threat of that earlier message. You remember it said: 'The Mark of the Hawk,' and there was that red circle beneath it."

"If ghosts gloat," said Blake, "then Captain Hawk was gloating over his success. But it beats me! I can't make head nor tail of the whole affair."

"Do you think Nunks will call in the police?" asked Digby at length.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"No, I don't think the police could help. And think of the publicity—Nunks would wish to avoid that. He may call in the police as a last resource. But at this stage, no!"

"But where are we to start to look for poor old Wildrake and Kerr?" said Blake wearily. "We've searched every blessed corner in the house."

Tom Merry shook his head. It was a question he could not answer. Perhaps, of the party, he was the most sceptical of supernatural visitants who wrote mysterious messages in crimson ink that faded away as quickly as they materialised, and who, in some way or another, were able to spirit away human beings at will.

But he admitted to himself that he was baffled. Kerr and Wildrake had vanished—completely and utterly, plucked from the very midst of the party. Where were they? What had happened to them? What could have happened to them?

His head ached as these questions drummed their way repeatedly through his brain, and he clenched his fists in his impotency.

"Ooooooooooh!"

The juniors jumped to their feet as that piercing shriek rang through the room.

"What was that?"

"Ooooooooooh! Keep off! Help!"

The big armchair before the fire began to rock, and Tom Merry & Co. stared at it in amazement. Then it came home to them with a rush that Baggy Trimble had fallen asleep in it. Evidently the fat junior was in the throes of a nightmare.

"Yooooop! Keep off! Help!"

The juniors smiled as they beheld Trimble, still asleep, waving his podgy fists before his face, as though to ward off a danger that threatened him.

"Yowp!" Baggy Trimble jumped up as if he had been shot. "Keep off! Don't you touch me! Oh, crumbs!"

His jaw dropped as he saw the chums of St. Jim's around him and no sign of that dreaded ghost of which he had been dreaming. The expression on his face brought in response a laugh from Tom Merry & Co.

It was but the shadow of their usual laughter, but it served to disperse the deep gloom that had threatened to engulf them.

Trimble glared.

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"Beasts!" he snorted. "Nothing to cackle about. I—I thought that blessed pirate was chasing me."

Tom Merry placed a friendly hand on the fat junior's shoulder.

"It's all right, Baggy. There's no ghost now. It's daylight—Christmas Day, you know."

"Grooooooough!" gasped the fat junior. "I'm not staying in this house another moment. I—"

Clang! Clang!

Trimble's words broke off abruptly as the deep tones of a gong echoed through the house.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Brekker gong!" said Tom Merry.

Baggy Trimble's face brightened.

"Oh, good! I'm staying for brekker. Jolly peckish, you know."

And he rolled towards the door with a great show of energy. Evidently the thought of breakfast was a powerful attraction to Baggy Trimble, for he reconsidered his intention of departing on the spot and stayed. Certainly the events of the night had not upset Trimble's appetite, for he remained at the table long after Tom Merry & Co. and Nunks and Buck had retired to another room—just as long, indeed, as anything of an edible nature remained.

CHAPTER 2.

Sacked!

"SNAKES!"

Malcolm Wildrake uttered the word in a tense, almost inaudible, whisper, and stepped back from his bed-room door. It was partly open, and a view of the room—or the greater portion of it, at least—was visible.

Wintringham, the only servant in that vast house, was busy there—very busy. He was holding Mr. Wildrake's coat in one hand whilst the other dipped into every pocket and drew to light the contents. It was pretty evident that Wintringham was

looking for something.

Malcolm Wildrake's eyes hardened in their expression as he stood at the open doorway and watched the servant going through his pockets. He had been glad enough to obtain the services of Wintringham, for a big house like Drere Manor, and a big party like Tom Merry & Co. made a combination of circumstances that necessitated the assistance of servants.

So far, Wintringham had proved an ideal man of all work. He could cook, wait at table—do anything, in fact. And he knew the house. Indeed, Wintringham had been in the employ of Montague Hawk, the former owner of the house, who had been found dead at the foot of the cliffs exactly seven years ago to the day. And it was Wintringham who had been the first to discover what had happened to his employer.

But, like all other people in the Murranhurst locality, he fully believed in the legend of the house, and had departed therefrom immediately his master's affairs were cleared up. From domestic service Wintringham had gone into estate agency work with Mr. Redknapp, of Murranhurst, from whom Mr. Wildrake had purchased the property.

When Mr. Wildrake, in a visit to the estate agent, had explained the difficulties of playing host to a big party of schoolboys without a servant, and without the faintest chance of engaging any until Christmas was over, Wintringham, conquering his natural fears of the manor, had offered his services. To Mr. Wildrake's honest, rugged nature, the offer was a sporting one. Thus, the sight of Wintringham going through his master's pockets came as an unpleasant shock to Malcolm Wildrake.

"Ah!"

A tense ejaculation left Wintringham's lips as a foolscap envelope came to light.

He gave it one swift glance and his eyes glinted triumphantly. Next moment the envelope was reposing in his inner jacket pocket.

"The dog!" muttered Mr. Wildrake.

He pushed open the door and strode in.

Wintringham smiled at him respectfully and made a great show of brushing the coat which he had so thoroughly investigated. But the smile quickly faded from his face as he beheld the angry light in his master's eyes.

"You sly dog!" thundered Mr. Wildrake.

Wintringham's eyes lifted inquiringly.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir?"

Mr. Wildrake clenched his fists. Then he made a quick movement forward and snatched the coat out of Wintringham's hands.

"What were you doing with this coat?"

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"Brushing it, sir!"

Wintringham's tone bore a touch of reproach.

"And is it durned necessary to sneak through my pockets to do that?"

The servant bit his lip, and a nasty gleam came to his eyes. It looked for all the world as if he contemplated dashing past his employer with the envelope he had gone to such great trouble to secure.

Mr. Wildrake seemed to guess something of what was passing in his servant's mind, for he suddenly reached out and seized Wintringham's collar in a grip of iron.

"Give me that envelope you sneaked!" he exclaimed.

"Envelope, sir—"

"You heard what I said!" said Mr. Wildrake wrathfully, as he shook Wintringham as a dog shakes a rat.

For a fleeting moment it looked as if Wintringham would make some show of physical resistance, but if so he saw that the old rancher from British Columbia was more than a match for him. Reluctantly—very reluctantly—he produced the stolen envelope.

Mr. Wildrake jammed it in his pocket and then released his grip on the man's collar.

"You can git!"

"I—I—I—" Wintringham stuttered.

Mr. Wildrake pointed to the door.

"You can git!" he exclaimed. "Guess I don't want no sneak thieves in my employ, much as I am in need of a servant!"

"But, sir—"

"I want to hear nuthin'!" snapped Mr. Wildrake. "Reckon there's no excuse. I saw what you did with my own eyes. If you're not out of this place inside ten minutes, reckon I'll throw you out! Savvy?"

Apparently Wintringham did. The air of abject humiliation that had surrounded him a moment before went in a flash. There was a challenging glimmer in his eyes as he stared insolently at his employer before he started to move to the door.

Mr. Wildrake was tempted to put his boot behind Wintringham, but he conquered the impulse.

He suffered from the same temptation when, exactly ten minutes later, Wintringham, bag in hand, passed through the front door of the house and tramped off down the drive, for there was a contemptuous sneer on the man's face as he turned to look at his late employer that made Mr. Wildrake's blood boil.

"Durned hobo!" growled Mr. Wildrake, as he watched Wintringham out of sight.

"Hallo, boss!" Buck Whipcord came along the hall and placed an affectionate arm round Mr. Wildrake's shoulders.

"What's bitin' yer?"

Malcolm Wildrake explained.

"The dirty hound!" was Buck's comment, when Nunks had finished. "Guess yer did well to fire him, boss. Must say I sure can't stand that sort o' petty stealin'!"

Nunks nodded gloomily, and together he and Buck entered the library.

The chums of St. Jim's were there, looking just as gloomy. They had spent fruitless hours searching the old house for some trace of their missing friends. And now they were gathered together to hold a council of war.

"I've got another piece of bad news for you, boys," said Nunks. "I've jest hed to fire thet durned feller Wintringham!"

"Oh!"

"I caught him riflin' my pockets," continued Nunks. "And thet's a thing I sure can't stand. Though what he wanted with thet document we found behind the secret panel yesterday sure knocks me out."

"The document?" said Fatty Wynn. "Do you mean the one that speaks of a treasure?"

Nunks nodded, and drew the envelope from his pocket. It contained two sheets of paper covered with bold, firm handwriting. It was obviously an interpretation of the weird Egyptian characters that were chiselled out in ninety-six of the hundred steps that wound their way down from the house, cut in the very rock itself. The last four steps had begun to crumble, and the hieroglyphics were missing. But the document evidently included them, for the translation made a hundred letters in all, and the whole made a sensational message in English, if the translation were correct.

"WONDROUS TREASURE FROM YE PROUD KING PHILIP LIES WITHIN YE HOOK OF YE HAWK.
HAWKS WHO COME AFTER DO SEEK WELL WITHIN MY TOMB."

"We figured it out thet thet durned thing was a hoax," said Buck. "But why Wintringham should hev gone to the trouble o' liftin' this blamed docymnt beats me!"

Nunks nodded.



"It may be worth while to look into this tomb when things have straightened out a bit," he remarked.

Tom Merry & Co. brightened up. They had been loth to part with their belief in the document they had found behind the secret panel in the library telling of a treasure buried in the tomb of the dead-and-gone buccaneer who had first owned the manor. The document had obviously been written some years ago, and it was fairly logical to presume that the man who had taken the trouble of translating the old Egyptian characters chiselled in the cliff steps had also taken the trouble to satisfy himself as to the existence or otherwise of the treasure before committing the document to the secret cavity in the wall.

"Our first job is to find poor old Wildrake and Kerr," said Tom Merry, breaking the silence that had settled on the party. "Then we can look into this treasure document."

"I rather fancy the one has bearing on the other," said Fatty Wynn.

"Eh?"

The party looked at their plump friend in amazement. "What the thump are you talking about, Fatty?" asked Figgins.

Fatty Wynn blushed.

"I'll tell you about it later," he said. "I think I've stumbled on a theory."

The juniors grinned.

They knew that Fatty Wynn's mind usually ran on the subject of "grub," for Fatty was a trencherman of no mean order. With him grub usually came first, although, unlike Trimble, it was not the beginning and end of everything. But that Fatty Wynn should possess a theory concerning the whereabouts of their missing chums which had some bearing on that strange document was something new.

Monty Lowther grinned.

"You stick to grub, old bean," he remarked. "We shall want your services now that Wintringham is sacked."

"Blow grub!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn, with unusual warmth. "I'm not the slightest bit interested in grub. I'm thinking of poor old Kerr and Wildrake."

The juniors were serious again.

"You get on with your searching," said Fatty Wynn at length, "and leave me to do a bit of thinking."

Tom Merry & Co. rose to their feet. With Nunks and Buck among them they streamed out into the hall, leaving Fatty Wynn to his own devices.

"Think Fatty's hit on anything, Figgy?" asked Tom Merry.

Figgins shook his head.

"Fatty's a good chap," he said. "A fine goalie, a tip-top bowler, and an Al cook. But—"

He ended his remark with a significant shrug of shoulders which spoke more eloquently than words of Figgins' estimation of Fatty Wynn's capabilities when it came to solving the mystery that they had run up against.

Buck and Nunks ascended the staircase. Both of them looked drawn and anxious, for the strain of the events at Drere Manor was beginning to tell on them. The former,



With the helmet jammed over his eyes it was a difficult matter indeed for the worthy officer of the law to see whom his captive was. "I've got him!" he roared. "Lend a hand, waiter!" "Leggo, you fool!" gasped the waiter. "That's me you've got hold of!" And while the constable and the waiter voiced their personal opinion of each other Baggy Trimble departed at top speed. (See Chapter 5.)

especially, seemed ill at ease, for he had come to Drere Manor prepared, in jesting mood, to lay its ghost.

But Buck was a stickler. He was convinced that in the long run he would lay that terrifying ghost. It was the passing of time that got on his nerves, for his beloved Kit was missing. It boded ill for the "ghost" if ever Buck came face to face with it, judging by the way the old plainsman's hands closed on the two six-shooters hanging at his belt.

CHAPTER 3.

Baggy Trimble Meets His Match!



"I'M going!"

Baggy Trimble gazed round on the party in the dining-room and made that announcement. But nobody seemed to be interested in Trimble's conversation. The Christmas dinner had been eaten in silence for the most part. It was hard to simulate interest in roast turkey, Christmas-pudding, and the other dainties Buck and Nunks between them had managed to cook, with the shadow of mystery that hung over the old house.

With the exception of Baggy Trimble, the party had sat down to dinner more as a matter of course than anything else. With the exception of Trimble, appetites were small. With the exception of Trimble, faces were doleful.

Thus it can be seen that Trimble was a being apart. If the fat junior were worried over the fate of Wildrake and Kerr it certainly made little difference to the amount of roast turkey and Christmas-pudding he could consume. Quite six helpings of each must have been tucked away somewhere beneath Trimble's capacious waistcoat. But

even Trimble had his limitations; he could eat no more. His fat face was sticky and shiny, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that he had perhaps eaten just a trifle more of that rich Christmas-pudding than he ought to have done.

"I'm going!" he snapped, with some heat.

"Shut up!" snapped Tom Merry irritably. "If you're not either stuffing yourself with grub you're talking. If you're not talking you're snoring! Give us a rest!"

Baggy Trimble glared.

"I like that!" he exclaimed. "You'll be sorry when I'm gone!"

"I shall be thumping glad, for one, anyway!" growled Blake.

"Yah!" Trimble's reply was expressive, if inelegant.

The fat junior placed a high valuation on his charming society, and in that he was unique, for no one else did. Indeed, Tom Merry & Co. went on conversing among themselves as if such an important person as Baggy Trimble didn't exist.

Buck and Nunks had vacated the dining-room a few minutes earlier. Thus Baggy Trimble found himself addressing the desert air, so to speak, when he announced for the third time that he was going.

"Yah!" he roared. "You'll miss me when I'm gone!"

Monty Lowther looked up at that.

"It'll be a thumping good miss, anyway!"

"Hear, hear!"

The fat junior glared.

"Think I'm going to stay in this beastly hole," he hooted.

"Yah! I'm not staying here another five minutes! I've had enough of ghosts and mysterious messages!"

"And we've had enough of your silly jaw. Ring off, for goodness' sake!"

"I believe there's a train for Murrinhurst at three fifteen," continued Trimble.

"Good!" ejaculated Blake, looking at his watch. "You'll just catch it, old fat man."

"Beasts!" exclaimed Trimble. "You'll be sorry when I'm gone. When there's no one here to protect you. I think it's like Wildrake's cheek to ask me to a blessed house that's haunted."

Tom Merry & Co. rose to their feet, and made as if to vacate the room. Trimble watched them with crimson face and glittering eyes.

"Don't I keep telling you that I'm going!" he roared.

"Ain't you going to say good-bye?"

Arthur Augustus paused. He was the soul of politeness, and much as he disliked Baggy Trimble he felt it incumbent upon him to wish the parting guest farewell.

He extended a hand, none too willingly, in Baggy's direction.

"Well, if you're goin', Twimble, I'll wish you good-bye!"

Baggy Trimble took Gussy's proffered hand and drew the elegant junior towards him.

"I say, Gussy, old chap, I'm short of tin, you know!"

"Weally, deah boy!" remarked Arthur Augustus, as if that were nothing new.

Trimble nodded.

"I don't want to worry Nunks and Buck at a time like this," he said meaningly. "But there's my fare to London, you know, and—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's good natured face clouded.

"And I shall be obliged to ask Nunks to let me have enough money for my fare if—I can't raise it amongst my pals, old chap!" continued Baggy Trimble.

"Bai Jove, Twimble, you mustn't approach eithah Nunks or poor old Buck. They have quite enough to occupy their minds now. I would wathah let you have the money for your fare myself."

Baggy Trimble grinned.

"That's what I thought—I mean, that's very good of you, old chap."

"How much is your fare?"

The fat junior reflected for a few moments.

"About two pounds," he said at length. "That'll just do it!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's eyebrows elevated a trifle.

"Is the fare as much as two pounds, Twimble?"

"Well, a St. Jim's chap must travel first class," grinned the fat junior. "And I always travel first class, anyway. Besides, I shall want to tip the porter who carries my suitcase. I always tip porters handsomely, you know."

"Yaas?" Arthur Augustus didn't see the merit of tipping porters handsomely with money that wasn't Trimble's. Still that was a small point.

"Then I shall need a snack on the journey," continued Baggy Trimble. "After all, it's Christmas Day, old chap. Two pounds will see me through, unless you like to make it a fiver."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus evidently had no wish to "make it a fiver," for he hastily pulled a wallet from his pocket and handed the fat junior two crisp currency notes.

"I think that will see you through, deah boy!"

Trimble's fat hand closed on the notes.

"Just about!" he said. "Of course, I shall settle up with you when I get back to St. Jim's."

"Don't twouble, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, who knew the fat junior of old, and knew at the same time that he had parted with two pounds for keeps, as it were.

Trimble drew himself up haughtily.

"First day of new term I'll settle up, old chap. I'm not a fellow to forget a loan, I hope!"

"Bai Jove!"

And with an airy wave of the hand, Baggy Trimble rolled away.

"Good riddance!" muttered Monty Lowther, as the fat junior disappeared down the passage. "This is no place for Trimble, anyway!"

Tom Merry & Co. nodded their heads in agreement. Baggy Trimble was more of a hindrance than a help in the circumstances.

But if the chums of St. Jim's thought they had seen the last of Baggy Trimble until the first day of the new term, they were doomed to disappointment. At that moment he was rolling in search of Buck Whipcord.

He found the tall Westerner cleaning his guns. A frown settled on Buck's face as the fat junior approached him.

"Waal, Grumble!" Buck persistently got the fat junior's name wrong. "What's your lay?"

"I'm going!"

Buck screwed his face up into a grin.

"Waal, guess you knows bes', Blimble, and to be perfect candid I'm not sorry!"

Baggy Trimble was taken aback at that outspoken comment.

"Oh!"

"Reckon you've come ter say good-bye, that it?" asked Buck.

"Well, the fact is, Buck," said Trimble, lowering his voice. "I'm short of tin, you know. A whacking remittance from my aunt which ought to have reached me the day I left St. Jim's didn't arrive. Expect it got held up in the post—Christmas rush, you know—"

"Waal?"

Trimble grinned his friendliest grin.

"I'm—I'm placed in an awkward position, you see," he continued. "My train fare to London will cost me three pounds—"

Buck jumped to his feet.

"How much?"

"Three pounds!" said Trimble firmly. "I travel first class you know. Must keep up appearances. My family always—"

"Three which!" demanded Buck grimly.

"Well, two pounds, anyway," replied the fat junior. "That'll mean knocking off the porter's tip. Still, I don't mind. But I hardly like to ask Mr. Wildrake to loan me that amount of money at a time like this. The rotter—I mean the poor chap is no end worried about Kit and that beast—ahem, poor old Kerr!"

Buck eyed the fat junior shrewdly.

"If you gits worryin' the ole man, you fat clām, I'll burst you!" he exclaimed, and Trimble terrified by the expression on his face backed away in alarm.

"I—I—I don't want to worry him," he gasped. "That's—that's why I came—ahem, to you. I must have my fare—"

"And you've got no money, eh?"

Trimble made an expressive gesture which was meant to imply that he hadn't a bean. Next moment he jumped as Buck's long arm shot out and his deft fingers snatched at something that peeped out from Trimble's inner jacket pocket.

"Then what in the name of thunder is this, you fat guy?"

He held up a pound note—one of those Arthur Augustus had parted with.

Baggy Trimble blinked.

"I—I—I—you see—that's to say—I mean—" he stammered.

Buck's face grew grim.

"I don't like sharks, Twimble!" he growled. "Especially at times like these! You say you're goin'?"

Baggy Trimble licked his dry lips and nodded.

"Ye-es!" he answered.

"Then I'll give ye exactly five minutes to take yourself off, you fat clām! If ye're not off the premises by then, I reckon I'll fill you with lead!"

"Wow!" gasped Trimble, eyeing the two six-shooters that lay on the table apprehensively. "I'm g-going!"

He snatched at the pound note that Buck held out to him, and turning on his heel bolted out of the room as fast as his fat little legs would carry him. His errand to Buck had not met with the success he had bargained for, although it had met with all the success it deserved. Well within the prescribed five minutes Baggy Trimble's bag was packed. Buck's

threat of filling the fat junior with "lead," served to hasten his movements.

When Baggy Trimble came panting down the stairs from the bed-room, bag in hand, Buck Whipcord was waiting for him at the foot of the stairs. He held his watch open.

"Good for you, Blimble!" he jerked out as Trimble fled past him. "You've saved the undertaker a job!"

"Wow!" gasped Baggy, and he raced down the drive as if he were on the cinder-track.

CHAPTER 4.

Fatty Wynn's Theory!

"WELL, Fatty, how's your theory going?"

Figgins smiled down at his plump chum, and the rest of the St. Jim's party smiled, too.

The afternoon was drawing to a close; the shadows of dusk loomed overhead. Tom Merry & Co. had spent the whole of that afternoon searching for Wildrake and Kerr. But not so much as a sign had they picked up that would help to solve the mystery.

Fatty Wynn had remained indoors. There was a serious expression on his chubby face which looked entirely out of place. His brow was knitted in deep thought. Whatever the theory was that had come to Fatty Wynn's mind it had certainly wrought a great change in him. At the dinner table it had been noticeable that he had only "pecked" at his food. That in itself went to prove that Fatty Wynn was preoccupied.

He looked up and frowned as he saw the chums of St. Jim's standing around him.

"Eh?" he ejaculated.

"How's the theory going?" inquired Figgins.

"If you chaps are prepared to listen, I'll tell you all about it," replied Fatty Wynn. "But if any of you have a theory, I'm prepared to listen to that first."

Tom Merry & Co. shook their heads.

"We're right up against it, old chap," said Tom Merry. "Let's hear all about your theory."

Fatty Wynn cleared his throat.

"It starts with Wintringham!" he remarked.

"Wintringham?" blurted out Blake. "Why, what—"

Figgins held up his hand.

"One at a time, old scout. Let Fatty have his head."

"It starts with Wintringham," said Fatty Wynn. "I've never liked that chap. He's not straight, as we've had proved to us. And it's my firm belief that he tampered with the coffee he gave to Wildrake and Kerr last night—"

"What?"

Fatty Wynn's statement caused a sensation. The chums of St. Jim's eyed him in amazement and incredulity.

The plump junior smiled.

"Think I'm romancing?" he remarked. "Well, I was sitting next to Kerr and Wildrake last night, just before that horrible laugh sent us rushing out of the room, and more than once I felt like asking them if they were all right."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "But why?"

Fatty Wynn paused before he replied.

"Because they looked thumping tired!"

Tom Merry smiled.

"Well, the silly asses had been out on the sands tramping about for some reason or other. Expect that's why they were tired. It was late, you know."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

But Fatty Wynn shook his head obstinately.

"It wasn't that sort of tiredness," he said slowly. "It came on suddenly, just before we heard that blooming ghost laughing."

"Oh, you're letting your imagination run away with you, Fatty," said Tom Merry.

Fatty Wynn shook his head again.

"Nothing of the kind," he asserted. "Facts are facts. We all know that poor old Kerr and Wildrake have disappeared. Are we going to believe that a ghost has walked off with them?"

There was such scorn in the fat junior's words that the chums crimsoned. Never had they seen Fatty Wynn in this serious mood. But undoubtedly he was right. Was it possible for any superhuman agency to walk off with two healthy schoolboys right under the very noses of their pals?

"We're thumping well not believing in any spooks!" exclaimed Tom Merry, grimly. "Fatty is right. The whole thing is impossible!"

"To return to the point where I left off," continued Fatty Wynn. "I am firmly convinced that their coffee was drugged."

"But why should it be?" demanded Monty Lowther.

"What object would Wintringham have in doping their coffee? Why theirs, anyway?"

"I'm coming to that," said Fatty Wynn. "Let's go back a bit first. We know that Kerr and Wildrake gave us the slip in the evening and went out of doors."

"They said that they'd been nosing round the cave at the foot of those hundred steps," said Digby. "Goodness knows what for!"

"Goodness know what for!" said Fatty Wynn. "You know Kerr's a sharp chap, and so is Kit Wildrake. They went to the cave for some very good reason. Only Wintringham saw them come in, you'll remember, for he brought up two coffees for them, anticipating what Gussy had rung the bell for."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "I wemembah that! I wang the bell in ordah to ask Wintwingham to bring two more coffees, and he came in with them before I had a chance to say a word to him."

Monty Lowther sniffed.

"Oh, that was simply a glimpse of the ideal servant!" he grunted.

"Maybe!" agreed Fatty Wynn. "But you will admit that if Wintringham wanted to drug their coffee that was his opportunity."

Monty Lowther snorted.

"But why should he want to drug their coffee?" he

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insisted. "Why not ours? You're talking out of the back of your nut, old chap!"

Fatty Wynn grinned.

"I haven't done so much thinking in my life as I've been doing to-day. I can tell you why Wintringham drugged their coffee and not ours."

He paused, and the juniors hung on his next words with a certain amount of eagerness.

"Because Kerr and Wildrake discovered something when they were on the sands," resumed Fatty Wynn. "Something that threw light on the queer things happening at this old house, I feel sure. And you know old Kerr and Wildrake were both sceptical of the ghost story."

"Well, you're right there," agreed Figgins. "Both of them put it down to trickery!"

"Exactly!" said Fatty Wynn. "And I repeat that they must have discovered something someone wanted kept dark very much."

Monty Lowther grinned.

"Can it, old chap! Are you trying to tell us that Wintringham is the blessed ghost?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that at this stage," replied Fatty Wynn cautiously. "But I'm convinced that Kerr and Wildrake were got out of the way because they knew something. And I feel convinced that Wintringham helped to do it."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Herries, who had been listening attentively. "Why, Wintringham was scared stiff last night when we heard those horrible laughs."

Fatty Wynn sniffed.

"Not so scared as we were led to believe," he remarked. "You saw him this morning. Didn't seem much wrong with him, did there?"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Now I come to think of it Wintwingham looked as fresh as a daisy this mornin'!"

"Exactly!" said Fatty Wynn. "Here's another thing. Why did Wintwingham, in front of us all, state his horror of the house, and then, almost in the next breath, offer to act as a servant to Nunks?"

"Because there was a substantial sum of money at the end of it," said Monty Lowther.

"Nothing of the kind," said Fatty Wynn firmly. "There was no mention of money at the time. Here was a man who declared that he was terrified of the Drere Manor ghost, and yet he forgets his fears to the extent of coming to live in the place."

Tom Merry looked thoughtful.

"You're suggesting then that Wintwingham was playing a part?"

"I do!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn stoutly. "And I'm sure it has something to do with the document we found behind the secret panel yesterday."

"Phew!" ejaculated Blake. "Don't forget, you chaps, that Wintwingham was fired out of the house for pinching that document."

"And let me tell you this," said Fatty Wynn. "Wintwingham was trying to pump Trimble yesterday about the document. He tried me, too; but I as good as told him to mind his own business."

"Yes, but anyone would be interested in a document if there was any treasure attached to it," said Digby. "Wintwingham's dishonesty in sneaking the papers is quite easy to account for."

"Don't you believe it," declared Fatty Wynn. "That chap's a real bad egg. He's got some game on. That's why he came to live here in the role of servant. And I still maintain that he was instrumental in doing the disappearing trick with Kerr and Wildrake."

The juniors were silent. Fatty Wynn had impressed them up to a point. But it wasn't sufficient to sweep away the whole legend of Drere Manor. The fat junior waited a moment before he resumed.

"To continue," he said at length. "It's also my firm belief that the document is genuine."

"My hat! Then you think there is treasure in Captain Hawk's tomb?" exclaimed Blake.

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"There's one very big point you chaps have overlooked. We will suppose that a man has successfully translated the Egyptian characters on the steps, with the exception of the last four characters—those that have crumbled away. What use would the translated characters be?"

Tom Merry gave an ejaculation of excitement.

"I follow you, old chap," he said. "Without those last four letters the whole document is useless. The word 'Tomb' is the key-word."

"Oh, great Scott!"

"My hat!"

The juniors caught at Tom Merry's excitement.

"Phew!" breathed Blake. "Old Fatty works it out like a blessed detective."

Fatty Wynn smiled modestly.

"I think Figgins was right," he said slowly, "when he suggested that the writer of the document never lived to put the truth of it to the test."

He paused and plunged his hand into his pocket. Next moment he had produced an ordinary Christmas card. Tom Merry & Co. crowded round to look at it.

The card was the usual type sent out at that season of the year. It bore the compliments of the season addressed to "Monty" and the date 1919. From "Cousin Jean" indicated the identity of the sender.

"Where did you dig that up?" asked Figgins, with a perplexed look at his plump chum.

"I found that in the secret panel yesterday, after you chaps had been testing the working of the spring," replied Fatty Wynn. "It had got caught up with the mechanism somehow or other, and we must have overlooked it in the excitement of discovering the panel and the document."

"You're getting jolly observant these days," grinned Tom Merry. "But this card doesn't tell us anything."

"Doesn't it?" said Fatty Wynn. "It didn't tell me much at first, but since I heard that Wintwingham was caught lifting the document it's told me a lot."

"But I don't see—"

Fatty Wynn stopped Arthur Augustus' burst into speech with a gesture.

"Just look at the card again, you chaps. What's the date on it?"

"Nineteen-nineteen," said Tom Merry. "But—"

"When do Christmas cards usually arrive?" was Fatty Wynn's next question.

"Usually Christmas week, fathead!" snorted Monty Lowther.

"Good!" grinned Fatty Wynn. "You can see that it is addressed to 'Monty,' and Montague Hawk was the name of the chap who lived in this house, who was found at the foot of the cliffs Christmas morning nineteen-nineteen, exactly seven years ago to-day!"

"Go on!" said Figgins excitedly.

"Now this is the point," remarked Wynn slowly. "The finding of the card tells us that the secret panel was opened one day during Christmas week nineteen-nineteen, otherwise—"

Monty Lowther gave a whoop.

"It doesn't tell us that at all!" he exclaimed. "The card may have been put there since."

"By whom?" asked Fatty Wynn. "Remember that no one has lived in the place since Montague Hawk met his end."

Monty Lowther's face fell.

"I was forgetting that," he admitted. "Sorry! Go on, old bean!"

"How the card came to be put in the secret panel I don't profess to know," resumed Fatty Wynn. "But it certainly shows that the panel was opened one day during Christmas week. I'm assuming that it was opened Christmas Eve and that the document was put in it."

"Which certainly gives colour to Figgins' suggestion that the writer never had an opportunity of testing its truth," chimed in Tom Merry, "for Montague Hawk died between Christmas Eve and Christmas morning."

Fatty Wynn smiled.

"You've got it," he remarked. "It's my belief that Montague Hawk had only just finished his translation of those Egyptian characters before he died."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Bai Jove!"

Fatty Wynn's line of reasoning certainly impressed his chums now. Only Monty Lowther was sceptical of the theory.

"Suppose the man Montague Hawk didn't write the document," he said, "what then?"

"I know he wrote it, Monty," replied Fatty Wynn. "In the family Bible—it's in the library—you'll find his signature. The 't' is crossed with a peculiar, uncommon flourish. The same flourish marks the 't's' in the document we found."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "You are a wondah, deah boy!"

Fatty Wynn shook his head.

"It's quite simple to put two and two together if you've had much to do with old Kerr. You chaps know how sharp he is. When he's about I leave everything to him. But now he's gone it's served to sharpen my wits."

"I should think it has," said Figgins admiringly. "Blessed if I thought you had it in you, old chap!"

"I'll agree that old Fatty has put things together very satisfactorily," said Monty Lowther. "But where does all this lead us?"

"Yaas, wathah! What beav'n! has this on the disappearance of Kerr and Wildwake?"

"It supplies a motive," answered Fatty Wynn. "This place is said to be haunted. That's all bunkum. My theory is that someone got to hear of this document about the treasure of Captain Hawk, and has and is still playing the ghost in order to keep people away."

"So that he can hunt for the treasure or the document?" said Tom Merry.

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"You've hit it."

"Blessed if I don't think you're right, old chap," said Tom Merry.

"And who better could know of the existence of such a document than Wintwingham, who was in Montague Hawk's service?" said Fatty Wynn triumphantly.

"Great Scott!" roared Figgins. "Fatty, you've hit the bullseye there!"

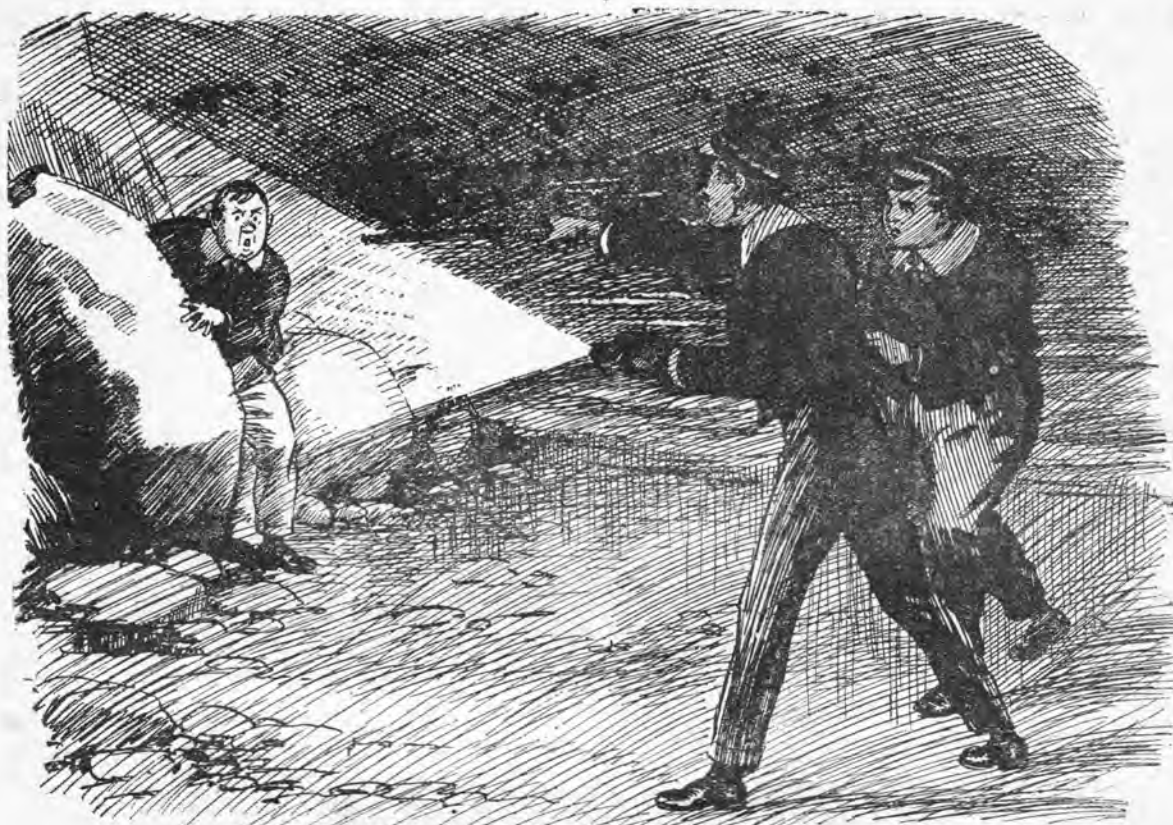
The plump junior smiled modestly.

The juniors were growing more excited than ever, with the possible exception of Monty Lowther. He was in argumentative mood.

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"Come out, you scoundrel!" yelled Tom Merry. "Come out, or I'll plug you with an ounce of lead!" It was only bluff, for Tom Merry did not possess a shooting iron; but there was a terrified gasp, and a round, podgy figure appeared from behind the boulder. "D-d-don't shoot!" "Trimble!" gasped Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn. (See Chapter 6.)

"I still can't see what bearing this has on the disappearance of Kerr and Wildrake."

"Don't you see that it serves a double purpose?" said Fatty Wynn eagerly. "The threat in the message Trimble said he saw yesterday was carried out. Added to which, Kerr and Wildrake, having seen the document, are in possession of the key-word. They are valuable people to the ghost of Drere Manor."

"You've got it!" exclaimed Tom Merry, his face lighting up. "Fatty, you're a giddy marvel!"

The chums of St. Jim's brightened up considerably. Paid had been put to the ghost of Drere Manor, inasmuch as they no longer believed in it now. Their plump Welsh chum had certainly theorised on sound lines.

"Hurrah!" roared Blake, giving Fatty Wynn a hearty slap on the back. "We'll give the New House best this time, you chaps. Fatty's solved the problem."

The Welsh junior held up his hand.

"Not solved it by a long way," he remarked. "We've still to find out what's happened to Kerr and Wildrake and where they are."

"Well, they can't be far away," said Figgins, "if we are going to assume that that rotter Wintringham played the ghost."

"Exactly," replied Fatty Wynn. "It's my belief that the rotter, having doped them, whisked them away when we all rushed up the stairs and hid them somewhere. This old house is full of secret panels, I'll bet. Besides, you must remember that Wintringham wasn't with us when we all rushed out the reception-room looking for that blessed ghost."

"Hold on," said Monty Lowther suddenly. "Wintringham couldn't have been playing the ghost and carting off Kerr and Wildrake at the same time."

"Oh!"

"But if you'll cast your mind back to last night," replied Fatty, "you'll remember that we only heard the two laughs. Then all was quiet. But it was quite twenty minutes later before we all came back to the drawing-room and discovered that Kerr and Wildrake were absent."

"That's correct," agreed Digby. "And we only came across Wintringham, shivering under the table in the library, about a minute before we reached the reception-

room again. He would have had plenty of time to do what he wanted with his two prisoners."

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"I think that clears up all the points satisfactorily," he said. "Our next move is to keep a very sharp eye on that rotter Wintringham."

"Rather!"

"It clears up all points but one," said Monty Lowther obstinately. "If you put all this down to Wintringham, how do you account for the presence of the ghost in the house before Wintringham came home with us the other night with Nunks and Buck? Remember the butler; he was terrified out of his wits. Who terrified him?"

Fatty Wynn shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't profess to know," he replied. "But there are several likely answers that I can give you. In the first place, it may have been Wintringham himself playing the ghost, for you'll remember that he came in at Redknapp's office while we were there. He had been out somewhere. On the other hand, he may have an accomplice."

"Or there's possibly a secret way into the house which we've not yet discovered," said Figgins shrewdly.

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"That seems to be the more likely answer, Figgy!" he said with enthusiasm. "And I rather fancy that poor old Kerr and Wildrake stumbled across it!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "I believe you're right again, Fatty. Kerr and Wildrake were thumping interested in that cave at the bottom of the steps, you chaps remember?"

The juniors nodded vigorously.

"And they went down there last night on their lonesome and nosed round," said Herries. "That's it! Old Kerr discovered something for a certainty."

"Then the best thing to do is to keep a jolly close watch somewhere near the cave," said Tom Merry. "And the sooner we do that the better. Hallo—What's that?"

Through the open window of the library floated an agonised cry. It came from a distance, but it reached the ears of all the St. Jim's juniors plainly enough.

They rushed to the window and peered out.

Darkness had settled on the cliffs. From below came the dull murmur of the sea and little specks of white moved

through the darkness as the waves broke over the rocks. There was little else to be seen.

"Listen!" whispered Tom Merry, as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was about to say something.

The juniors listened. But no other cry reached them.

"Expect it was a seagull," said Tom Merry, after five minutes had elapsed without the cry being repeated.

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors, agreeing on that point, turned to discussing who should keep a watch on the cave. Finally it was arranged that Fatty Wynn and Tom Merry should take the first watch, Blake and Herries to relieve them after two hours, and so on through the whole party, each junior taking a two-hour vigil.

If Fatty Wynn's theory were correct, the ghost of Drere Manor would be laid for a certainty.

CHAPTER 5.

Trimble is Curious!



"Oh, dear!"

Baggy Trimble's jaw gaped.

"Oh crumbs!"

The fat junior was seated in the best hotel at Murranhurst. Before him stood a tall waiter, no longer the suave, attentive individual who had so graciously waited upon Trimble three-quarters of an hour earlier. There was a knowing grin on the waiter's face as he watched Trimble dive his hands into every pocket he possessed in search of the money he had so cunningly extorted from Arthur

Augustus D'Arcy.

But, although the pockets contained between them a piece of toffee mixed up with some string and the stub of a pencil, a broken pocket-knife, a grubby notebook, a French halfpenny with a hole in it, and the handsome sum of two shillings, there was no sign of the thirty shillings in notes Trimble had placed in them earlier in the afternoon.

"I've been r-robbd!" gasped the fat junior, with a horrified look at the knowing waiter.

That individual merely raised his eyebrows a trifle and waited patiently, the knowing grin deepening in his face.

It was four hours since Baggy Trimble had shaken the dust, or rather, the snow of Drere Manor from his feet—four hours in which Trimble's jaws had worked at an exceptional Christmas rate. Inquiry at the station had elicited the fact that there were no trains to London that day. But the unexpected piece of news had not worried Trimble unduly. In fact, he had been rather pleased. At St. Jim's he was wont to talk at great length of the wonders and magnificence of his "ancestral" home—Trimble Towers. But as this palatial residence, complete with butlers, footmen, and every modern comfort, so to speak, only existed in the fat imagination of Baggy Trimble, it was not surprising that he received the information that no trains to town left Murranhurst that day with more joy than sorrow. Indeed, it would have been impossible to find any train that stopped anywhere near Trimble Towers. And Trimble had no intention of spending the rest of the Christmas vac at his real home, which doubtless was a relief to Trimble's parents.

Without loss of time, therefore, Baggy had looked round him for something to do. The sight of a pastrycook's window, with its tempting array, had swiftly decided what he should do. To the astonishment of the good lady who served at the counter, Trimble had eaten eight shillings' worth of cream buns, eclairs, tarts, and marzipan cake, without turning a hair. He had termed that modest repast a "snack," promising himself something much more substantial when dinner-time came round, and had accordingly rolled out of the pastrycook's and mooched about until dinner-time came round.

Between these two occasions when Trimble's jaws had been busy, he had encountered a tramp. The tramp, doubtless remembering it was Christmas, had tried to "touch" Trimble for the price of a square meal, whereat Trimble had told him to go to the nearest relieving officer.

And as Trimble had possessed the sum of thirty shillings in notes at the time he had met the tramp, and certainly didn't possess them now, it was fairly safe to assume that the tramp had relieved Trimble of his thirty shillings while Trimble's snub little nose had been held high in the air. Even Trimble, obtuse as he was, was convinced of that horrible fact as he now searched his pockets, for the tramp was the only person he had encountered from the time he left the pastrycook's to the time he had entered the restaurant.

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Another frantic search failed to bring the missing notes to light, but it brought a very heavy-footed manager on the scene in response to a gesture from the waiter.

"What's the trouble?"

"Gentleman can't find his money to pay the bill," explained the waiter with another wink.

The manager's face grew grim.

"I—I—I had some money," gasped Trimble. "I must have been robbed, you know!"

"Indeed, sir? How much is the bill?" remarked the manager.

"Twenty-five shillings and eightpence," volunteered the waiter.

The face of the manager grew more grim.

"You say you had some money, sir?" he asked, in a tone which implied that the contrary was the case.

"Ow! Yes!" gasped Trimble. "I—I—I had thirty-two shillings on me! A tramp must have robbed me."

The manager eyed him sharply, and then sniffed.

"A tramp?" he exclaimed scornfully. "I've heard that story before. And I've met your sort before!" he added.

"Oh, really—"

"Suppose you think because you're a schoolboy you'll get away with it, do you?" sneered the manager. "Well, we'll see! Call a policeman, Tompkins!"

"Oh crikey!" gasped Trimble. "Don't do that! S-stop!"

But Tompkins, the waiter, had already departed for the door.

A bead of perspiration stood out on Trimble's fat brow. The thought of the police made him shiver. For once he was really telling the truth. He had been robbed, but the manager, who prided himself on his judgment of human nature by what he read in the face, saw nothing more or less than a "bilk" in Trimble's podgy features, and in consequence he did what he considered his duty.

The fat junior, however, had no intention of being carted off to a police-station, which, in his blind terror, he imagined would happen when the constable arrived. Trimble's fat wits were not given to working at speed, but they certainly worked now. He glared round him like a rat in a trap. The manager towered above him mockingly.

Next moment Trimble had picked up a roll and hurried it at the mocking face.

Whiz!

"Yaroooooh!"

The manager staggered back clapping a hand to his injured nasal organ, what time Trimble rolled to the door of the restaurant as fast as his little fat legs would carry him.

"Stop! Stop, thief!" roared the manager, dashing in pursuit. But Trimble had the advantage of a good start. He flung through the swing doors of the restaurant and raced down the broad, spiral staircase leading to the street. Half-way down there sounded a loud concussion and a chorus of yells as Trimble, in his blind terror, ran full tilt into Tompkins, who was returning, accompanied by a policeman.

Thud!

"Yooooop!"

"Ooooo-er!"

"Wow!"

The constable, his helmet jammed over his eyes; the waiter, all the breath knocked out of him by that sudden onslaught, and Baggy Trimble, who had fared best of all in that unhappy meeting, collapsed on the stairs in a struggling heap.

"Groooooogh!" gasped the police-officer.

"Mummmmmmmmmmm!" wheezed the waiter.

"Groooooogh!" howled Trimble.

Next moment he had scrambled to his feet. The constable, feeling someone next to him, made a blind effort to detain him. With the helmet still jammed over his eyes it was a difficult matter indeed for the worthy officer of the law to see whom his captive was.

"I've got him!" he roared. "Lend a hand, waiter!"

"Leggo, you fool!" gasped the waiter. "That's me you've got hold of!"

And while the waiter and the constable voiced their personal opinion of each other, the cause of all the trouble, so to speak, had flown.

Trimble, indeed, had raced like the wind out of that restaurant. Wheezing like a broken-winded bull, he had charged out into the street and dashed down the first turning that came to hand. It was dark, and he thanked his lucky stars for that act of Providence.

For quite ten minutes he raced along the road, and then he stopped—he had to, for his heart was beating like a steam-hammer and his breath was coming in great sobbing gasps.

"Oh dear!" he panted, leaning up against the wall.

"Oh! Groooooogh!"

He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that he was

not pursued, and he rested there in the shelter of that friendly wall for a good ten minutes.

"Wow! Rotters!"

He shook his fist at an imaginary waiter and his manager and then blinked about him. Fortunately for Trimble, he recognised the locality. A continuation of the road brought him out to the cliffs, and from there he could find his way back to Drere Manor.

What Trimble expected Nunks and Buck to say or do when he showed up at the house again never entered the fat junior's mind. His one thought was to get under shelter for the night.

With many a nervous glance behind him to satisfy himself that he was not being followed, Baggy Trimble started off. Twenty minutes later he had reached the cliff-tops.

Away to his right, about a hundred yards distant, the impressive shape of Drere Manor stood silhouetted against the sky. Lights twinkled at the windows, and Trimble knew that food and warmth were to be found there.

He shivered, and pulled his coat about him. Then he set off along the cliff-top until he reached the lane that led to the manor. He had not traversed more than fifty yards when a piercing shriek rang out on the cold, frosty air coming from somewhere below. The blood nearly froze in the fat junior's veins as he heard it. With beating heart and gaping mouth, Trimble stopped.

"Wha-a-at was that?" he asked himself, in a hoarse whisper.

And then, as no further cry came up from the depths below, Trimble ventured as near to the edge of the cliff as he dared and peered over. Against the paleness of the sands he made out what he took to be a human figure. It seemed to be wrestling with something.

Trimble watched, fascinated.

For some moments he watched the figure perform these wrestling movements, and then he saw it straighten up. Next moment it moved off, and Trimble saw that the man, whoever he was, carried some object in his hand, and that he limped painfully. But it was his direction that drew the fat junior's attention most, for the man made straight for the cave that opened at the foot of the hundred steps at Drere Manor.

"Where's he going?" muttered Trimble.

That, indeed, was a mystery to Baggy Trimble. But curiosity was his besetting sin. The fat junior glanced about for a way down to the foreshore eighty feet below. He shuddered as he looked over the edge of that towering cliff.

"Groooogh! I'm not chancing a climb down there!" he muttered, drawing back. "But what's that chap doing? There's no way out in the direction he's gone—only the steps to the manor. Thumping queer, and no mistake!"

The fat junior watched the man limping along the narrow strip of foreshore with more curiosity than ever. He saw him throw something dark into the sea. It was a heavy object, Trimble knew that, for the splash it made reached his ears plainly.

That decided Trimble. More curious than ever, he was determined to follow the mysterious stranger. And what was that object like a rake he now trailed behind him in his left hand? Was it something that would obliterate his footprints in the sand?

With a start Trimble recollected that there was a winding path down to the foreshore, for he had travelled up it only the day before. True, he would have to retrace his steps along the cliff-tops a hundred yards or more; but as the man whose movements interested him so deeply could not possibly find an exit at the Drere Manor end of the cliffs, and could not possibly pass Trimble without being seen should he retrace his steps, the loss of time the fat junior's route entailed made little difference.

Having reached that decision, Trimble rolled along the top of the cliffs until he came to the winding path he sought. Then he commenced the descent. It was a tedious journey down, and dangerous, too, for Trimble was anything but agile. Time and again his feet slipped, but he managed to clutch something on each occasion that checked his fall. And at last, panting with exertion, he found himself on the narrow stretch of sand that divided the cliffs from the incoming waves.

With ponderous, laboured strides Trimble set off in the direction of Drere Manor.

CHAPTER 6.

The Vigil at the Cave!

"WHAT'S that?"

"What's what, Tom?"

Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn stopped half-way down the steps leading from the manor to the foreshore below. The former clutched his plump companion by the arm.

"Do you hear it?"

Fatty Wynn strained his ears. From under the very steps upon which they were standing came a number of muffled sounds like those made by a person walking over bare boards.



"Thumping queer!" ejaculated Fatty Wynn.

"You heard them, then?" asked Tom.

Fatty Wynn nodded.

"Like someone walking about underneath these steps!"

"That's what it sounded like to me," remarked Tom Merry.

He stood listening, but those strange sounds, growing weaker and weaker, gradually faded away to nothing. The two chums, the first pair to do sentry at the cave, had set out barely three minutes before. Each was well wrapped up; each carried a heavy stake and an electric torch. They looked quite confident of laying the "ghost" of Drere Manor as they tramped on down the remaining steps.

"Mind the bottom four," advised Tom Merry, giving a wide berth to those crumbling steps, and leaping nimbly to the stretch of sand.

"Right-ho, old scout!" whispered Fatty Wynn.

And a moment later he was beside his chum.

"Let's have a squint in the cave first," suggested the Welsh junior. "Don't switch on the torch until we are inside—in case anyone sees us."

They felt their way round the wall of rock until the opening of the cave was reached. There, being screened from view, Tom Merry switched on his torch, and Wynn's blazed out a second afterwards.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

He stood gazing down at the thin layer of fine sand that covered the floor of the cave.

"What's up?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"What's happened to the footprints we left behind us yesterday?" asked Tom, in a tense whisper.

Fatty Wynn started.

"My hat! Considering that about eleven chaps came in here yesterday that's rather astonishing!" he remarked, scanning the sanded floor closely. "There's not a vestige of a footprint!"

"Looks for all the world as if someone had raked over the sand with something or other to obliterate the tracks," ventured Tom Merry.

Fatty Wynn's face screwed up into a thoughtful frown.

"Suppose Kerr and Wildrade didn't do that for some reason or other?" he remarked.

"Perhaps they did!" said Tom Merry, with a shake of the head. "It's funny, though!"

They looked round the cave. It was quite dry and sheltered from the wind, and in ordinary circumstances it would have made a snug retreat to such adventurous spirits as Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn.

"Jolly good place for a picnic!" remarked Fatty Wynn, the first time his thoughts had turned to "grub" that day.

"Top-hole!" agreed Tom Merry. "But I'm blessed if I can see how this cave would provide an entry to the house, old chap."

"Wants a bit of believing, I grant you," replied Fatty Wynn, "when we remember that we are eighty feet below the manor."

"And yet the hundred steps would want some believing, unless people had seen them, as we have," said Tom Merry.

Fatty Wynn nodded.

The two juniors stared round them in the comforting light of their electric torches. It was a lofty cave, and the irregular shapes that occurred in its walls gave it a picturesque effect. The minutes dragged by. Nothing could be heard save the splash of the sea and the moaning of the wind. And then quite suddenly there floated through these familiar noises the sound of moving feet.

"Ssssh!" hissed Tom Merry, with a glance at Fatty Wynn.

And the two torches were shut off immediately.

The footsteps grew nearer.

Someone was approaching the cave!

With beating hearts the juniors waited. Their right hands gripped the stout stakes with which they thoughtfully provided themselves before setting out on that two hours' vigil. In their respective left hands were the electric torches, ready to show up the mysterious intruder.

The footsteps halted outside the cave. But to whomsoever the feet belonged, their owner showed no great hurry to

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enter its cavernous depths. Next minute, just when Tom Merry was trying to make up his mind what to do, the footsteps began to retreat.

Tom Merry switched on his torch, and Fatty Wynn did likewise.

"After him!" roared Tom, springing to the opening of the cave.

Fatty Wynn was barely a second behind him. Their torches combined blazed the surrounding vicinity in an endeavour to pick out the owner of the footsteps. But there was no sign of any living presence there, save themselves.

"He couldn't have got far away!" hissed Tom Merry. "I—"

His words trailed off, as his staring eyes made out the shape of a shoe which peeped from behind a large boulder no more than six or seven paces away.

"Look, Fatty!" he whispered, pointing along the beam of light from his torch to that shoe. And then in a loud voice he yelled:

"Come out, you scoundrel! We've spotted you behind that boulder! Come out, or I'll plug you with an ounce of lead!"



A
SCOTTISH
READER
WINS A
DELICIOUS
TUCK
HAMPER

THIS
WEEK!

"REASONING."

An economical Irishman went into a saddler's shop and asked for a single spur, at half the price of a pair. "And what will you do with one spur, my good sir?" asked the astonished shopkeeper. "Sure an' begorra," replied Pat, "O'll use it! If Oi get wan side of my horse to go, sure the ither side's got to go wi' it!"—A delicious Tuck Hamper has been awarded to Harry Hangham, 3, Hobart Terrace, Moorville, Carlisle.

It was only bluff, for Tom Merry did not possess a shooting-iron, but it served to put movement into the owner of the shoe.

There was a terrified gasp, and a round, podgy shape detached itself from behind that boulder and crept into the beams of light from the torches.

"D-d-don't shoot!"

As that voice fell on the ears of Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn, and as that figure was identified, they nearly collapsed.

"Trimble!" gasped Tom and Fatty Wynn.

"Wow!" yelled Trimble. "D-don't shoot, you silly asses!"

Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn snorted. To think that they had suffered the excitement of the past three minutes, only to find Baggy Trimble at the end of it, so to speak, was the limit.

"You silly ass!"

"You fat, footling owl!"

They seized Baggy Trimble by a fat shoulder apiece and shook him fiercely. The fat junior, almost blinded by the glare of the torches, hardly knew whether he was on his head or his feet.

"Bump the fozzling idiot!" said Tom Merry wrathfully.

"Serag the fat frog!" roared David Llewellyn Wynn ferociously. "What's he come back for, anyway?"

"Yoop!" howled Trimble. "Don't shake me! I—I—I had to e-c-come back! There's n-n-no t-t-train t-to London!" Bump!

"Yoop!" The enraged sentries, forgetful for the moment that their task demanded silence, grabbed hold of Trimble and upended him.

"Bump the silly owl!" said Tom Merry between his teeth.

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"We'll make him sorry he came back! And what the thump did he want to come this way for?"

"Yooooop! I came this way because I saw— Whooop!"

Really it was hard for Baggy Trimble to attempt any explanation in the circumstances.

Bump!

"Wow! Yow! I s-saw somebody sneakin'— Oh! Hellup! Groooooough!"

Trimble gave it up after that. He needed all his breath for yelling. Certainly there was very little left in reserve for explanations by the time Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn had finished with him. It was useless Trimble trying to explain that he had been afraid to enter the cave in case the strange individual with the limp whom he had followed was concealed there, or that he had posted himself behind the boulder to wait until such time as the man showed himself. The very few words he did manage to interpolate in his cries of anguish were meaningless. And finally the interpolations ceased altogether in favour of roaring.

"Now kick the fat rotter up the steps!" growled Tom Merry. "We can't have him with us here!"

Fatty Wynn jumped.

"Oh, my hat!" he exclaimed. "If our ghost friend should happen to be anywhere within a hundred yards' radius of this place he would know that it wouldn't be exactly wise to show himself just now."

Tom Merry bit his lip.

"We've made enough row to bring the chaps down here, anyway," he said, as several flickering lights appeared on the cliff steps above, and inquiring voices filtered down through the darkness.

"Yow-wow!" moaned Trimble. "You rotters!"

Really it was not exactly Trimble's lucky day!

"What's the giddy rumpus?" came Blake's voice. "I thought I recognised Trimble's dulcet tones."

"So you did!" growled Tom Merry. "The fat barrel is here!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Blake & Co. and Figgins & Co. reached the stretch of sand at last. They gathered round Tom Merry, Fatty Wynn, and Baggy Trimble in an inquiring group. And then, while Baggy was trying to explain for the second time, Buck Whipcord's voice, raised with that of Nunks', penetrated the depths.

"Buys!"

The juniors sent back an answering call; and then, being younger than their hosts, they climbed back up the hundred steps.

Buck and Nunks eyed them in astonishment.

"What's the game, buys?" inquired Buck, with a puzzled frown. "What's all the row about?"

Tom Merry looked at Fatty Wynn, and the Welsh junior looked at Figgins, and Figgins looked at Blake. Finally Arthur Augustus D'Arcy broke the silence.

"You see, Buck, deah boy," he began, "we've been doin' a little bit of thinkin' on our own, an'—"

"Reckon it'd be a durned sight more comfortable if we had the story, whatever it is, in the house!" growled Nunks.

"Perishing cold standin' here, anyway!"

He made a movement to shepherd the party back to the house, and the juniors moved off, Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn casting reluctant glances in the direction of the cave at the foot of the steps.

Once in the library, Tom Merry lifted the explanation out of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's mouth, as it were, much to that elegant youth's surprise, and swiftly narrated the events that had led up to the first two-hours' vigil at the foot of the steps. Nunks and Buck listened in rapt attention.

"Gad!" exclaimed the latter, when Tom had concluded his account of Fatty Wynn's theory. "You buys hev sure hit the right trail, I'm thinkin'!"

And Nunks nodded his head vigorously.

"Fatty," boomed Buck's voice again, "guess I want to shake you by the hand! Reckon them brains of yours hev got me beaten to a frazzle!"

Fatty Wynn winced as Buck's strong grip closed over his hand like a vice.

"It was Kerr and Wildrake who set the ball rolling," he ventured to remark.

Nunks shook an admonitory finger at the party.

"You buys hev got the pluck of an army," he drawled.

"But it's sure durned foolish not to hev let Buck an' me into the secret."

"We weren't too sure of things at this stage," said Fatty Wynn. "And we wanted to test one or two things without making—making fools of ourselves."

"Guess that were all right," said Buck.

"But it's a durned, doggone son of a murderin' hobo we've got to reckon with. An' to think that that scoundrel Wintringham is at the bottom of it all!" he added, shaking his head regretfully. "To think that my hands hev been so near him, an' yet so far away!"

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Readers may send in as many efforts as they

like, but each attempt must be accompanied by the special coupon printed on this page.

All efforts must be addressed: "Bicycle" Joke Competition (No. 2), Gough House, Gough Square, London, E.C. 4, and must reach that address not later than Monday, December 27th.

The Editor's decision must be accepted as final.

Send in your jokes to-day, chums! Nothing like striking while the iron is hot!

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"But we are not certain of anything, you know," Fatty Wynn reminded him. "I may have followed up a wrong trail, Buck."

"We'll see, my boy!" growled Buck. "Guess I'm going to have a spell of dooty in that cave."

"But I say—" began Trimble.

"You shet up, Grumble!" exclaimed Buck. "I see you've invited yourself into the party again."

"But—" began Trimble, eager beyond measure to tell what he had seen from the cliff-top.

"Will you ring off, old fat man, for goodness' sake," said Tom Merry. "You've mucked up enough things for to-night."

Baggy Trimble snorted.

"I jolly well like that! But for me you'd be making fools of yourselves."

"What the thump do you mean?"

"I jolly well know that Winttingham wasn't the man I saw!" retorted the fat junior. "He limped, and Winttingham doesn't limp!"

"What are you burbling about?" asked Blake, with crushing scorn.

"Really, Blake—"

"Oh, shut up, old fat barrel! Give your chin a rest!"

"But—" hooted Trimble.

"Shut up!"

It was a concerted shout from the entire party, and it made Trimble jump. Evidently no one was interested in what Baggy Trimble had to say. The fat junior relapsed into silence and satisfied himself by glaring at each of the juniors in turn.

"Reckon we'd best keep a watch on that cave," said Buck at length, "although it beats me how anyone could get into the house from there."

He signalled to Tom Merry and Fatty Wynn, and these two juniors left the warmth and comfort of the library and returned to their vigil at the cave. With Buck in their company the juniors felt no fear of a conflict with the mystery man who played the ghost of Drere Manor.

CHAPTER 7.

The Ghost Walks!

MEANTIME, up in the library Nunks kept the party cheerful with ranch stories, but his heart was heavy for all his show of cheerfulness. He was thinking of Kit and Kerr, and his impatient nature rebelled at this game of wait-and-see which had to be endured before a decisive move could be made.

Every two hours through the evening two of the party relieved the sentries in the cave below, whilst Buck remained at his post the whole time. But the returning sentries had nothing to report. Certainly no person had passed into the cave before their

gaze; no sounds of footsteps along the sandy beach had reached their ears.

The weary vigil, spread all through the evening, grew monotonous.

Would nothing ever happen?—the juniors asked themselves.

And then, as if to mock them, as if to tear Fatty Wynn's theory asunder, a soft, eerie laugh floated through the house.

"Ho, ho!"

"The—"

The word "ghost" trembled on almost every lip, but it was checked in time. There was no ghost of Drere Manor, the juniors had told themselves. That laughter was human.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

"Come on, you chaps!" exclaimed Tom Merry, clenching his teeth. "This is the last time we're going to hear this rotten trickery!"

"Hear, hear!"

But Nunks was on his feet, and he waved the boys back. "Just stay where you are," he said quietly. "I'm going in search of this ghost."

He drew a loaded revolver from his pocket.

"But—" began Tom Merry.

"There'll be some shooting," said Nunks grimly.

"Tain't healthy for a crowd when there's shooting about!"

And with the words he dashed from the room.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

Again that mocking laugh, a trace of triumph in it this time, echoed eerily through that vast house. With a bound Mr. Wildrake gained the landing of the first floor.

Not many yards behind him came Tom Merry & Co., in direct defiance of Nunks' wishes. With stout cudgels and stakes cut from the trees earlier in the evening, they rushed in a body behind Mr. Wildrake, with beating hearts and grim determination to lay this mocking ghost for keeps.

Even Baggy Trimble was in the rear of them, a poker in his hand, but his presence was due to the fact that he preferred to be with a crowd rather than on his lonesome.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

From the region of the third landing the laugh rang out this time as if defying anyone to seek it at close quarters. But Nunks was no coward. He gained the second landing, a trifle breathless it is true, but he only paused to switch on the electric light before he started to mount the next flight of stairs. His eyes gleamed with a savage determination, his first finger was curled round the trigger of his loaded revolver.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

Still from the third landing came that horrible laugh. Tom Merry & Co. were only a few feet behind Mr. Wildrake. In front of him the third landing lay shrouded in heavy darkness, for it was impossible to flood it with light until the topmost step dividing the second from the third landing had been gained.

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But Nunks recked nothing of the darkness before him so long as he had the light behind him. There would be no question of a blow in the back. As yet he did not know that Tom Merry & Co. had followed him, but he suddenly became aware of their near presence when Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, brandishing a heavy cudgel, plucked him by the arm.

"Where is it, Nunks? Where—?"

The words froze on his lips and he felt a chill at his heart, for suddenly from out the deep gloom ahead appeared the vapoury outline of the ghost said to haunt the manor. There was no mistaking the gleaming cutlass, the menacing steel hook, the savage face, the picturesque yet fearsome attire of the old sea pirate remembered as Captain Hawk.

"Ho, ho!"

It was a warlike cry this time as the figure, glowing strangely, advanced on the party. Even Nunks was taken aback by that strange apparition. But only for a second. The next, his finger had jerked round the trigger of his gun.

Crack, crack!

The reports rang out almost simultaneously.

A second afterwards, through the smoke of the discharged revolver, the juniors saw that shadowy figure of the buccaneer, and heard the mocking laughter.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

Then it vanished before their eyes just as suddenly as it had materialised.

The whole scene had been enacted in four seconds. On the fifth Nunks was fumbling for the electric light. On the sixth the third landing was illuminated like day. But save for the curling wreath of smoke that swept ceiling-wards, for which the two revolver discharges were responsible, the landing was empty of all presence save Nunks and the juniors.

The laughter had ceased, the ghost had gone.

And all that remained to that amazed party of youngsters with the grizzled old veteran at their head was Fatty Wynn's theory.

And Fatty Wynn's theory did not include the possibility of a human being endowed with a protective hide against bullets.

"Phew!" gasped Nunks. "Where did those bullets go? Why, boys, this gun o' mine was trained dead on the darned thing!"

"And where's—where's the ghost gone?" quavered Monty Lowther.

They searched the landing—every inch of it. They even tore down that life-sized oil painting of the buccaneer Captain Hawk which graced the entire span of one wall. But it revealed nothing. The canvas so ruthlessly torn from its frame lay curled on the floor, the only portion of the picture visible being the remarkably lifelike representation of the dreaded steel hook.

"It's nothing to do with that picture!" growled Nunks. "That darned thing was only put here to frighten people, I dare swear. Waal, it won't frighten no more folk. But question is, where's that blamed ghost gawn?"

That was the question. Certainly no sign of it remained on the landing.

Nunks turned to the boys.

"No good staying here," he growled. "But I reckon we'll shift these blamed walls somehow to-morrow; then we'll see where Mister Ghost makes his exit."

"Then you still believe that the whole thing is a trick?" said Tom Merry, whose confidence in Fatty Wynn's theory was considerably shaken.

"O' course I do!" said Nunks. "I'll admit I was a bit scared when I saw the blamed thing. That's only natural, 'cos it's the first time I've ever set eyes on it. But it's trickery—trickery! There ain't no doubt about it."

They were meant to be comforting words, and the juniors received them as such. All the same, they did not give a complete and satisfactory answer to the questions that came surging through their brains.

And in a subdued body the juniors retraced their steps to the library.

Nunks lingered on the landing for a few moments on his own. He had made a close examination of the three walls in order to find out where his bullets must have entered. But only one bullet-hole was to be seen, in a position high up above his head on the left-hand wall. And Nunks was positively certain that he hadn't fired a shot in that direction.

"Darned queer!" he muttered, scratching his head.

His next glance embraced the window at the far end of the landing, almost in line with the stairs. The upper portion of it was open.

"Must have put 'em through the window," Nunks reflected. "But I don't recollect aiming at the moon."

He shook his grizzled head, and was about to descend the stairs when his keen eyes caught something on the polished

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floor close to the right-hand wall. It proved to be a small spot of blood.

A grim smile broke out on Nunks' face.

"Blood!" he muttered. "That proves my bullets went home. But he must be a rare plucked 'un if he kin stand a couple of shots at close quarters and still laugh afterwards."

It was a surprise to Nunks, but it comforted him greatly to think that his aim had been more or less true.

For some few seconds he stood gazing at the spot of blood, and his mind was busy.

"Strikes me that this wall'll be the first to be pulled down. That spot o' blood proves that our ghost does his disappearing-trick somewheres round about this wall. Waal, guess he won't do any more tricks after to-morrow. A dose of dynamite'll shift that old oak, I reckon!"

And feeling pleased with himself, the old rancher descended the stairs.

Two of the sentries had returned from their vigil when Nunks reached the library, but they had nothing to report.

Tom Merry & Co. looked uneasy. They still felt a peculiar feeling run down their spine when they thought of that gruesome figure with the cutlass and the hook, when they thought of that horrible laugh.

And the apparition had withstood the test of revolver fire at close range. Nunks could hardly have missed. Faith in Fatty Wynn's theory was already on the wane.

Nunks greeted the juniors with a cheery smile.

"Back up, lads!" he exclaimed. "I've proved that they weren't no ghost. My bullets found the mark all right—or something near it, leastways."

And he explained what he had discovered on the landing.

"But surely there's no man on earth who could stand two shots at close quarters like that and then laugh before the report had died away?" said Tom Merry.

"Admit thet does puzzle me a bit," said Nunks, with a grimace. "Still, they were English bullets," he added, with a laugh. "Bought 'em in the gunsmith's at Murrinhurst yesterday. Mebbe—"

He had jerked open the chamber of one of his guns as he spoke and tipped the unspent shots that remained in it on to the table. Then he jumped, and Tom Merry & Co., looking on, jumped too.

"Great Washington!" exclaimed Nunks furiously. "They're blanks!"

It was true. The shots on the table were undoubtedly blank cartridges!

"My hat!" roared Blake.

"No wonder the ghost didn't feel upset!" exclaimed Nunks, with knitted brow. "Blanks! Did you—?"

He growled something unintelligible to the juniors, and his jaw snapped home. There was an angry glint in his eyes.

"I'll give thet darned fellow at the gunsmith's blanks!" he bellowed after a pause. "I'll—I'll—"

Tom Merry plucked the infuriated old rancher by the sleeve.



"Ho, ho!" As that eerie laugh rang out Nunks' figure of the buccaneer, and heard the mocking la-

"But didn't you see they were blanks, Nunks, when you loaded the gun?" he asked.

Nunks banged his right fist into his left palm.

"No!" he growled. "The blamed fellow at the shop was so cussed obligin' thet I let him do it!"

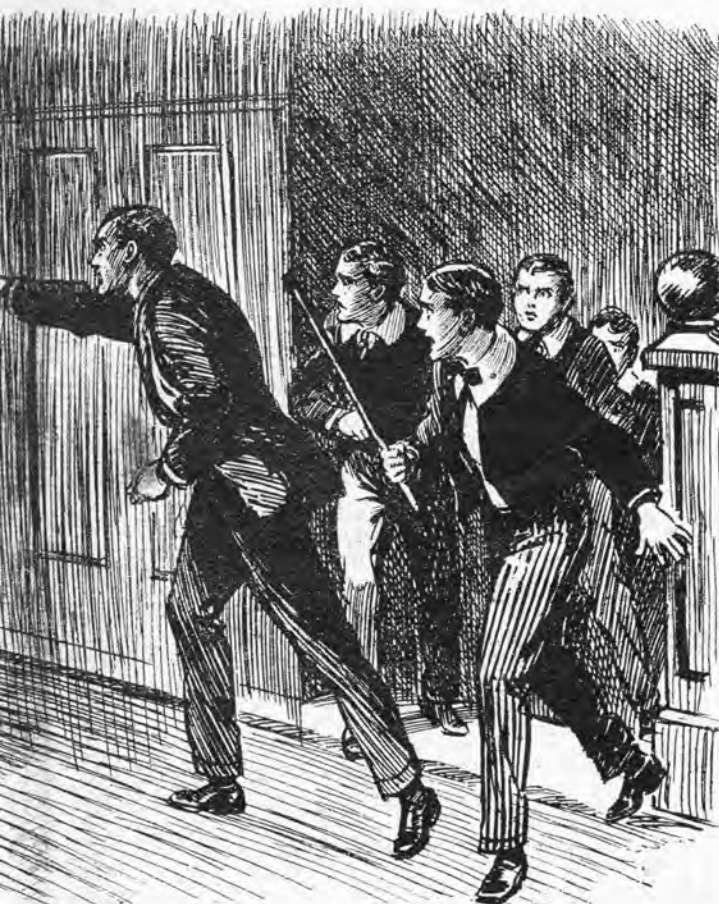
The juniors exchanged glances.

"Then—then how do you account for that patch of blood you saw?" inquired Blake.

Nunks' jaw dropped.

"Oh, don't ask me!" he roared. "This place—this place—"

"Poor old Blenkiron's, I expect," chimed in Fatty Wynn. "You remember we found the chap on the landing yesterday, with the mark on his head!"



Nunks' finger tightened on the trigger of his revolver. Crack, crack! A second afterwards the juniors still saw that shadowy knocking laughter. "Ho, ho, ho!" Then it vanished from their sight. (See Chapter 7.)

The juniors nodded.

That seemed to be a likely explanation of that single spot of crimson that had so delighted Nunks when he had discovered it.

The old rancher sat down in the chair and pulled his second gun from his pocket. It proved to contain six blank cartridges.

The juniors were silent.

"I say," exclaimed Monty Lowther suddenly, "There's one thing we've all overlooked!"

"What's that?"

"Why, if we're going to believe that this ghost story bisney is only someone playing a part, how do you account for the fact that the ghost—I mean the rotter who's playing ghost—deliberately walked in front of that gun and risked his life?"

"Oh!"

That was a poser indeed. It seemed certain suicide for any man to rush deliberately on a man he saw to be armed with a revolver.

"Perhaps he thought his appearance would scare us," ventured Tom Merry.

"That's not safe enough for a chap who plays ghost," said Monty Lowther, with a shudder. "I don't like this

business at all. It's been my belief all along that we're making a big bloomer in thinking that it's Wintringham."

"I'm inclined to agree with Monty now," said Arthur Augustus. "You chaps saw that the ghost—I mean—he limped. Wintringham doesn't limp."

Baggy Trimble started. He remembered what he had seen on the cliff-top—the man with the limp, who had walked along the foreshore and mysteriously disappeared. Trimble wasn't usually given to thinking unless there was a feed at the end of it. But his fat brain began to work now.

"I say, you chaps—" he began excitedly.

"Shut up, Trimble!" said Blake.

"But I tell you I saw—"

"Shut up!" bawled Herries.

Trimble glared.

"Well, if you won't listen to what— Yaroooooh!"

His words ended with a yell as Monty Lowther picked up a cushion and flung it at the fat junior.

"There's another one here if you don't dry up!" growled Lowther. "Keep quiet, you fat clam! Can't you see we want to think things out?"

"Beasts!" Trimble shook a fist at the party and moved towards the door. "I'll jolly well show you, you rotters!" he roared. "I'll do it off my own bat now! Yah!"

And with that elegant ejaculation the fat junior rolled out of the room. For once Baggy Trimble's turgid mind was destined to work to great effect.

CHAPTER 8.

The Unknown!

KIT WILDRAKE shivered.

His eyes tried to pierce the gloom, but they could see nothing. Darkness, black as the night, reigned about him. His head ached, his limbs were cramped and well-nigh numbed, and the gag that bit into his mouth was causing him great pain.

What time it was he hadn't the foggiest idea.

Where he was proved a little easier to answer, for the swirl of the sea came to his ears, and occasionally the cry of a seagull.

He was somewhere on the coast, that was

evident. More than that he couldn't determine. And how he came to be in his present plight was almost as difficult a question to answer as the others.

Memory of that horrible taunting cry which had caused him and his chums to dash out of the reception-room into the landing in quest of the ghost of Drere Manor was all that remained to him, except that, as he had raced up the stairs, someone had struck him a sudden blow over the head, then he had fallen in an inert heap to the floor. Those were the sole threads left to him from which to weave the story of his present plight.

Hundreds of questions had surged through his brain while he had lain there trussed up like a turkey. Who was his captor? Why had he been captured? Had it anything to do with the ghost of Drere Manor?

He was hungry—very hungry. It seemed days since he had eaten.

But in reality he had been captive there in that dark, gloomy place for eighteen hours. He wondered what Tom Merry & Co. were doing. What Nunks and Buck were doing.

Suddenly his ears, now tuned to catch the slightest sound, heard the soft thud of footsteps.

Kit tried to struggle up into a standing position. Once again he was reminded of the chain about his middle, which was fixed to a staple in the wall. He had felt those walls. They were of rock, he knew that, which suggested a cave. And the chain that held him a fast captive, in addition to the ropes round his wrists and ankles, allowed him scant liberty of movement. Standing up was more of an ordeal than lying down.

The footsteps came nearer, and finally halted somewhere in front of the captive junior. Then, from out of the gloom, came a deep voice whose tones were unfamiliar to Wildrake, try as he would to place them.

"You are awake?"

Kit could not answer, for the obvious reason that the gag in his mouth effectually stopped speech of any kind, but the movement he made which rattled the chain about his middle satisfied the owner of the voice that his captive was awake.

"You are hungry?" The words were mocking. Kit detected the sneer, and he strained at his bonds until the chain rattled alarmingly.

"Very hungry?" said the voice again; and the speaker moved into the gloom of the cave and knelt beside his captive.

Wildrake did not struggle as he felt hands go out to his face, for he guessed that his captor was about to remove the gag.

"Is that better?" the unknown's voice was mildly inquiring. "No, no!"—as some sort of cry, weak and well nigh unintelligible, left Kit's lips. "Don't attempt to shout. You would never be heard."

"You scoundrel!" As Kit felt the muscles of his jaws reacting to their new-found freedom he hissed the words at his captor and struggled with his bonds.

"Quiet!" The man's voice was vibrant with authority. "I come to ask you a question, not to listen to your school-boy foolishness. You have a secret—"

"You rotter!" blazed Kit, all his pent-up emotion and anger running away with him. "Why have you trusted me up like this? Where am I? Who are you?"

The words tumbled out in a torrent. Kit's captor allowed the junior to finish, and then he chuckled.

"You talk too much and too fast, my lad," he said at length. "I am not here to answer questions—you'll remember that if you value your life and freedom. You are in possession of a secret, as I remarked before. You have seen the document which tells of a treasure that lies within the book—the book!" He laughed, as if something of extreme humour was to be culled from that word; but his voice dropped to its note of seriousness again in a second. "I want to know that last word of that document!"

Kit started.

His mind went back to the occasion when, with the rest of the party at Drere Manor, he had seen the strange document discovered by chance in the recess behind the secret panel. "The last word." Quick as a flash Kit saw the entire document, word for word, in his mind's eye. The last word!

"You'll not hear it from me!" he hissed; for he saw the significance of that last word.

"You will not leave here until you do speak it!" snapped his captor. "Your friend has proved just as obstinate as you, but there is a way to make people speak."

Kit felt a thrill run down his spine.

"My friend?"

The unknown chuckled mirthlessly.

"Your friend," he repeated. "I know not his name, but he speaks with a Scottish brogue—"

"Kerr!" exclaimed Wildrake. "K-Kerr!"

"If that's his name, he is here," came the voice. "But he's just as obstinate as you are. I did not credit school-boys with much sense, but he voiced much the same words as you when I asked him for the last word in that document."

"You rotter!" roared Kit Wildrake. "Oh, you hound! That word is the key to the whole document," he added. "I see it all now!"

"And that word is the only one I seek!" said the mocking voice. "I will exchange it with you for another—liberty!"

"Never!" replied Kit Wildrake. For he realised now that anyone who would go to such lengths to capture two schoolboys just to be told of the one word that ended the treasure document, which he and the rest of the party had put down as a hoax, proved that the treasure was not the myth all had imagined.

"You refuse?"

"Yes, you scoundrel!" retorted Kit.

"Very well!" said the voice resignedly. "Perhaps a few more hours of confinement will help you to change your mind. I have plenty of patience—seven long years have I waited for this secret. And it shall not slip through my fingers again! Your life is at stake—you make the choice!"

"You rotter!" replied Kit. "You can't keep me here! The police—"

The unknown snapped his fingers—Kit heard them plainly. "The police? What do I care about the police? They will never find you!"

"My friends—"

"Your friends? Umph! They are scared stiff of the ghost of Drere Manor! They, too, will search in vain!"

Kit Wildrake breathed hard. His eyes strained through the darkness in a fruitless endeavour to identify his captor, but it was hopeless. Not so much as his outline could the captive schoolboy make out.

"Your answer—for the last time!"

The grim words roused Kit to realisation of his plight. He tried to bluff.

"I will tell you!" he stammered.

"Good!" The eagerness in the voice of his captor showed Kit how much depended on this one word the man sought. "What is it?"

Kit thought quickly, then he took the plunge.

"Ship!" he blurted out.

"Fool! You would play with me!" hissed the unknown.

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"You would banter with me over a fortune fit for a king! Bah!"

Kit felt a sudden kick in his ribs that brought a cry of pain to his lips. Next minute the gag was being replaced, and, try as he would, Kit could do nothing to prevent his rascally kidnapper performing the task.

"You dog!" The man's voice was raised in something like a scream. "You think you can fool me? You'll never leave this place alive until you speak the word—the right word! Ship! Heavens, I could kill you! And it will be the right word, for I shall put it to the test before you regain your freedom. Think it over. I shall return again—it may be to-night, it may not be for two nights."

Kit wriggled in his bonds.

The footsteps began to ring out again as his captor strode away, apparently sensing his way in the darkness like a cat, for the footsteps thudded out at regular intervals—sure indication that the man knew his way by heart.

Finally the sounds died away, and all that was left to Kit was his troubled thoughts and the murmuring of the sea.

Question upon question racked his brain. Who was his captor? Was he the ghost of Drere Manor? The man whose trail Kerr and himself had chanced across on Christmas Eve? And where was poor old Kerr?

These thoughts brought him back to his conviction when the man had demanded the key-word of that strange document. Wildrake knew that even if he had given it, that his liberty was questionable. The man seemed scoundrel enough to leave him to perish there, once he had gained his own nefarious ends.

"Fortune fit for a king!" The words of his captor rang through Wildrake's brain time and time again. And he was convinced now that, unless he was dealing with a madman, the secret of the steps was something of rare worth.

He tried to think. Would it serve him to give the scoundrel the missing word? For it was evident that the rest of the secret he knew. Those last four characters on the steps that led down from the manor to the foreshore completed the directions as to where the treasure was to be found; without them the rest of the document was useless.

As Wildrake lay there, turning these thoughts over in his mind, he thought he heard a cry, distant and eerie. He listened acutely. It was a cry, and it sent a shiver down the captive junior's spine; the cry of a man demented. For several minutes the junior listened; but the cry was not repeated. The only sounds that reached him were the monotonous voices of the sea and the wind, and finally these voices lulled the hungry and exhausted junior to sleep.

CHAPTER 9.

Trimble's Discovery!

"HALLO! Where are you going?"

Buck Whipcord's voice nearly made Baggy Trimble collapse as he jumped un-
gainly from the last of the sound steps that led down from the manor to the foreshore.

The big Westerner held his gun at the ready. Evidently the sudden appearance of the fat junior had startled him.

"It's me, Buck!" quavered Baggy Trimble. "T-Trimble, you know!"

Buck lowered his gun.

"What the heck are ye doin' down here,

Grimble?" he snapped.

"J-Just going for a walk, you know," replied the fat junior. "Along the shore."

"Waal, I swow!"

For Trimble, the laziest and fattest schoolboy Buck had ever set eyes on, to announce his intention of going for a walk at that late hour of the night nearly took his breath away. Buck was feeling restive. He had kept watch on the cave now for six hours—a vigil that was uncomfortable as it was fruitless. Moreover, Buck, who had heard revolver-shots, had been informed of the sudden appearance of the ghost of Drere Manor by Nunks himself, and Buck was feeling vengeful that once again he had failed to be honoured by that mysterious being which came and went at will. Certainly no ghost, or anything tangible, at least, had passed Buck and the juniors who had kept him company at the cave during those wearisome six hours. And the rugged plains-man had come to the conclusion that Fatty Wynn's theory, although it dovetailed as theories should, was completely off the rails. The more Buck had looked at that massive cave the more sceptical he had become that it provided a hidden entrance to the house. To give Fatty every benefit of the doubt, Buck had promised to place a charge of dynamite against the walls of that cave on the morrow—or, at least, as early as he possibly could manage to purchase some of that useful explosive.



"You're not afraid of going for a walk at this hour of night?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was keeping watch with Buck and Herries.

Trimble blinked. As a matter of fact, he was scared out of his life to travel beyond the company of the chums of St. Jim's, but he felt a sense of injury. Baggy flattered himself that he knew it wasn't Winttingham who was playing the ghost at the manor, for the mystery man he had seen walking along the foreshore limped—and it was a decided limp. The fat junior did not know how or why he connected this mystery man with the ghost of Drere Manor, for, if anything, Trimble was half convinced that such things as ghosts did exist. But he felt peeved because the juniors had refused to listen to what he had to say. Really, it was hard for a fellow who had such a lot of important news to tell to be continually told to "shut up" the moment he endeavoured to impart it. And he felt curious. The combination of these things would, doubtless, never have stirred Trimble to feats of energy along a lonely, desolate, gloomy stretch of sand, shadowed by towering cliffs, in the ordinary way, but deep down in him the fat junior possessed an instinctive idea that what he had seen a few hours earlier would serve to throw much light on the mystery.

That meant a certain amount of limelight. And Trimble liked limelight as he liked pineapple, in chunks. That the mystery man he had seen from the top of the cliffs had been wrestling with something or someone Trimble was certain, for curious eyes seldom play their owners wrong. That this man with the limp had dumped something heavy into the sea the fat junior was equally certain. And Trimble meant to find out what that object was. The tide was out three hundred yards or more, and the fat junior reckoned that it would not prove too difficult a task to find what he sought, although it meant a walk on a cold night.

"You're not afraid, Trimble?" repeated Arthur Augustus.

Baggy Trimble snorted.

"Afraid? I'm not afraid of anything!"

Buck smiled.

"Waal, git on with it, Glimble," he drawled. "Guess you sure can't do no harm. If the ghost is in the house somewhere you can't scare the blamed thing away by walking along the sand. It's got to pass little me first."

Trimble brightened up at that. He told himself that he had nothing of which to be afraid. It was even as Buck had said. The "ghost," whoever he was, was still in the house. Certainly he was not on the sands.

Trimble rolled off, Buck and the two sentries staring after him with amused expressions on their faces until his fat, unwieldy shape was lost to view in the darkness.

Trimble panted on. In his mind's eye he saw the place where the stranger with the limp had thrown down the load he had been carrying into the sea. In the fat junior's pocket reposed a torch he had thoughtfully borrowed of Tom Merry—when Tom Merry wasn't looking. He had reached a spot about fifty yards from the foot of the manor cliff steps when he drew the torch from his pocket and flashed it about him.

A grunt left his lips as he saw the chalk boulder which marked the place, approximately, where the man with the



"We shall have a deuce of a job to get this blessed chain off," said Wildrake. Kerr struck one of his precious matches and took a good look at the chain. At one end it was attached to a steel band about Wildrake's middle, whilst the other end was fixed to a staple firmly embedded in the wall of the cave. "We've got to do it somehow, old scout," said Kerr cheerfully. (See Chapter 10.)

limp had deposited his burden. It was a few yards from a narrow track that ended in a bottle-neck shape, by reason of the boulders on either side.

"Where is the blessed thing?" grunted Trimble, as he flashed the pocket torch right and left.

He searched the sand, still damp and glistening, as the tide had receded five minutes or more. And then he found something that caused him to emit an ejaculation of surprise.

In the glare of the torch he picked out the shape of a man-trap. Trimble did not need telling that it was a man-trap, for he had seen one in an antique shop at Murrhurst only the day before. Indeed, he remembered now in a flash that Kerr had also looked in at the window of the antique shop where the man-trap was and had displayed a lively interest in it.

What was it doing here?

Trimble did not dwell on the matter long. His mighty intellect was never equal to wrestling with problems for a lengthy period. But luck was with him. It came home to him suddenly that the whole party of juniors had passed along this particular stretch of sand the day before, and not one of them had passed any remark about the man-trap, which one or other of them would certainly have done had it been seen. Yet it was here now!

"I've got it!"

Trimble almost danced a jig in his excitement. In a flash he remembered that piercing cry which had reached him hours earlier when he had been at the top of the cliffs; he remembered the peculiar action of the man with the limp. He had appeared to be wrestling with something. The limp! Everything became clear to Trimble now—at least, almost everything. The man had been caught in the man-trap. He had wrestled with it in his endeavours, doubtless, to unfasten its steel jaws. He limped as a direct result of being entrapped in that dangerous and unlawful contrivance.

That was it, undoubtedly. For once the fat junior's brain rose equal to the problem it had confronted. With beating heart and laboured breathing Trimble dragged the man-trap clear of the sand, in which it was half embedded, and hauled it up to a shingly strip of beach. There, under the glare of the torchlight, he examined his prize.

It was a fearsome-looking contrivance, with great steel jaws. They were inter-locked now, and Trimble shuddered.

as he pictured what impression they would make on his own fat feet and ankles were the jaws opened ready to receive their human prey.

"No wonder the blighter limped!" muttered Trimble, showing unusual concern over the misfortune of a fellow being. "Grooooooh!"

He examined his prize closer. His eyes nearly goggled from their sockets when he saw a piece of material, no larger than two inches square, spiked on one of the teeth of the steel jaws.

With feverish haste and fumbling fingers the fat junior managed to rend that piece of material from the teeth without entirely destroying it.

"Now we'll see if the rotters are right!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "This is a piece of trouser cloth—any fool can see that!"

"Any fool" did, apparently, for the fat junior's surmise was correct.

He looked at it closely, and then very carefully placed it in his pocket. Then Trimble pondered over the situation. The more he thought the whole thing out the more convinced he became that he had hit the right track. The man with the limp had disappeared. The ghost had walked Drere Manor barely half an hour ago—rather, he had limped, Trimble reflected with a grin.

"I'll jolly soon find out if Wintringham's the ghost," said Trimble, with a fat grin. "He, he, he! This will make the fellows sit up! He, he, he!"

He cogitated again, and finally resolved to make for Murranhurst. It was a laborious journey, and Trimble was panting and puffing like a grampus when he reached the top of the cliffs by the winding path he had followed earlier in the day. But the fat junior was going the whole hog now that his initial curiosity had prompted him to take exercise. He rolled towards the village of Murranhurst as fast as his fat little legs would carry him.

He was crimson with exertion by the time he reached the estate agent's office in the High Street, but his fat face lit up when he saw lighted windows above Mr. Redknap's business address. Wintringham lived in the rooms above, the fat junior knew.

"I'll thumping soon see if Wintringham is the ghost, anyway!" he muttered, as he thumped at the knocker of the door. "He can't be at Drere Manor and here as well!"

Trimble felt a little excited as he heard footsteps descending the stairs. The door opened and a woman's head came into view.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Trimble blinked.

"Is Mr. Wintringham at home, ma'am?" he asked.

"No, he's not!" snapped the good lady. "You're from the manor, aren't you? Well, what do you mean by knocking people up on Christmas Day?"

"But—"

Slam!

Trimble jumped back as the door slammed in his face, narrowly escaping damage to the tip of his nose. His fat features fell. Wintringham was not at home. Did that mean—

"What do you want?" It was Wintringham's voice behind the fat junior.

Trimble started and wheeled.

It was Wintringham himself, and there was an angry glitter in his eyes. An aroma of gin polluted the air in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Wintringham, from which it was evident that he had been improving the shining hour, and doubtless celebrating his dismissal from the manor and Christmas at the same time at the village hostelry.

He lurched a trifle unsteadily, and Trimble, noting the fact, felt his excitement returning, for there was no sign of a limp about Wintringham. He was convinced the next moment, if any doubt did linger, for Wintringham suddenly reached out and grabbed the fat junior by the collar.

"What are you hanging around here for, you fat frog?" he hiccupped.

"N-nothing," began Trimble. "Yooooooop!"

Wintringham's right foot came up with a thud against the fat junior's netter garments, and Trimble howled.

"I had enough of your cheeky orders up at the manor," said Wintringham. "This will teach you not to put on airs and graces, my lad!"

"Whooooop! Yow! Wow!" roared Trimble, as the obliging Wintringham taught his victim another "lesson"—with his left foot this time.

"And—"

But the fat junior tore himself away and scudded down the street as fast as his fat little legs would carry him. At a safe distance he stopped to breathe.

"Yah! Rotter!"

But Trimble contented himself with that. After all, he had learned what he came for. True, the price had been

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two kicks, but it would be something to talk about when he reached the manor—honourable wounds, so to speak.

He rolled leisurely to the old house this time, for the unaccustomed exertion of the day had begun to tell on him.

And when he reached the house a fresh surprise greeted him. Tom Merry & Co. were in the library, bending over the forms of Buck Whipcord, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and Herries.

The three of them were unconscious, and Nunks and the juniors were plying restoratives with feverish haste and anxiety. But what made Trimble's jaw drop the most at this fresh mystery was the ominous circle of crimson that stood out on Buck Whipcord's forehead.

"The Mark of the Hawk!"

Forgetful of all he had done in the face of this new emergency, Baggy Trimble allowed the words to fall from his lips.

Tom Merry & Co. turned round on him angrily.

"Shut up, you fat idiot!" hissed several voices.

And once more a lot that Trimble could have explained of the strange things happening at Drere Manor, or at least throw some light on, remained locked up in his podgy breast.

The fat junior glared, snorted indignantly, and finally "shut up."

CHAPTER 10.

The Old Man of the Cave!



"KIT!"

Kit Wildrake stirred in his sleep.

"Kit!"

The captive schoolboy opened his eyes. For a moment he imagined that he had been dreaming. Someone had called him by name. Someone—

"Kit! Kit, old chap! Where are you?"

Wildrake wrestled with his bonds, tried to mouth some ejaculation—anything that would make his presence known.

"Kit! Kit!"

It was Kerr's voice. Wildrake would have picked it out from a thousand. Kit plucked madly at the chain and shook it. Soft, unintelligible mumblings left his gagged mouth.

"Wildrake! Kit!"

Suddenly a light flickered into the darkness. Slight as the glow was it gave acute pain to Wildrake's eyes, but it brought a great bounding relief to his heart.

Footsteps sounded behind the light. The light grew larger, casting weird shadows on the cave, revealing for the first time to Wildrake's smarting eyes the geography of the prison he was in.

"Mummmmm!"

Wildrake's gurgling cry was heard, soft as it was, for next second a whoop of excitement echoed and re-echoed in the cave. The light went out, but Wildrake cared little about that. The dread monotony of his captivity was broken. Perhaps freedom was near at hand, for Kerr's voice, Kerr's footsteps meant that he at least was free to move about.

"Hold on, Kit!"

Kerr's voice came into the cave, and a moment later the Scottish junior himself came in sight. A lighted match flickered in his upraised hand, and its radiance fell across the bound and gagged figure of his chum.

Next moment Kerr had bounded forward.

"Thank heavens!" he breathed, feeling for Kit's bonds in the darkness. "I—I thought that scoundrel had killed you!"

"Mummmmm!"

In a moment Kerr's deft fingers sought for and found the gag secured round Wildrake's mouth and jaws. Another moment and it had been plucked away.

Wildrake drew a deep breath.

"Thank goodness you found me, Kerr!"

Kerr's hands went out in the darkness, and the Scottish junior wasted no time in words. Swiftly the cords were untied. Wildrake's ankles were next released, and then he tried to stand upright.

"Take it easy!" panted Kerr. "It's a holy terror when the circulation begins to get going again. I've been through it. Can't strike any matches. Only a few left, and I shall want them to get out of this maze."

Kit nodded. The pain of the returning circulation in his limbs was excruciating, but he bit his lip and bore it bravely. And then, having chafed his limbs until they began to feel as if they really did belong to him, he remembered the chain about his middle.

"We shall have a deuce of a job to get this blessed chain off, old chap!" he said.

Kerr struck one of his precious matches, and took a good look at the chain. It was fixed to a staple in the wall, and the staple appeared to be firmly embedded. The match burned low until it caught Kerr's fingers and scorched the flesh, but he didn't seem to feel the pain. And then it was that Wildrake, greatly wondering, saw that his companion's wrists were raw and bleeding.

The light flickered out.

"That thumping chain will want a bit of moving," muttered Kerr. "But we've got to do it somehow, old scout!"

He took hold of the chain and jerked all his weight on it, Wildrake lending what aid he could. But the staple refused to budge. In absolute silence the two juniors wrestled with it until the perspiration came off them in streams and their muscles ached. And still that staple defied their efforts.

"Keep it up, Kit!" panted Kerr.

"Can't you get help?" gasped Wildrake. "Buck—"

Kerr paused.

"I haven't the foggiest idea where we are," he panted. "And I don't know a way out, old chap. But we must get you free before that scoundrel who kidnapped us returns. Don't talk any more. I'll explain afterwards."

It was sound advice.

The two juniors laboured on. They had nothing to help them save their hands, their strength, and their determination. But the staple never budged. It might have been part of the rock itself by the way it withstood the combined onslaught of the two juniors.

And after half an hour the chums had to stop from sheer exhaustion. Kerr did not strike any more matches. He had seen that there was nothing in the cave to assist him—no tool or weapon of any kind that would help to shift that staple or the links of the chain.

"Let's try again!" muttered Kit.

They resumed their task.

Then, just when their spirits were at zero, just when they had, unknown to each other, decided that the next tug would be the last for another lengthy period of rest, one of the links of the chain snapped.

Both of the juniors hurtled backwards as the link parted company with its fellows, but fortunately they did not strike their heads against the rocky walls of the cave.

Breathless and dazed, they sat up and groped towards each other.

"You all right, Kit?"

"Yes. Bit winded. How are you, old chap?"

"In the same state," panted Kerr. "But you're free!"

For a few moments they sat there drinking in deep breaths of air. Then Wildrake got to his feet. The end of the chain, still fastened to the steel band round his waist, clanked against the rocky floor as he moved.

"Wind it round your waist," suggested Kerr. "We'll soon get that blessed thing off once we get out of here."

"Which way do we go?" asked Wildrake, adopting Kerr's suggestion.

"Blessed if I know," grunted Kerr. "I've been stuck up in a cave ever since some rotter biffed me over the head with something and knocked me out. Bound hand and foot, not tied to a staple in the wall," he added, with a faint chuckle.

"Then how did you manage to get free?"

"I came across an old sea-shell," said Kerr, "and I sharpened it against the walls of the cave until I had it like a razor. It was a lengthy job, but it served. And then I jammed the shell between my knees and sawed my wrists over it until I had cut the cords. The rest was easy."

"Thank heavens!" breathed Kit. And then: "What do we do now?"

"Move thumping warily," said Kerr. "This cliff—it must be a cliff—is honeycombed with caves. A regular maze, in fact. It was only blind chance that I stumbled across you. But I don't know the way out, for these caves lead into one another. And the trouble is that I've only a dozen matches left."

"We must use them sparingly," said Kit.

The Scottish junior nodded.

"You know our theory was that the manor could be entered by that cave at the foot of the steps."

"And I think we were right!" exclaimed Kit. "I've got a feeling that because we had stumbled over that, as well as because we know the key-word of that treasure document, we were carted off from the rest of the party."

"That's what I think," muttered Kerr. "That document we found in the secret panel is evidently valuable. That mystery chap who carted us here said that it was worth a fortune."

"He told me that, too! We shall have something to say

to Buck and the other chaps when we get out of here, Kerr, old chap!"

"Yes, and the sooner we stop chinwagging and make a start the better," said Kerr. "Don't you think so?"

"I'm in your hands," said Kit. "You know something about this place—I don't, lead on MacDuff!"

Kerr moved to the entrance of the cave and branched off to the left.

"We won't go right," he said, "because that's the way I came. We'll try this passage."

He struck a match. The light showed a winding, natural passage in the cliff that just allowed the two juniors to traverse it in an upright position. The floor was uneven and jagged in places and the width of the passage would only allow of one junior moving along it at a time.

"Now we can see about twenty paces ahead with this light," said Kerr, as the match began to dim. "We'll count the twenty paces before we stop."

"I follow!"

They set off, groping their way through the dark until Kerr had counted the twenty paces. Two steps ahead the passage began to wind. Cautiously the two juniors reached the spot. Their straining eyes, however, could see nothing in that murky gloom, and Kerr felt for his precious matches again.

"Only ten more left after this," he muttered.

"That will be enough for us, I feel certain," said Kit cheerily, although deep in his heart he wondered whether he would ever get out of the place alive. He had read of such cliffs honeycombed with caves where men had lost themselves; where their bones had been discovered years after by some chance explorer. He shivered. He felt more apprehensive still when the match flared up, for it showed three rugged passages striking off in different directions. Which one to take he couldn't for the life of him make up his mind.

But Kerr's practical mind came to the rescue.

The lighted match flickered up in a strong draught, and the Scottish junior noted that fact at once.

"This is the passage for us," he said, as he singled out the opening from which came the most powerful draught of air. "There's bound to be an outlet somewhere," he added.

"Of course!" agreed Kit. "Air can't force its way through solid rock."

They set off again.

Another precious match was lighted, and Kerr's face became grim when he saw the winding, shallow passage before him.

"Can't walk upright here," he said. "We shall have to crawl!"

"It's a good sign, though," remarked Kit. "If that strong current of air comes through such a small passage-way it signifies a pretty hefty opening at the end."

It was a tedious journey, for the juniors had barely gone three or four paces when the tunnel narrowed and shallowed to such an extent that from a stooping posture they had to sprawl out flat on their stomachs to get along at all.

It was as well they did so. Thirty yards had been traversed in this slow and painful fashion when Kerr, who was in the lead suddenly felt his outstretched hand encounter nothing more than empty air. Another foot, and he would have plunged down he knew not where.

"Hold on!" he called back to Kit. "I've reached the end. We've been crawling along a shelf."

"Phew!"

With great difficulty Kerr felt for and found his matches. With equal difficulty, in that confined space, he struck one.

The flame, sheltered by his cupped hand from the strong draught that blew in his face, flickered and spluttered and almost went out. But it recovered, and Kerr's eyes nearly started from their sockets at the scene he beheld.

He was as he had said on a shelf. Before him was a large and roomy cave, the floor of which was about nine feet below the shelf. Straight ahead he could hear the murmur of the sea, could feel the wind as it dashed in his face. But it was none of these things that came as a surprise to the Scottish junior. It was in the cave itself that the sensational awaited him.

There, with a steel girdle round his middle, from which ran a fairly lengthy chain fixed like Kit's had been to a staple in the wall, was the figure of a man.

A man?

As Kit took another glimpse at that strange figure he wondered if he were looking upon a rare specimen of the monkey tribe, for the figure looked more animal than human. A trailing beard of silver and grey that almost reached the feet of the figure dropped from a grizzled, emaciated face in which two eyes glowed with a wild, maniacal light. Few clothes surrounded the emaciated frame, and what few there were hung on it like threads.

No shoes encased the feet, and barely any flesh covered the bones of the creature's arms and legs.

But it was the face that arrested Kerr's attention most. It was sunken and drawn, almost resembling a skeleton. Only those two glittering orbs now fixed in childlike wonder on the figure of a schoolboy holding a guttering match spoke of life.

"Great Heaven!" panted Kerr.

His face expressed his horror and his sympathy at the same time. Was this another victim of the unknown scoundrel who had kidnapped him and Wildrake?

In quick, whispered sentences he passed back to Wildrake what he had seen.

"Heavens!" breathed Kit.

The Scottish junior struck another match. The face of the creature in the cavern below remained the same; no expression, other than wonder, was registered in those glittering sunken eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Kerr, in trembling tones.

A maniacal cackle of laughter floated back to him in reply. It made Kerr grit his teeth to stop himself from shuddering. There was something beseeching, something piteous, something childlike in that laugh that made the Scottish junior forget his natural repugnance of the horrible picture the creature below presented.

"Can you talk?" was Kerr's next question, and there must have been some chord of sympathy in his voice, strained as it was, that appealed to the captive below.

The expression in the glittering eyes changed. This time no wild laughter rang out. Two bony, grimy, emaciated hands, the nails of which were nearly as long as the fingers themselves, clawed their way through the air appealingly to the junior perched on that narrow shelf. Next moment the cave resounded to deep sobs as the captive buried his hoary old head in his hands.

Wildrake, unable to see a thing of what was passing, felt his blood run cold. Suddenly he felt Kerr nudge him with his boot.

"I'm going down into that cave," said Kerr stoutly. "That poor wretch is half mad. He looks as if he's been a prisoner here for years."

"But you said that the drop into the cave is about nine feet," said Kit suddenly. "If you go down there you'll never get back."

"I've thought of that," said Kerr; "and this is where that chain of yours will come in handy."

"I don't see—"

"Unroll it, old chap," said Kerr swiftly. "Good! There's about three feet or more of it. If you'll wedge into this narrow tunnel I can use the chain as a rope. I shan't drag you down," he added. "All you'll have to do is to lurch your shoulders against the sides of the tunnel."

"I follow you," said Kit, catching on to the shrewd junior's idea.

"Right, then," said Kerr. "I'm ready to start. Are you ready?"

Wildrake bunched himself in the narrow tunnel.

"Ready!"

The chain tightened suddenly as Kerr dropped over that shelf, but Wildrake made an effectual wedge, or staple, even as the Scotch junior had said.

A moment later came a soft thud, as Kerr dropped the remaining inches between his outstretched feet and the floor of the cave, and Wildrake, up above, felt the chain swing freely. Then, full of curiosity, he crawled into the spot his chum had vacated, and was just in time to see Kerr strike another match.

The sight of the emaciated figure, half-animal, half-human, brought a cry of horror to Wildrake's lips and a grim determination at the same time to make the one responsible pay a heavy price for his inhumanity.

Kit saw Kerr go up to the captive, saw the tears of joy that started to the sunken eyes, saw the long bony arms that went out and embraced the Scottish junior in thankfulness and gratitude and heard himself choke back a throb in his own throat at the same time.

A babble of talk rang in that spacious cave, for the captive overjoyed at his new-found company talked, or rather tried to remember the language he had once used before he had been chained to that staple in the wall, like a child who has just learnt to what use a mouth and pair of lungs can be put.

And from the number of notches the old man had managed to scratch on the wall by means of a piece of pointed rock, each notch representing a day, Kerr always practical minded, discovered that the man had been a prisoner in the cave for seven years to the very day.

That his memory had suffered, that his sanity had well-nigh gone was apparent from five minutes attempted conversation with him. And beyond that five minutes nothing could be gained from him, for with Kerr's strong youthful arm about him the prisoner of the cave had fallen

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into a deep sleep. Up above, Kit heard the news from his chum, and as nothing could be done in the darkness he, too, decided that he could do a lot worse than seek sleep himself, stony as was his bed and narrow its confinements.

Perhaps the dawn would bring freedom. Certain it would bring light!

CHAPTER 11.

A Fresh Mystery!

"HOW are you, Buck?"

Nunks voiced the question with a tinge of anxiety.

It was Boxing Day, and, pale and hollow-eyed, the St. Jim's party looked as they stood ranged round the library at Drere Manor.

Buck was stretched out on the big settee, which had been turned into a bed. His face was pale under its mahogany tan, and that dread circle of torn flesh in his forehead gave him a repulsive aspect.

But he smiled bravely at the anxious, lined face of Nunks, as he bent over him.

"Right as a trivet," he said, with an attempt at bravado. "But what about the boys?"

Arthur Augustus and Herries were stretched out on two mattresses before the blazing fire, wide awake. Tom Merry and the rest of the juniors busied themselves about them.

Nunks glanced at them.

"They seem to be all right, old son," he said softly.

"True, they've slept mighty heavy, same as you have done, but they don't look any the worse. Do you think you can tell us what happened, Buck?"

Buck sat up, and his hand went to that slight circular furrow in his brow.

"Durned if I do!" he remarked. "We was just sittin' in that cave—leastways, the boys were sittin' and I was standin', when I came over durned queer mighty sudden. An' thet's all I know, except thet some blamed guy's taken away a bit of my forehead wi' him!"

"Can any of you boys tell us what happened?" asked Nunks, turning to Herries and Arthur Augustus.

Both the juniors shook their heads.

"We were just sitting in the cave, as Buck says," said Herries. "That's all I remember."

"That's all I wemembah!" declared Arthur Augustus. "But how did we get here?"

"Fatty and I went down to relieve you," said Tom Merry. "It was our turn for sentry. And we found you all stretched out on the sand as if you'd been shot."

"An' what have I been doin' since then, deah boy?"

"Sleeping," said Monty Lowther—"sleeping like a log!"

"It's durned funny!" said Buck. "Hurroooooough! My head!" he added, as he tried to stand on his feet. "It's goin' round thet swift, I can't keep up wi' it!"

The juniors forced a smile. Certainly Buck wanted a lot of knocking out. Not even that mark on his forehead sapped his cheery spirits.

"Take it easy for a bit," advised Nunks.

"Take it easy, be—" Buck paused and drew a deep breath. "I'm all for goin' on now. The first round is over, an' thet cussed ghost feller has bagged all the points. But it's the last round, I'm thinkin', for I'm goin' to see what a dose of dynamite does to thet blamed cave wall."

"Then you think—" began Nunks.

"I thinks what I thought all 'long!" growled Buck. "Blamed trickery! The boys were gassed somehow or 'nother, there ain't the slightest doubt. An' thet guy who gassed us must hev done the trick in that cave. Nunks, shall you or me git 'long to the villidge, or wherever you kin git the blamed stuff, and buy up a load of dynamite? 'Cos it's going to be done right pronto. We've hed enough o' this business!"

Buck's strength was evidently returning for he paced up and down the library with long strides, as if nothing had happened.

"Waal, reckon you can't get 'long to the public with a face like thet," said Nunks, "so guess I got to hustle on myself."

"An mind ye don't git blank dynamite, if there's such a thing," said Buck, with a smile.

Nunks caught him by the arm.

"I've been making discoveries," he said. "Thet man at the gunsmith's didn't hocus those shots, for the rest in the packet I bought are genuine bullets. Someone has monkeyed with my six-shooters—changed the real shots for blanks."

Buck whistled.

"Sure, things do happen 'long this house," he drawled.

"But we're nearin' the end. I kin feel it in my bones."

"Do you still think it's Wintringham now, Fatty?" asked Tom Merry, of his plump Welsh chum.



"Blessed if I know what to think," said David Llewellyn Wynn. "But if it isn't him, I'm dashed if I can think of anyone else!"

"Well, the best way to have tested that theory," chimed in Monty Lowther, "was to have kept a close watch on the rotter."

"I thought of that," replied Fatty Wynn, "and, unknown to you chaps, I slipped out yesterday, when we had talked things over, and fixed it up with a chap at Murranhurst to keep a very sharp look-out on Wintringham's comings and goings."

"Oh!"

David Llewellyn Wynn was coming out strong in the detective line.

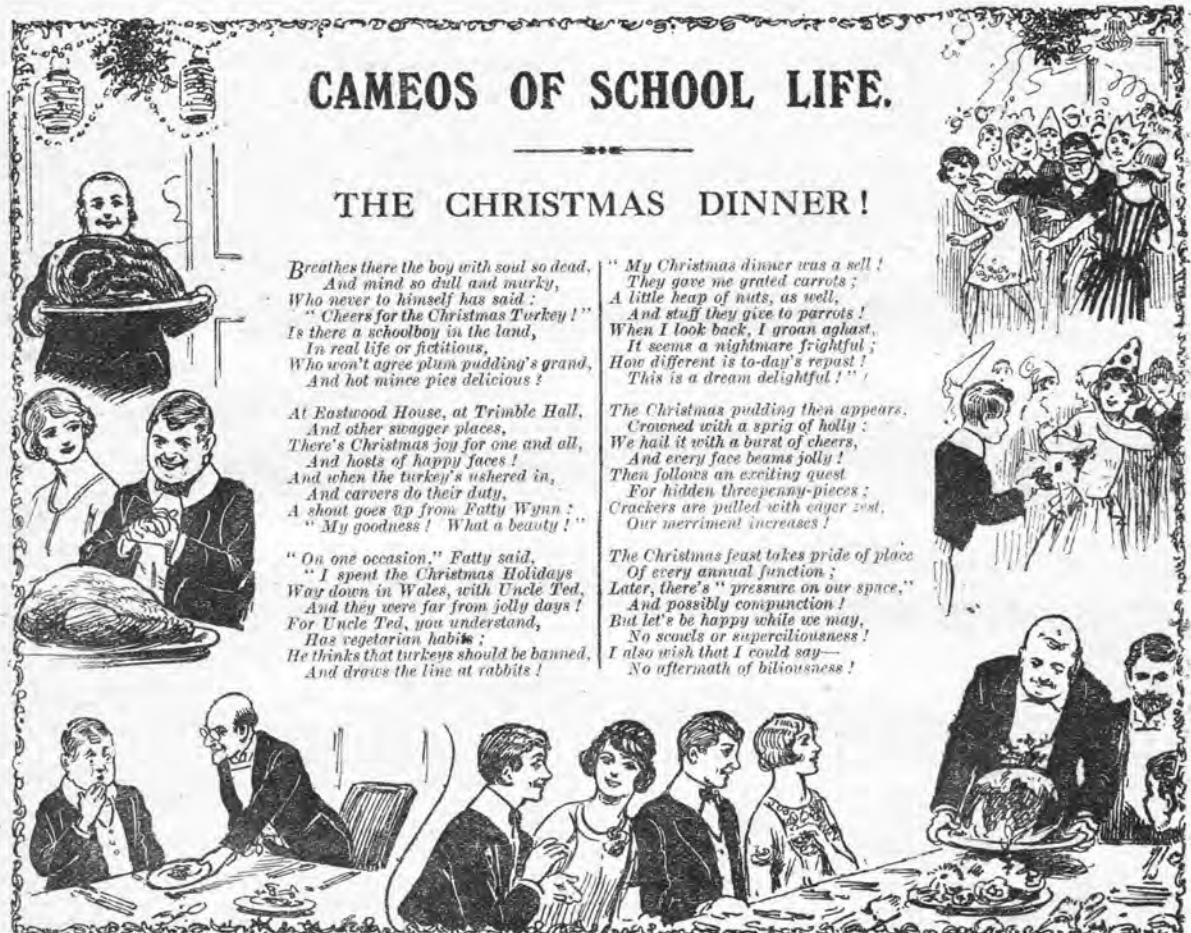
"And what's the result?" asked Tom Merry breathlessly, and the juniors hung on Fatty's next words.

"Wintringham was away from his house practically all day," answered the plump junior. "The chap I engaged to watch him told me a quarter of an hour ago that Win-

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Breathes there the boy with soul so dead,
And mind so dull and murky,
Who never to himself has said:
"Cheers for the Christmas Turkey!"
Is there a schoolboy in the land,
In real life or fictitious,
Who won't agree plum pudding's grand,
And hot mince pies delicious!

At Eastwood House, at Trimble Hall,
And other swigger places,
There's Christmas joy for one and all,
And hosts of happy faces!
And when the turkey's ushered in,
And carvers do their duty,
A shout goes up from Fatty Wynn:
"My goodness! What a beauty!"

"On one occasion," Fatty said,
"I spent the Christmas Holidays
Wear down in Wales, with Uncle Ted,
And they were far from jolly days!
For Uncle Ted, you understand,
Has vegetarian habits;
He thinks that turkeys should be banned,
And draws the line at rabbits!"

"My Christmas dinner was a sell!
They gave me grated carrots;
A little heap of nuts, as well,
And stuff they give to parrots!
When I look back, I groan aghast,
It seems a nightmare frightful;
How different is to-day's repast!
This is a dream delightful!"

The Christmas pudding then appears,
Crowned with a sprig of holly:
We hail it with a burst of cheers,
And every face beams jolly!
Then follows an exciting quest
For hidden threepenny-pieces:
Crackers are pulled with eager zest,
Our merriment increases!

The Christmas feast takes pride of place
Of every annual function;
Later, there's "pressure on our space,"
And possibly compunction!
But let's be happy while we may,
No scowls or superciliousness!
I also wish that I could say—
No aftermath of biliousness!

tringham arrived home at about the time approximately we discovered poor old Buck and Gussy and Herries unconscious in the cave."

"Phew!"

"Jove, Fatty!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You weally are a stickah! If it's Wintwingham all the time I'll—"

Fatty Wynn shrugged his shoulders. He had followed the line of thought that had come to him, and things had worked out pretty easily after that. It just remained to be seen how near the truth he was.

Nunks had bustled out of the house without delay. Something had to be done to clear up the mystery of Drere Manor, otherwise the police would have to be called. The thought of Kit and Kerr still missing made him gnash his teeth in helpless rage. Astride Buck's spirited mare the old rancher fairly made the miles fly by as he galloped into Wayland—the nearest big town to Murranhurst. There was a military camp there, he knew. And Nunks had enough persuasion to get the dynamite he wanted, he

pealed to him as no common verbal discussions could. Besides, once more he had been told to "shut up."

"You've got the stuff?" inquired Buck.

Nunks tapped his pocket.

"I've enough here to blow up the cave walls, and the panelling from thet durned landing upstairs!" he said grimly. "And, after brekker, I guess we'll git right busy on those two jobs."

With the thought of what lay before them the juniors—with the exception of Trimble—did not linger long over breakfast. In a wildly excited party they streamed for the cave.

Buck and Nunks, who possessed a working knowledge of high explosives, arranged the charges, and the fuses were laid.

"Now for it!" exclaimed Nunks grimly, as he applied a match to the lengthy fuse.

The juniors were fifty yards or more away, sheltered behind a jutting corner of cliff. Nunks and Buck, who

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were in the van of the waiting party, looked out to see that the fuse was firing properly.

Nunks nodded cheerfully to Buck as he saw the thin, smouldering line racing towards the sticks of dynamite placed against the walls of the cave. But the cheerfulness gave place to a cry of alarm as his eyes, going ahead of the smouldering fuse, suddenly saw one wall of the cave vanish from sight, as if pulled up by an army of giant hands, and in the cavity it left behind appeared three figures.

"Stop it, for Heaven's sake!" he bawled, and there was a world of anxiety, of fear, in his voice. "It's Kit!"

"Snakes!" roared Buck, as he, too, saw the three figures emerging from the cave right in the path of that racing fuse. "Kit! Kerr!"

Tom Merry & Co. had peeped round the shelter of the buttress as they heard those surprised exclamations, and they started.

There was Kit and Kerr, large as life, if a trifle bedraggled. And what was that strange figure they supported between them?

It was barely a second that was taken to view these surprising happenings, but in that second Nunks and Buck were racing after that burning fuse as if for dear life.

Unconscious of their peril, Kerr and Kit, carrying the almost helpless figure of the man they had found in the cave, came staggering out on to the sands.

"Down for your lives!" roared Buck. "Down!"

He had tried to race the fuse to tear it from the dynamite sticks, but he knew it was a hopeless race. It was only a matter of seconds now before the sticks ignited.

Then and only then did Kerr and Wildrake discern that thin, curling ribbon of hissing smoke and flame almost in their path.

"Down!" bawled Nunks. "For your lives! Dynamite!"

Immediately Kit Wildrake and Kerr fell flat on their stomachs, dragging their helpless charge with them. They had barely stretched out on the sand when there was a devastating roar that shook the ground they were lying on. Great pieces of jagged rock hurled skywards, clouds of chalk and sand fell round them in clouds.

"Kit!" It was Nunks' voice, almost tearful in his anxiety. "Sonny!"

"Kerr!" gasped Buck hoarsely. "You all right, sonny?"

Both the juniors sat up and shook themselves. Their ears were still ringing with the deafening noise of the explosion; but beyond that they appeared little the worse. But their companion, the old man of the cave, lay strangely still. A crimson stream flowed from his forehead where a fragment of flying rock had struck him.

Nunks and Buck stared at that weird, repulsive-looking figure with widely-staring eyes, and Tom Merry & Co., who had rushed up, were equally dumbfounded.

"Who is he?" The query came in unison from all members of the party.

And Kerr's reply came as a further shock:

"Montague Hawk!"

"What?" gasped Buck.

"Montague Hawk!" said Nunks, a frown of puzzlement on his brow that found reflection in the faces of Tom Merry & Co. as well. "But he died seven years ago—seven years ago yesterday!"

But Kerr and Wildrake shook their heads.

"He is here now!" said Kerr grimly. "This poor fellow is Montague Hawk!"

CHAPTER 12.

Montague Hawk's Story!

"HE'S coming round!"

Kerr looked up from the bed upon which lay the shrunken figure of the man he had declared to be Montague Hawk, and whispered the words.

Wildrake's anxious face relaxed.

It was half an hour after their sensational reappearance amongst their chums—half an hour of anxious questioning and astonishing answers. Tom Merry & Co. had listened to their chums' adventures amongst the caves with breathless interest.

Figgins was on his way to fetch Dr. Munroe, for it was apparent that unless the stricken man on the bed received early medical attention, his life was in danger.

"The brandy!" muttered Kerr, as Montague Hawk's eyes flickered.

The Scotch junior forced some of the spirit down the stricken man's throat. Its effect was cheering. The shrunken face twitched, and finally the eyes opened.

"Ah!" A look of childlike wonder was reflected in the

two glittering orbs that dwelt upon each of the juniors in turn.

"Take it easy," muttered Kerr, as the old man endeavoured to sit up on the pillows.

Montague Hawk nodded, and his bony hand rested on that of the Scotch junior gratefully.

Nunks and Buck looked at each other, and shook their heads. That this weird-looking creature could be Montague Hawk they found it hard to believe; for it was supposed that Montague Hawk had died seven years ago.

The man on the bed fixed his glittering eyes on Nunks and Buck, and then beckoned them.

"Who are you?" he asked in such a manner as to indicate that he found speech a great labour.

The two ranchers moved forward.

"I'm Wildrake," said Nunks abruptly. "An' this is my foreman, Buck Whipcord."

A puzzled expression flitted across the shrunken face of Montague Hawk.

"Foreman?"

"Sure," said Nunks. "We're jest over from British Columbia—"

"Then what are you doing in my house?"

There was a challenging note in the stricken man's voice as he uttered the words. Kerr stretched out a soothing hand.

"Mr. Wildrake has bought this place, as I told you," he said softly. "You see—"

The man on the bed pressed his head in his hands.

"My house!" he muttered; and then he drew himself up.

"I am Montague Hawk!" he added dramatically.

"Montague Hawk! D'you hear?"

"I hear," answered Nunks. "But, say, Montague Hawk cashed in his checks seven years ago—"

"That is not true!" said the man on the pillows. "I have been a prisoner for seven years—seven years! Heavens!"

He buried his face in his hands, and his emaciated frame shook to his sobbing. Tom Merry & Co. looked on compassionately.

"Buck up!" whispered Kerr.

The words had a visible effect upon the strange old man. He clutched the Scottish junior by the arm as if seeking some of the strength that reposed in Kerr's strong frame, and sat up on the pillows again.

"Tell them your story," whispered Kerr.

"I will," muttered Montague Hawk. "Heaven give me enough strength to tell it, for I fear that I am nearing the end."

He made a motion with his hand, and Kerr passed him the brandy-flask.

The juniors, and Nunks, and Buck waited expectantly. What story could this strange creature have to tell? How could he be Montague Hawk? A pin could have been heard to drop in the bed-room, while they waited for the old man to begin.

"Seven years ago," he started, "I was Montague Hawk—lord of the manor. I had everything in life that one could wish for except a true friend. But I thought him true at the time. The lure of two million pounds turned my friend into a scoundrel—a ruthless, merciless scoundrel, who has kept me captive in my own caves—my own caves, your hear me"—his voice rose to a shriek—"for seven years!"

He paused impressively, and gazed round upon his wondering audience.

"Your heaven-sent chums"—his gaze rested affectionately upon Kerr and Wildrake—"have liberated me. They have told me the story of the document you found in the secret panel. I wrote that document."

"Oh!"

Tom Merry & Co. looked at Fatty Wynn, as they remembered that the plump junior had deduced this fact the day before.

"I wrote that document," resumed the old man, in a high-pitched voice, "on Christmas Eve, nineteen-nineteen! Those hundred letters forming a message give the whereabouts of a vast treasure my ancestor, Captain Hawk, buried."

"The message is a translation of the old Egyptian hieroglyphics on the steps," said Fatty Wynn.

Montague Hawk nodded.

"You are right," he said. "For years I strived to complete the message those characters formed, but I was at a loss to find the key-word, for the bottom four steps had crumbled away, and the Egyptian characters with them. And then, by the greatest of good luck, as I thought then, I discovered a faded photograph which showed the last four steps intact. My friend, as he was then, shared my interest, but for purely instinctive reasons I forbore to tell him what the last word in the message was."

"The key-word," said Fatty Wynn.



"Exactly, my boy. This scoundrelly friend knew the rest of the message by heart, for he watched me at work. And that friend struck me down and buried me from human sight for seven years in order to wrest the secret from me. But he never had it! Not for nothing do I come of pirate stock! For seven years I have endured the tortures of the damned. Starved, mocked at, taunted with words of liberty if I did but give up my secret. But I know that a friend who could strike me down, who could imprison me, would not think twice about taking my life once the secret were his. I have watched the years drag by, I have seen the tides come in and go out for seven years—a helpless captive at the end of a steel chain. For seven years have I fought and struggled with that chain with the knowledge that if I broke it there was still a nine foot climb up the sheer walls of my living tomb before freedom was mine."

He paused and his emaciated frame shuddered.

"And all that I have suffered for a friend," he said, with a snarl. "A friend?—rather should I say a fiend!"

"Take it easy," advised Kerr, as he noted the nervous excitement the man was working himself into.

"You are right," said Montague Hawk. "You are right, my dear boy. But for you and your friend, I should be a prisoner in that horrible dungeon now. But you set me free—your young strength broke the chain which had withstood my puny efforts for seven years. And now this friend of mine shall pay for his dastardly deeds. I feel it in my old bones; the hour of reckoning is at hand. To him I gave everything I had; my hospitality, my money, my confidence. He was the only man who had ever been shown the secret panels of this house—in my generation, at least—for the Hawks—his eyes flashed—"keep their secrets. It is in the blood! And to this devil incarnate I gave all my secrets but one. I showed him the maze of caverns built in this cliff; I showed him the working of the secret entrance at the foot of the steps; I showed him, by the irony of fate, the very cave in which he imprisoned me. All my secrets I gave to him except one—the word which meant a fortune!"

"Then the treasure is not a hoax?" said Nunks.

"It is there in the tomb—I tell you that word, for I understand that you have seen it for yourselves—the tomb of my ancestor. It is true!" added Montague Hawk, as he read doubt in the face of Nunks. "A Hawk never lies!"

"And your scoundrelly friend repaid you like that," growled Buck. "Waal, I reckon it's him thet's been playin' the ghost—"

Montague Hawk nodded.

"That is true. He used to come and taunt me with his stories of how no one would live in the place because of the ghost. He was the ghost, the fiend! He it was who kidnapped your two friends here and made them captive—all for this buried treasure worth a king's ransom. I can see him now gloating in the knowledge that his base deceit has never been pierced by living mortal, except myself, and I was, and am, scarcely living. Just enough food did he bring me to keep body and soul together. But he shall be unmasked; my fingers are itching to be at his throat!"

The juniors shuddered as they saw the expression on the old man's face. Woe betide that false friend should he ever come face to face with the man he had betrayed.



Before any of the St. Jim's party could dash forward and tear the two men apart, they lurched to the edge of the battlements, struggling fiercely. "My heavens!" gasped Buck Whipcord. "They'll be over the top!" Even as the words left his lips there was a shriek of terror from Dr. Munroe that mingled in nerve shattering discord with Montague Hawk's unearthly laugh, and the two figures hurtled over the edge of the roof. (See Chapter 12.)

"Reckon you hev my deepest sympathy," said Nunks. "Seven years—Heavens, it's hardly credible!"

"Credible?" stormed Montague Hawk. "Why, I've been so near to insanity that I've told myself it is incredible. I have told myself that the treasure is mine. That I live in a palace. That I eat the choicest of food and drink the rarest of wines! That's what seven years of torture can do for you!"

He shook with emotion.

"But how did this friend of yours cover up your disappearance?" asked Tom Merry, remembering with a start that a body clothed in Montague Hawk's clothes had been found at the foot of the cliffs on Christmas morning seven years ago, and had been identified as Montague Hawk.

"Ah! I have only one theory to account for that," said Hawk. "There was a shipwreck two days before I disappeared from mortal sight. Your friend Kerr has told me that a body was identified as mine. My scoundrelly friend left nothing to chance, for that body was wearing my clothes. Perhaps the fate of some poor drowned seaman was wrapped up in mine."

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, speaking for the first time since the story had commenced. "Bai Jove! That wottah of a fiend has a lot to account for. The uttah scoundwel!"

Tom Merry & Co. nodded. The story had moved them to great feelings of pity, and the desire to see the scoundrel who had betrayed his friend receive his just deserts was uppermost.

"And who is this scoundrel?" asked Nunks. "What's his name?"

Once again the maniacal light blazed in the sunken eyes of Montague Hawk. Once more the nervous hands were feeling the air for the throat of the man who had betrayed his trust. His lips worked, specks of foam dropped at the corners. But no words greeted the eager ears of the silent party in the bed-room, for with a convulsive shudder Montague Hawk collapsed on the pillows.

"He's still breathing," said Kerr, as he forced a drop of brandy between the stricken man's lips. "If the doctor would only come."

"He won't be long now," said Nunks. "Figgins has got long legs. But I reckon this poor critter is in need of rest."

"Sure!" agreed Buck. "Guess we excite him too much. Let's git out o' here until the doc arrives, leas'twys."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors moved silently out of the room, only Kerr and Wildrake remaining at the bedside of the stricken man. In a silent group they waited in the library for Dr. Munroe to arrive. They had not long to wait. Within five minutes the front door bell clanged out its summons, and Buck, opening the door, ushered in Dr. Munroe and Figgins.

"This is the second time in two days that I have been called to this house," said the medico, peeling off his gloves. "What is it this time? Not another ghost victim? Your long-legged friend who brought me was most uncommunicative!" He looked shrewdly at Figgins.

Figgins coloured.

"It's such a strange case," he explained, "that I thought it best for Nunks—I mean Mr. Wildrake—to speak to you about it."

"Yes, yes; of course!" smiled Dr. Munroe. "But you were lucky to find me available," he added. "I had the misfortune to fall down the stairs this morning, and I've damaged my foot. Ugh!"

He winced as he brought his weight to bear on his right foot, and at that moment Baggy Trimble saw something that nearly made him jump out of his skin.

"Oh, my hat!"

The exclamation came from him in a tense whisper as his startled eyes beheld the doctor's right trouser leg. There was a rent in the material that settled just over the heel which caused the fat junior feverishly to pull from his pocket the small piece of cloth he had extracted from the jaws of the man-trap, and examine it.

One glance satisfied Baggy Trimble that the material was the same as the doctor's trousers.

"I've got it!" roared Baggy Trimble. "Stop!"

He bawled the word as the medico, accompanied by Nunks, moved through the doorway. They paused to look at him, and then moved on up the staircase.

"Stop him!" roared Trimble, plucking Tom Merry by the arm.

"What the thump are you yelling about?" demanded Tom Merry crossly. "Don't you realise that there's a sick man in the house?"

But Baggy Trimble was so excited that all he could manage to do was to flourish the piece of material before the junior's eyes.

"L-look at that!" he exclaimed at length. "Look at it!"

The juniors looked at it.

"Are you potty?" asked Blake. "What the thump do you want us to look at that for?"

"It's the doctor's!" said Trimble. "It's part of his trouser leg! I told you chaps you were wrong when you thought Wintringham was the ghost!"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"What are you burbling about?"

Baggy Trimble drew a deep breath.

"The doctor's the blessed ghost!" he announced, in a dramatic voice.

"You silly owl!"

"You burbling jabberwock!"

"You fat chump!"

With these emphatic expressions of opinion Tom Merry pushed past Baggy Trimble and followed on the heels of Nunks, Dr. Munroe, and Buck Whipcord.

"What's that fat clam Trimble bawling about?" asked Nunks, as the juniors caught him up on the stairs. Tom Merry grinned.

"He thinks Dr. Munroe is the giddy ghost, that's all!"

"Waah, thet's durned funny!" said Nunks.

And he smiled, and Buck smiled, and Dr. Munroe smiled.

In a quiet group they entered the bed-room. The medico laid down his bag and then moved towards the bed.

Kerr and Wildrake turned their faces towards him as he approached. A startled expression swept across Dr. Munroe's features, but it was hardly noticeable to the juniors in the room. But next moment the medico came face to face with the shrunken figure on the bed.

"You?" he gasped, and his jaw dropped, a light of terror settled on his face and he jumped back as if he had been stung.

"You?" This time it was Montague Hawk's voice. There was a savage, triumphant ring about it that made the St. Jim's party shiver. Next moment there was a maniacal shriek, and before any of the juniors could move Montague Hawk leaped from the bed like a tiger straight at Dr. Munroe!

"You scoundrel!" shrieked Montague Hawk. "At last! At last!"

His long, bony fingers fastened round the wretched doctor's throat; his eyes blazed with an insane cruelty.

"Help!" gasped the doctor. "Drag him off!"

Buck and Nunks dashed forward, and between them they dragged Montague Hawk from his victim. Writhing and scratching, the old man fought with a maniacal strength to free himself.

"He's the scoundrel!" he gabbled, and the foam gathered at his mouth. "Seven years of torture! Dr. Munroe—"

He ended in a burst of shrill, maniacal laughter.

All eyes were turned on Dr. Munroe.

"The—the man's mad!" he stuttered, licking his dry lips.

"Hold him tight!"

"Let me go!" shrieked Montague Hawk, struggling anew. "He is the fiend who shut me up for seven years! He is the scoundrel who kidnapped your boys!"

Kerr and Wildrake started.

Was it possible? Could it be—

"Hold him!" gasped Dr. Munroe. "I—I—I will arrange to get an ambulance. The man is insane."

"Insane!" shrieked Montague Hawk. "You fiend! I'll tell the world, Herbert Munroe, of your villainy! You cannot escape me!"

With a superhuman effort he threw off the detaining hands of Buck and Nunks and rushed at the doctor. Two outstretched hands sought the doctor's throat. But even when they were an inch away the medico turned on his heel and dashed for the door.

Crash!

Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who were directly in the man's path, were bowled over like skittles. And over their sprawling forms dashed Montague Hawk. He looked a terrifying figure in his rags—a figure of vengeance—and a shrill burst of maniacal laughter escaped his lips as he gave chase.

"Stop him!"

"Stop them!"

Shouts rose on all sides, and a concerted rush was made for the door. Precious moments were wasted as the juniors jammed there, all striving to get out of the room at once. Meantime, Montague Hawk was racing at the heels of Dr. Munroe.

"Help!" The terrified medico turned a ghastly face over his shoulder as he ran. Like a Nemesis followed Montague Hawk.

Up the staircase they raced, barely a foot between them. Where he was running the scoundrelly doctor hadn't the foggiest idea. Any direction that would take him clear of the man he had so evilly wronged was sufficient.



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"You cannot escape me!" shrieked Montague Hawk. "You cannot! It's my fate and your fate, you fiend!" "Help!"

As the doctor's agonising cry reached the juniors they spurred themselves to greater effort. They had no doubt now that Montague Hawk's villainous captor was indeed Dr. Munroe. At all costs they must stop Montague Hawk from carrying out his vengeance. The law of England would see that the scoundrelly medico got his just deserts.

But there was no law of England to protect Dr. Herbert Munroe then!

He raced up the staircase until he came to the top landing. Then he faced about and struck blindly at the face of his pursuer. The blow went wide, and a horrible chuckle left Montague Hawk's lips.

"You cannot escape me, you scoundrel! You cannot—Ah, would you!"

The terrified doctor looked about him wildly for means of escape. His eyes caught sight of the steps that gave access to the battlemented roof. He raced up them like the wind, slammed open the trapdoor, and clambered on to the roof.

Barely a second behind him followed Montague Hawk.

"You cannot escape me!"

With the words Montague Hawk sprang. His clatching fingers grouped themselves round Dr. Munroe's throat. Together they swayed and struggled like two wild animals fighting to the death.

In an anxious group the St. Jim's juniors swarmed through the door and on to the roof. About ten feet away from them, locked in each other's arms, they saw the two men who had once been the closest of friends; they heard the shrieks of Dr. Munroe and the savage, gloating cries of Montague Hawk. Then, before anyone could dash forward and tear them apart, the two struggling figures lurched to the edge of the battlements. For a few seconds they swayed on the very edge of that dizzy roof.

"My heavens!" gasped Buck. "They'll be over the top!" Even as the words left his lips there was a shriek of terror which mingled in nerve-shattering discord with a shrill, unearthly laugh, and the two figures, locked in a tight embrace, hurtled over the edge of the battlements to the rocks eighty odd feet below.

One more laugh—triumphant and eerie—came up from the depths. Then all was still.

"Waal, buys," said Nunks, "I guess the excitement is all over. The last of the police has bin and gone, and now we'll jest settle down to make up for lost time."

Tom Merry & Co. nodded.

It was the following day, exactly twenty-four hours since the grim tragedy the chums of St. Jim's had witnessed on the roof of Drere Manor. And it had been one of the most crowded twenty-four hours of their lives. Police had arrived and departed from the old house with monotonous regularity. Copious notes had been taken, and each of the juniors had been put through a searching cross-examination.

The secret of the steps was a secret no longer, for it constituted the motive of Dr. Munroe's villainy, and as such was of great importance in the evidence that would be called at the inquest.

Nunks had aided the police heart and soul. As the owner of the property he was keen to clear up the mystery that had surrounded the place for so many years. And it was surprising how many secret panels in the house came to light when the police tackled the job of discovering them in earnest. The third landing—the scene of so many "manifestations"—first received their attention. The fine old oak panelling was torn from the walls. And one of these panels was found to be movable. Attached to it, top and bottom, were well-greased wheels similar to any found on sliding doors. But this discovery came as no great surprise to Nunks and the juniors, for they had expected to find such a contrivance, neither did the cavity that lay beyond the moving panel. This led down into the very bowels of the cliff by means of a number of crudely fashioned steps carved in the solid rock that led to a spacious cave. From this cave would a number of natural passages, difficult in places to negotiate, that linked an astonishing number of smaller caves together. But even these wonders of Nature did not serve to show how the "ghost's" victims had met their peculiar fate at the third landing, and it was left to Kerr to clear up the mystery.

The Scottish junior discovered in his ramblings a large cylinder, which was connected by a flexible rubber tube to the point in the landing ceiling where the electric lamp was suspended. This electric fitting was innocent-looking enough, for although the flex was encased by a thin, hollow brass tube which, as is the case in many electric wiring systems, served to protect the flex, it also provided a channel along which the gas from the cylinder was forced.

So innocent indeed did this electric light, with its decorative glass bead shade look, that Kerr, turning on the cylinder taps, nearly gassed the whole party on the landing beneath the light. Then it was Kerr, making a thorough investigation of that innocent-looking brass rod, found that it ended in a rose spray. This was the distributing point of the gas, cunningly arranged so that the gas, seeking an outlet, was forced down the many hollow strips of glass forming the beaded decoration of the shade, over the head or heads of anyone standing directly beneath it. The remains of a similar contrivance were discovered amongst the debris of the cave at the foot of the steps, which showed how Buck, Arthur Augustus, and Herries were stricken down while on sentry duty there.

The cylinder was taken away by the police and its contents analysed by an expert. But he was baffled to give any definite name to it. Certainly no such gas was known to science. But the expert stated in his report that experiments proved the gas was almost instantaneous in its effect; that it became harmless within three minutes of its mixing with air, but that the effect on a human being inhaling it was to rob him of all physical energy, whilst it excited the nervous system to such an extent as to cause a mental collapse. As Nunks remarked to the chums of St. Jim's, that "mixture" of Dr. Munroe's would keep the experts busy for a long time to come.

The costume of an old-time buccaneer, the cutlass, and the dreaded steel hook were discovered in one of the caves where evidently Dr. Munroe had been in the habit of repairing prior to and subsequent upon each fresh impersonation of the ghost of Drere Manor. And in this same cave was a surgeon's scalpel with which the rascally medico had fashioned that legendary mark of the Hawk on the foreheads of his victims.

A visit to Dr. Munroe's house by the police and a thorough investigation of his property brought to light a bottle of colourless liquid, found in the laboratory which, under the influence of heat, had the effect of becoming transformed into a liquid of deep crimson for the matter of a few moments. Then it would disappear entirely, leaving no trace on the material to which it had been applied. This time the experts found their task a simple one, for this colourless liquid was simply an invisible ink, doctored to meet the demands of the ghost of Drere Manor. Thus one of the most baffling mysteries of the manor possessed a simple solution; the mystic messages that had put such terror into the chums of St. Jim's were simply another instance of Dr. Munroe's cunning.

The juniors had spent the early part of the morning roaming through the maze of caves in the rock upon which the manor was built, but their gruesome associations did not tend to make Tom Merry & Co. appreciate their beauty to the full. They were more keen, perhaps, to visit the tomb of the dead and gone buccaneer, and they awaited the coming of three o'clock with great excitement, for Montague Hawk's relatives, who naturally were entitled to whatever the tomb contained, had been notified, and they were to be present at that time to test the truth or otherwise of the document relating to the secret of the steps.

"I wonder if there will be any treasure there," said Tom Merry.

"Blessed if I know what to think," said Figgins. "Anyway, we shall see at three o'clock."

The juniors nodded.

"I say, you chaps—"

This time the chums of St. Jim's did not tell Baggy Trimble to "shut up." For once in a way the fat junior had used the brains nature had given him, with great effect. He had been right about the identity of the ghost. Tom Merry & Co. were the first to admit that now, and they had hastened to apologise to Trimble for shouting him down every time he had tried to speak on the subject. The apologies Trimble had received in his usual lofty manner, whereat the juniors were tempted to add a bumping to their apology, but they good-naturedly refrained and for once Trimble was given his head.

"I say, you chaps," he reiterated, "you might shove that Christmas pudding along here, you know. I've only had a taste of it."

"Oh, my hat!"

Considering that a whole pudding had disappeared somewhere within Trimble's capacious interior that reference to a taste was surprising.

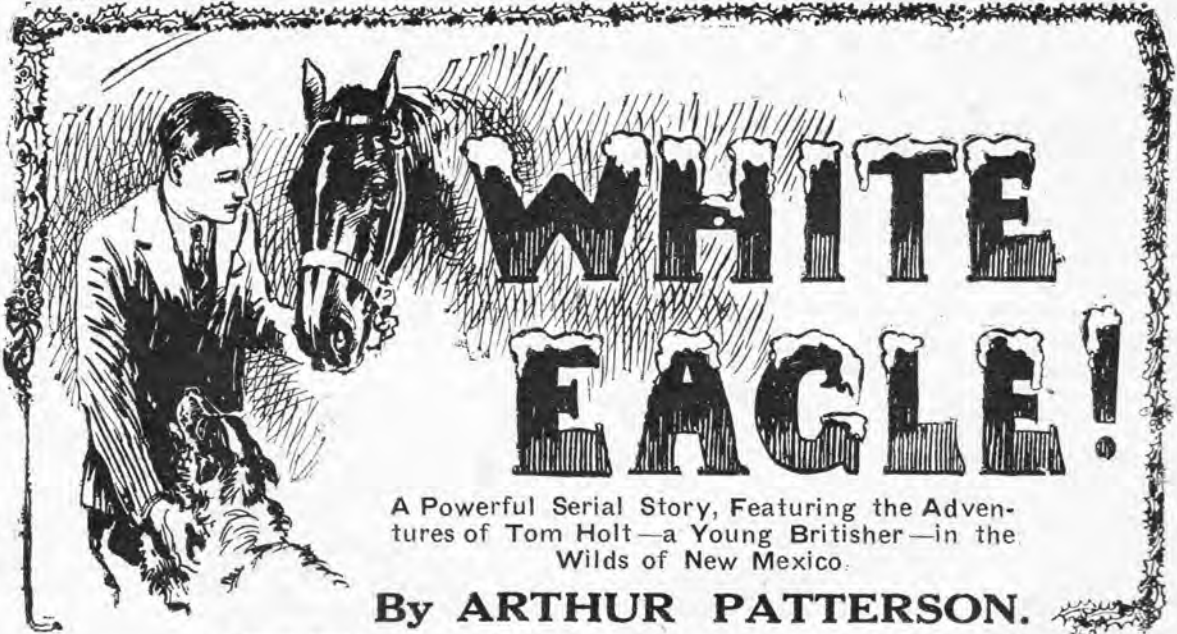
Fatty Wynn, who also had a liking for Christmas pudding, seized hold of the dish as Figgins was about to pass it along.

"Hold on!" said Fatty. "If it leaves here there won't be a blessed currant on the dish by the time it gets back. I want another helping."

Trimble snorted.

(Continued on page 28.)

THE COLONEL'S GRATITUDE! It is unusual in New Mexico for white men to sit at table with Redskins, but Colonel Chapin, whose daughter has been rescued by the Indians, sinks all prejudices in a whole-hearted effort to show his gratitude!



A Powerful Serial Story, Featuring the Adventures of Tom Holt—a Young Britisher—in the Wilds of New Mexico.

By **ARTHUR PATTERSON.**

Honour First!

COLONEL CHAPIN was much better acquainted with the needs of the nation than Tom was aware—or anyone else, for that matter. He carried, as we know, a warm heart under his humorous, cynical manner; and though, of course, the colonel had no sympathy at all with Tom's purpose of bringing white and red men into brotherhood—not believing that an Apache was capable of such a thing—he felt deep compassion for the condition under which the nation lived in winter-time, when it was dependent upon the Government for food and clothing. He knew also that there were very strong reasons why it would be worth everything to the Apaches to have Tom among them then in the reservation as an honorary chief in the tribe, and that Tom, because of his personality, and in spite of his youth, would prove a greater friend to these Indians than he had any idea of himself, or than even Black Hawk, with all his shrewdness, could know at present.

The colonel had been dead against the plan, not only because he wanted Tom for himself, but from knowledge he possessed of the administration of the Indian agency of the Government on the one side, and of the character of Badger Head, the supreme chief of the tribe, on the other. He foresaw no end of trouble and even grave danger for Tom.

Now, however, he viewed the matter in a different light. His own influence in certain high quarters would protect Tom, and it was an obligation he owed to Black Hawk and the rest to exert such influence. But he was not at all happy over the prospect, and when the three men sat down to a late supper at Calumet he was almost as silent as Black Hawk himself.

As for Black Hawk, always taciturn, he had not a word to say to anyone to-night. He was perfectly self-possessed. Uncle Eph, whose very soul revolted in shuddering horror against the indignity and degradation of witnessing a half-naked savage occupying the place of honour at the master's table—let alone having to wait upon him—had to confess,

when he told the dreadful story in the kitchen, that no visitor Calumet had ever entertained had conducted himself with greater propriety than this little Red chief. He could handle knife, fork, and spoon; he did not spill a drop of soup. He actually used—wonder of wonders!—a napkin when he spilt some gravy once upon his bare chest. Nothing, indeed, except his appearance could be held against him. But Uncle Eph's convictions were a fixed quantity.

"Don't anyone dare tell me now dat dis ole Red fox will leave hyar, where gold and silver is layin' about, without robbin' de-kunnel! It's de natur' ob folk ob his colour to steal—horses first if dey can get 'em, or hens out of coops, an' clothes, an' any sort of valuableness! But I'm watchin'! I not close my eyes to-night! An' le' me catch his dirty fingers touchin' so much as dat fryin'-pan, I'll sure squabulate him flatter'n any pancake! Yes, seh!"

The butler was mistaken. Neither spoons nor clothes, nor even frying-pans, interested Black Hawk to-night; but if Uncle Eph had known the purpose with which the chief had accepted the invitation to Calumet, he would have been more indignant still.

When the news came to the Apache camp of the danger to Sadie, Hunks, and Malinka, Black Hawk's hunting-party volunteered to a man. This was not for Sadie's sake, but out of their love for Hunks and Tom. The rest of the Indians, however, made merry over the whole affair, Badger Head, the leading chief, being particularly sarcastic. He was inclined, indeed, to forbid the whole adventure, and Black Hawk, partly to placate him, partly from his own desire to find out all possible details about the life and homes of white men, suggested that such a service to a man of Colonel Chapin's standing might enable a way to be found into Calumet Ranch and information to be acquired which would be of great value for the raid Badger Head was planning against the settlement next year.

The chief perceived this, and, giving permission for all to be done to save the girl, instructed Black Hawk to get a full view of every part of the ranch, the best means of

WHO'S WHO IN THE STORY.

TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen, who has lived for a time amongst a tribe of Apache Indians in New Mexico.

BLACK HAWK, chief of the tribe.

WHITE CAT, his son.

COLONEL CHAPIN, a wealthy rancher.

SADIE, his daughter.

HUNKS and **MALINKA**, Tom's dog and horse respectively.

Tom soon endears himself to the Chapins and Calumet Ranch becomes his new home. But Tom doesn't forget his friends the Indians. On the contrary he does much to pull down the barriers of racial hatred that exist between the Whites and the Reds. Unknowingly, however, Tom is being used by Black Hawk to collect information about the white settlements, which the Indians plan to raid next spring. The colonel, like most of the cowboys in Serrita, has good cause to hate the Redskins, but his views change when his daughter is caught in a forest fire, for the Redskins are the first to offer their services. Sadie is saved, thanks mainly to Tom, White Cat and his Indians. The colonel, eager to show his gratitude, throws open the doors of Calumet Ranch to Black Hawk's tribe, and for the first time in the history of Serrita white men and Redskins sit down to table together.

(Now read on.)

access to it, and other matters which would facilitate robbery and arson the following spring.

Black Hawk had begun his survey as they rode in under the bright moonlight, photographing in a memory, which would forget nothing, a plan of the place; how many out-houses there were, and where they stood; the position of stables, storehouses, bunkhouses for cowboys and household staff; where cover could be taken for attack; the approximate number of men in residence who would form a garrison; and even the best method when the time came—as it always does in an Indian raid—of burning the place to the ground.

Now, as he ate his food and drank his wine in so mannerly a way—a performance he owed solely to his power of imitation, for he did just what he saw his host and Tom do and nothing more—his cold, crafty little eyes wandered round the room and counted the doors and windows, and noted how they shut or were fastened; while he calculated how many other rooms there were in the house, and meditated a cross-examination of White Cat on the subject.

But even as Black Hawk did all this, and very thoroughly, he began to feel a most curious and unexpected distaste and annoyance with the whole proceeding.

He had heard of Chapin for years past, but nothing he had heard prepared him for the reception given by the man or for the man himself. If there is one thing Indians understand it is hospitality, and the most fixed and immutable of all these principles is the responsibility a guest should feel toward the person who opens his house and his hand generously for his entertainment.

Black Hawk, having made his promise to Badger Head, was keeping it; but to betray his present host and take a part in the destruction of the home which had been opened to him in such a way was, he felt, to outrage the honour of the nation, not to mention his own.

Then a way out occurred to him. He would keep his knowledge to himself. Badger Head should be told as much as appeared necessary, but not too much, and when the time came for action—well, they would see.

This determination brought the chief great comfort; and when the colonel raised his glass and drank his guest's health the smile which broke up the dark face into strange puckers and wrinkles as Black Hawk responded was not an evil one at all.

A seed had been sown in the Apache's mind—a very small one, which might be choked by weeds before next year, but very much alive at present.

The person most depressed of all was Tom. This was partly physical. He was feeling sick with the smoke he had inhaled; his body ached all over, and he ought to have been in bed. He ate very little, and drank less, but he would not give in, and sat there and did his best to second the colonel's efforts to fittingly entertain Black Hawk, to whom he owed so much.

Tom saw clearly what the colonel had in mind when he made his promise to the men who had saved Sadie's life.

He was quite at a loss to understand why the nation should be so anxious for his presence in the reservations this coming winter, and was still more bewildered by the emphasis they now laid upon his chieftainship in the tribe; but he was too shrewd not to perceive that it was a fact, or to misunderstand the colonel's meaning and intention. At another time he would have delighted to find that he was a person of such importance, and would have been extremely flattered. But it worried him very badly; because to-night he had made the discovery that the welfare of all the Indians in the United States, and everything else connected therewith, was not worth to him the shoelace of a certain very naughty, but very repentant, small person who was now, he hoped, fast asleep in her room upstairs.

"Tom! Oh, Tom, my dear!" Sadie had cried, when, at her imperative command, he had gone up to her for a moment, after she had been put to bed. "I don't know what to say to you, so I just shan't say anything. But come here!" And then she had thrown her arms about his neck and held him very closely.

"Do you know," she whispered, kissing him, "I was conscious all the time when you came through that barrage of fire. Guess it would take more smoke than that to make me faint. I was only too heavy to speak, that was all. I was just too happy, too. Tom"—she clutched his hand, and he felt her lips were hot and dry as she kissed him once again—"I saw, as I lay there, everything that happened. It was sort of like being in a trance, or something. There were you and White Cat—dear little White Cat, I could almost kiss him; no, not quite—both of you riding and riding nearer and nearer, and making howly noises whenever Hunks barked. I knew father was following with all the boys, and I knew Black Hawk and the dear Indians were fighting that fire, and my sweetest old Hunky-Hunks was keeping away all those creepy animals, poor things, and Malinka sheltering me. But, oh, Tom, I did want you so badly, and I began to call you—not out loud, you know, but just to myself.

"And all of a sudden Hunks began to bark in quite a different way, and I knew you were coming to my rescue. And then I saw you. Oh, my dear!" Tom felt her arms tighten. "Tom! Say, Tom, you must never leave me; never let me be away alone from you! Something tells me that if we are parted we may never see each other again. We mustn't be parted, Tom. I have no one in the world but you and dad. I love daddy—you know how much. But now—now, oh"—her voice sank to the lowest whisper—"I love you most, Tom!"

Then she had let him go, given herself a firm little shake; said "Good-night!" rather sharply, and turned her face away; and he had gone downstairs in a dream.

She was a child, though not all a child. He was only just over seventeen. What did that matter? She wanted him—needed him. He wanted nothing in the whole wide world but her. The colonel might say what he pleased to-morrow; White Cat and Black Hawk might pray on their bended knees; they would not get him to go. He belonged to Sadie, and Sadie belonged to him. The Apache nation and his chieftainship and everything else could go hang!

The Trespasser!

THE first person out of bed at Calumet next morning was Hunks. It was his usual habit. He had learnt it in the mountains, where the best hunting is done before dawn, which in summer-time is from three-thirty to four o'clock a.m. After the first night he had refused to sleep with Malinka in the stable, and during the first stages of Tom's illness he took up a strategic position under the bed, from which no one had the heart to move him.

He would come out for food when Sadie called him; and when he was well assured that he would not be banished he went for walks with her. But until Tom was convalescent Hunks slept nowhere but with him. Then he took to sleeping at the corral, in a spot only known to himself. But the walks with Sadie were continued regularly until they became a fixed habit.

The knowledge of his master's feeling for the girl entered Hunks' shrewd brain very soon; and Sadie, for her own sake, became very dear to the pup. It was because of this love that he accompanied her upon the excursion to the fire.

Hunks did not expect to find anyone about this morning. White Cat, who was the only person who rose at such an hour, was not at the ranch. He had returned with Black Hawk and the rest of the party to the Indian camp after supper. The chief had been pressed by the colonel to stay the night, but he had refused, giving as a reason that it was not customary for Apaches to be absent from their camp when the head chief was there.

This was true. But it was not the reason why Black Hawk went back. He knew Badger Head would expect a report in regard to Calumet as an enemy stronghold at once, and he wanted to make this report before he could be expected to have examined the ranch by daylight.

Hunks stretched himself four times—once for each limb—and tenderly examined two of his feet which had suffered from the hot grass. This examination made him determine that he would do no more than hunt a water-rat or two near the river-side, and he was about to betake himself there when he became aware of a peculiar smell. He drew himself stiffly together and shrank under cover.

He was standing behind the wall of a disused corral, in the corner of which he had burrowed a hole for sleeping purposes, just as one of his father's ancestors would have done a century or more ago. He could not see anything, and there was nothing to be heard at all, but Hunks' first sniff had told him that on the other side of that wall was a man, and the second sniff that the man was an Apache whom he did not know. Now Hunks, out of his personal experience, liked Indians, but he was a dog of the Western Plains, which means that he never trusted people until he was used to them. Therefore he did not discover himself, but, crouching closely to the wall of the corral, listened.

The stranger was pacing softly along the other side, and Hunks came to the conclusion that he, also, was concealing himself. Now this was queer. There was no reason why any Apache should be afraid of white men. Something was wrong about this Indian. He was playing the spy! Hunks' Western-bred intelligence knew that such conduct was a gross breach of courtesy at any ranch, and at the same time his bulldog blood rose against a trespasser of any kind.

(Who is this trespasser, and will Hunks be clever enough to "arrest" him? Mind you read the continuation of this fine story in next week's GEM.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 984.

THE SECRET OF THE HUNDRED STEPS!

(Continued from page 25.)

"Yah!" he exclaimed. "You get on with your rotten theorising!"

Fatty Wynn crimsoned. He hated to think that Trimble of all people had a "pull" over him, and he certainly had in the matter of that theory. Only in three things had he been near the mark in that theory of his; namely, that Kerr and Wildrake had been kidnapped because they had discovered something at the cave at the foot of the cliffs, that the secret document written by Montague Hawk before he had a chance of testing it supplied the motive of the ghost walking, and lastly that Wintringham desired to know the key-word.

This latter belief had been confirmed when Wintringham, interrogated by the police, admitted that he knew his late master was working on a translation of the Egyptian characters on the steps; that he had overheard Montague Hawk discussing the document with Dr. Munroe before the last four characters had been translated. And it transpired that the doctor had offered Wintringham a tempting sum of money should he ever discover what that key-word was while he was in the employ of Malcolm Wildrake. But the news of Dr. Munroe's rascality had come as just as great a shock to Wintringham as it had to the rest of the inhabitants of Murraburth.

The whole affair caused a nine days' wonder, for the climax was an astonishing one.

Sharp at three o'clock that day the relatives of Montague Hawk were present to see the opening of their ancestor's tomb. Tom Merry & Co. were keenly interested in what went on. But their hopes were dashed to the ground, as also were the hopes of the old buccancer's relatives when, after a lengthy inspection of the tomb, it was pronounced to contain nothing more valuable than the rotting bones

of one who was once a terror to all peaceful merchantmen. But there was ample evidence that the tomb had been disturbed in the years gone by, and doubtless the treasure had gone with the disturber, if ever it had existed. But who he was, when he lived, could only be left to conjecture.

"And that's the end of that yarn," drawled Nunks, as the juniors went back to the warmth and shelter of the cosy library. "To think that a man with Dr. Munroe's capabilities should run his neck into a noose for something that didn't exist! It sure beats me!"

"An' me, too," growled Buck. "But some folks'd kill their own grandmother for a bit o' money."

"Let's forget these unpleasant things," said Nunks.

And forget them Tom Merry & Co. did. Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Boxing Day had been anything but Christmasy, but Nunks and Buck went "all out" to make the remainder of the chums of St. Jim's stay with them something to be remembered.

When it came to saying "good-bye" there were regrets on both sides, for Tom Merry & Co. had had the time of their lives, and Nunks and Buck appeared years younger than they actually were in the healthy, boisterous company of their young guests. But as Monty Lowther sagely remarked: "Everything comes to an end at last, even the Christmas vac."

To which Kerr had added:

"And even the legend of Drere Manor."

For a moment the chums were silent. The tragic side of their holiday came home to them. But it was hard to nurse any solemn feelings for long on that fine crisp morning. As the car containing the party hummed down the drive the juniors looked back at the grand old house, towering in a massive pile against a blue sky, waved their caps to Nunks and Buck who stood, two picturesque figures on the steps, and gave them a lusty cheer.

Its notes had hardly died away when Buck and Nunks, whipping out their revolvers, fired a salvo into the air in honour of their departing guests. Then when the car was lost to sight the two rascals turned back into the library to discuss anew the thrilling adventures of their first Christmas in England, with the ghost of Drere Manor!

(Mind you read "OUT FOR TROUBLE!"—next week's grand extra long complete story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's, which introduces Knox minor!)

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