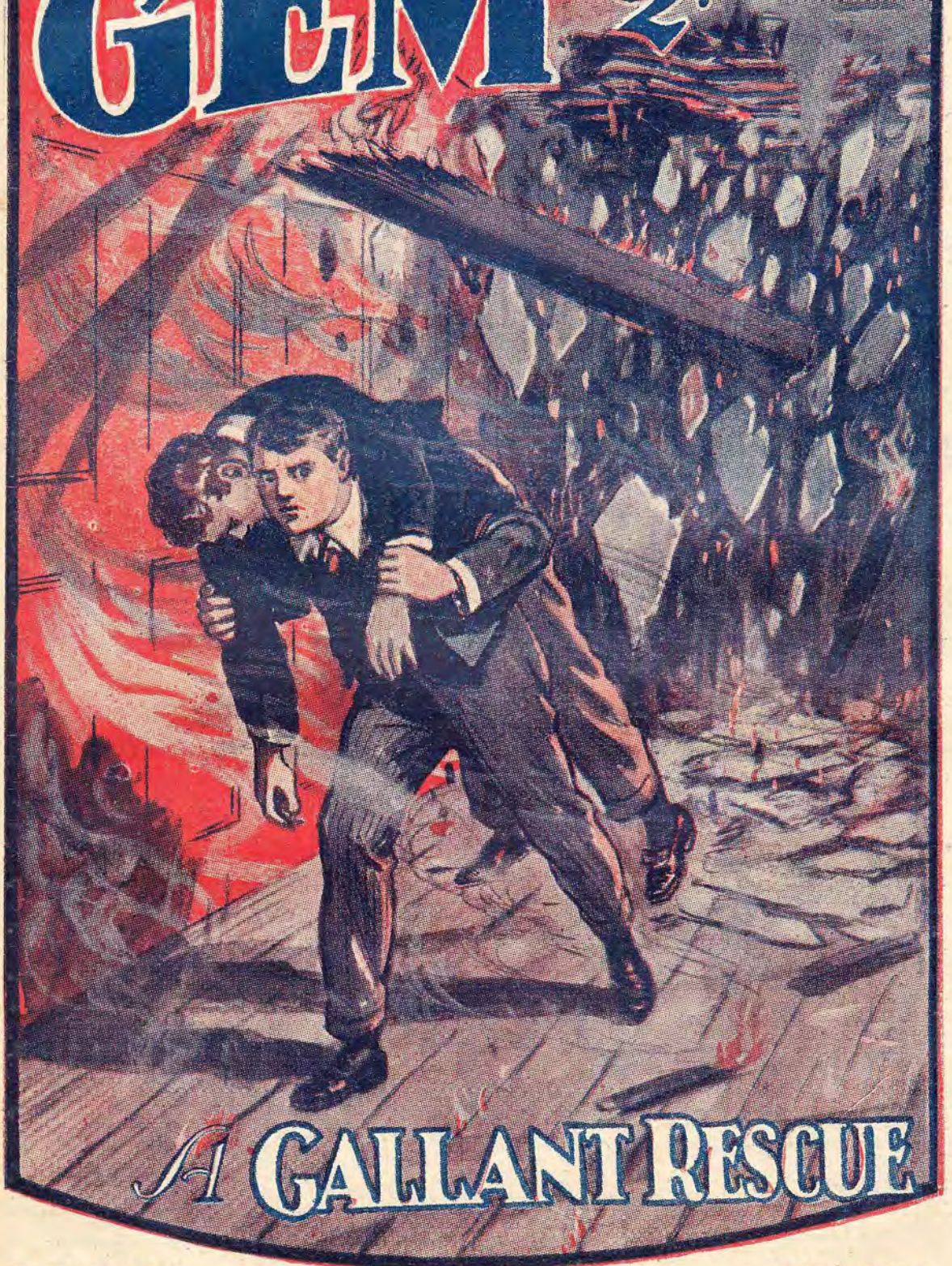


"THE RETURN OF THE WOLF!"

This Week's Enthralling Story of Tom
Merry & Co., of St. Jim's.

THE GEM 2^d

EVERY
WEDNESDAY.



A GALLANT RESCUE

THERE ARE THRILLS FROM START TO FINISH IN—

The Return of the WOLF!

by Martin Clifford



Cunning—ruthlessness—treachery—there's precious little the Wolf and his followers would stop short of to gain their ends. But British pluck and resource are a match for them at every turn!

CHAPTER 1.

At Llanfellyn Towers!

LOOKS like more snow, you chaps!"

Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell at St. Jim's, made that remark.

There was a chorus of agreement and satisfaction from his companions.

"Good egg!"

"What-ho! The more the merrier!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry was tramping through the grounds of Llanfellyn Towers, together with his two chums, Manners and Lowther, and Talbot of the Shell, and Blake & Co., and Levison of the Fourth. The ground was deep in snow already, and the silent, leafless trees were heavily burdened with it. But, as Tom had said, from the look of the sky in the early wintry dusk, it looked as though more snow was coming.

Llanfellyn Towers, where the juniors were spending Christmas with Sir Napier Wynter, an uncle of Eric Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, was situated in the wilds of the Welsh mountains. Glittering hillsides and far-off white peaks surrounded the old house and its grounds. Through the trees ahead of them could be seen the gables

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and towers of the picturesque old house, roofed with gleaming whiteness.

The School House juniors were returning for tea through the deepening dusk, after a ramble on the mountainside.

Their cheeks were aglow, their breath steaming in the cold air, as they crossed the park in the direction of the big old mansion.

Even as Tom Merry spoke, a few heavy white flakes came falling slowly through the dusk.

"Here it comes!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Talk about an old-fashioned Christmas—"

"If it falls heavily enough to-night, it'll make up for all the snow Gussy swallowed tobogganing this morning!" chuckled Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, adjusted his celebrated monocle and surveyed Jack Blake very frostily.

It was true that Arthur Augustus had swallowed quite a lot of snow that morning, whilst endeavouring to show his chums the best way of managing a toboggan—for somehow Arthur Augustus' toboggan had declined to be managed and had deposited the swell of St. Jim's face down in a snowdrift! But Arthur Augustus did not like being reminded of that fact—it was still rather a sore point!

"Weally, Blake! I have already pointed out that there

—THIS GRAND STORY OF THE ST. JIM'S CHUMS.

must have been somethin' w'ong with that toboggan. There is no othah way of accountin' for its ovahturnin' in that extwaordinawy mannah—

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see anythin' whatever to cackle at! I might have been sewiously injured. The wunnahs of that toboggan must have been out of twue—"

"You looked out of true, anyway, Gussy, old hoss, when you crawled out of that snowdrift," grinned Monty Lowther. "My hat! I've never seen the girls laugh so much—"

Arthur Augustus went very pink.

"Weally, Lowthah! Though I would not say a word against the gals, I considah that their mewwiment was wathah out of place—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look heah, you gwinin' boundahs!" snorted the swell of St. Jim's hotly.

But the "dear boys" only chuckled the more, and Arthur Augustus relapsed into an indignant silence with a sniff, as the little party tramped on towards the house.

It was still two days off Christmas—to-morrow night would be Christmas Eve. Though the St. Jim's party had only been at Llanfellyn Towers a few days, there had been exciting happenings since their arrival.

Llanfellyn Towers had been besieged by a band of South American desperadoes—a gang of scoundrels under the

who had held, and were still holding, trusted positions under President Garcia of Riogway.

As yet Sir Napier had been unsuccessful in his efforts to decode the contents of this paper, and his enemies had been determined to get hold of it before he succeeded in solving its secret, so that he would not be able to carry out his intention of informing the Riogwayan Government of the names of the traitors. But the band of desperate scoundrels had been beaten, after a thrilling time for the juniors, thanks to the desperate fight put up by Sir Napier and the St. Jim's party. But Digby, with his arm in a sling, and Manners, with a limp caused by a bullet wound in the leg, still witnessed visibly to the desperate struggle that had raged at the lonely house.

Since then, however, the South American revolutionaries had disappeared completely from the neighbourhood, and the St. Jim's juniors felt convinced that they had gone for good, having given up all hope of gaining possession of the fateful paper.

And with that conviction in their minds the party at Llanfellyn Towers, which included Cousin Ethel & Co., of Spalding Hall, the juniors' girl chums, had settled down to enjoy their Christmas with high spirits!

"A pity your cousin had to buzz off home," remarked Tom Merry to Ernest Levison, as the juniors approached the broad snow-covered terrace at the side of the house.

Levison nodded.

"Yes, rather."

Levison of the Fourth had arrived at Llanfellyn Towers, together with his sister Doris and Ethel Cleveland and Lady Peggy Brooke, in an aeroplane belonging to an airman cousin of his—turning up, unexpectedly enough, in the middle of the attack on the house by the South Americans. Afterwards they had been only too delighted to accept Sir Napier's warm invitation to stay on and spend Christmas with the party. But Levison's airman cousin



leadership of a villain known as the Wolf. Their object had been to gain possession of a secret paper that was hidden at Llanfellyn Towers—a paper that Sir Napier Wynter had brought to England from Riogway—a turbulent South American Republic, where he had put down a dangerous revolution on behalf of the Riogwayan Government.

This important document contained, written in code, the names of the secret instigators of the revolution—traitors

CHAPTER 2.

Gussy's Ghost Story!

had been recalled home owing to the unexpected arrival of his father from abroad.

The juniors tramped up on to the terrace. As they did so the french windows of the library opened, and the tall figure of Sir Napier Wynter appeared, followed by Eric Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's.

"So here you are!" exclaimed Sir Napier smilingly. "Just back in time for tea!"

"Rather, sir," grinned Manners.

The thought of tea was a very pleasant one indeed to the juniors, after their long tramp.

"I have a message for everybody," went on Sir Napier. "That fellow Jackson has telegraphed from Liverpool, wishing us all a merry Christmas. He sails for Canada to-night."

"Good luck to him!" exclaimed Talbot.

"Heah, heah!"

Jackson had been the only English member of the gang of scoundrels who had attacked the house in search of Sir Napier's hidden paper. But he had come over to their side in the end, rather than help the South Americans against his own countrymen, and Sir Napier had rewarded him by providing him with sufficient money to start an honest life in Canada.

"Any news from the hospital, sir?" asked Tom Merry quietly.

Sir Napier frowned.

"Yes; not good, I am afraid. Broom is still unconscious—delirious, poor chap."

Broom was the old butler of the Towers. He had been badly knocked out by the revolutionary gang, and ever since had been lying delirious. By the doctor's orders he had now been transferred to the hospital at Whilyn.

There was an additional reason, as well as their deep sympathy for the old man, why Sir Napier, Kildare, and the juniors were anxious for the manservant's quick recovery.

Broom was the only person who knew the whereabouts of a certain secret panel at the Towers. Behind that panel lay hidden the fateful paper with which the old butler had been entrusted by Sir Napier, and which the South Americans had been trying to get possession of so desperately. Until Broom recovered his senses, the whereabouts of that paper seemed likely to remain a mystery.

Though they had searched the house from cellars to attics, Sir Napier and his guests had been utterly unable to locate the secret panel which they knew to exist.

"What about having another look for it to-night?" suggested Kildare, glancing at his uncle.

Sir Napier shrugged.

"I am afraid it is hopeless for us to search any more, Eric," he answered, shaking his head. "We have already ransacked the house from top to bottom. No, I think we may as well save wasting our time, and wait till poor Broom recovers his senses, and can tell us where this secret panel is. I have asked the hospital to telephone to me at once when he recovers consciousness, of course."

"Well, we can afford to wait now, I suppose, sir," said Reginald Talbot. "Now that the Wolf and his ruffians have made themselves scarce, I suppose there's no urgent hurry about finding that paper and getting it decoded? It seems clear enough that the Wolf has given up all thoughts of being able to get hold of it."

From somewhere in the house the deep tones of a gong could be heard. Tea was evidently ready. The juniors turned towards the garden door that opened on to the terrace, and tramped cheerfully into the house, whilst Sir Napier and Kildare turned back into the library.

There was a frown on the tanned face of Sir Napier Wynter.

"What's up, uncle?" inquired Kildare quietly.

"I was only wondering if what Talbot said was true," answered Sir Napier slowly. "It certainly looks as if the Wolf and his scoundrels have given up all idea of gaining possession of that paper, and have left the neighbourhood—perhaps the country—by now for good. But—well, he is a determined villain, is the Wolf!"

"You mean, you think there's a chance he may have another shot at getting his hands on that hidden paper?" breathed Kildare, his face suddenly startled.

Sir Napier shrugged.

"Who knows?" he said quietly.

He clapped a hand on to his nephew's shoulder.

"But we won't meet trouble half-way, Eric! I shall certainly not breathe a word to the youngsters, and still more certainly not to the girls, that I think there is so much as the faintest chance that the Wolf may return. Probably he won't, so why spoil the festive season with groundless fears?"

Kildare nodded.

But there was a faint frown upon the handsome face of the captain of St. Jim's, as he followed his uncle from the library into the firelit hall.

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"I WILL begin now, deah boys—"

"Good egg!"

"File in, Gussy!"

"Certainly, deah boys! I am just about to begin!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy adjusted his eyeglass in his noble eye and beamed round at the assembled company.

It was after dinner that night, and Sir Napier Wynter and his guests were gathered round the big old fireplace in the panelled hall. The light from the flaming log-fire cast rosy gleams and dancing shadows over the walls, lighting up the faces of the juniors and their three girl chums, gleaming on the suits of armour and the great oil paintings. The electric lights had been put out, so that only the cheery glow from the fire illuminated the cosy scene.

Outside, snow was falling thickly, deepening every minute the smooth white drifts in the great park surrounding the old mansion.

Tom Merry tossed another log on to the fire, sending a shower of sparks up the wide mouth of the huge, old-fashioned chimney.

"Carry on, Gussy!"

"Wight-ho!"

Arthur Augustus had promised to tell a ghost story. Whether the juniors expected to be thrilled, or whether they merely expected to be amused by Gussy's ghost story, was perhaps not quite certain. But Arthur Augustus, at any rate, was quite certain.

He intended to thrill his audience thoroughly.

It was certainly an ideal place in which to tell a ghost story. The firelit hall of Llanfellyn Towers, with snow falling in eerie silence outside, and the glowing flames from the burning logs within, was as good a setting for his narrative as the swell of St. Jim's could have wished for.

"Fire away, Gussy!" urged Blake.

"I am just about to begin, deah boy!" said Arthur Augustus, glancing, however, in rather a doubtful way at the girls. "You are quite suah you gals will not be frightened?"

Ethel laughed. Like Doris and Lady Peggy, Cousin Ethel was looking very pretty and charming in her evening frock, where she sat at her cousin's side.

"Oh, no! I don't think we are likely to be frightened."

"It is wathah a weird and cweeepy stow that I was thinkin' of tellin'," said the swell of St. Jim's, with a shake of his noble head. "If you gals would sooner not heah it, aftah all, I will take the chaps into the libwawy, and tell it to them alone—"

"Oh, please let us hear it, too!" broke in Doris Levison gravely, though her eyes were twinkling. "We promise not to be frightened."

"Well, if you do feel fwrightened, deah gals, just say so, and I will stop at once," promised Arthur Augustus kindly.

"Oh, certainly!" smiled Ethel.

"You weally feel quite suah—"

"Oh, do get on with the giddy ghost story!" sighed Lady Peggy. "I'll jolly well tell one myself if you don't buck up, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove! Vewy well!"

Arthur Augustus coughed, polished his eyeglass very carefully with a silk handkerchief, replaced it in his eye, and coughed again.

"Got a cold?" inquired Monty Lowther innocently.

Arthur Augustus frowned at him.

"No, deah boy, of course not! I was meahly coughin' to deah my voice. I will now begin—"

"Good!" grinned Levison. "Let's have it!"

"Weally, Levison! You intewwupted me, deah boy, when I was just goin' to begin—"

"Sorry!"

"Buck up, Gussy!" urged Herries. "Get on with the washing, old boss!"

"Weally, Hewwies! I must pwotest against these intewwptions—"

"Sorry. Carry on!"

"I am twyin' to cawwy on!" snapped the swell of St. Jim's indignantly.

"Well, why don't you?" inquired Herries innocently.

"I am just beginnin'!" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"Are you?" ejaculated Herries in astonishment. "I can't say I've heard a word of your ghost story yet—"

"I will now begin—"

"Oh, good!"

"Weally, Hewwies! I will now begin—"

"You keep on saying that, you know," murmured Lady Peggy thoughtfully.

The juniors chuckled. Arthur Augustus glared at them, and coughed.

"Hem! I will now begin—" He broke off hastily.

"I mean, heah goes!"

"He will now begin," explained Blake gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look!" yelled Tom Merry. With a faint creak, a small square of the panelling beside the fireplace opened inwards, revealing a black cavity in the wall.



"Look heah, Blake——"

"Not begun yet, after all?" queried Lady Peggy.

"N-no!" gasped Arthur Augustus, turning decidedly pink. "Heah goes! I will now beg——" He checked himself hastily. "It was Chwistmas Eve!"

Arthur Augustus had evidently begun at last. He glanced round the ring of firelit faces, pausing impressively.

"Yaas," he repeated in a thrilling tone, "it was Chwistmas Eve——"

"What was?" inquired Monty Lowther in a puzzled tone. "Eh?"

"You say it was Christmas Eve, old chap," said Lowther blandly. "What was?"

"It" was!" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"It?" queried Monty Lowther, apparently more bewildered than ever.

"Yaas!" snorted the swell of St. Jim's. "It was Chwistmas Eve! That is to say, Chwistmas Eve was——er——it, if you gathah my meanin'——"

"Blowed if I do!" confessed Lowther.

"Shut up, Monty!" chuckled Tom Merry. "Carry on, Gussy! It was Christmas Eve——"

"Chwistmas Eve, and the snow was fallin' thickah and thickah ewwy moment! Thickah end thickah and thickah——"

"As thick as that?" murmured Manners.

"And the wind, deah boys, was howlin' and wailin' woud an old house in Kent——wailin' howwibly! It was the house of Jaspah Flint, the misah!"

Arthur Augustus paused, glancing round to see the effect of this startling piece of information upon his listeners.

"Jaspah Flint, the misah, was a wick old wascal, with quids and quids hidden away in the collahs; but he nevah spent a pennay if he could help it, and on this Chwistmas Eve——"

"Which Christmas Eve?" asked Levison innocently.

"The Chwistmas Eve I'm tellin' you about!" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"Which one's that, old chap?"

"It doesn't mattah!"

"Oh, doesn't it? All right; I was only wondering. Carry on."

The juniors chuckled. Arthur Augustus snorted and continued his thrilling narrative.

"Jaspah Flint, the misah, was huddled ovah a candle to keep himself warm. He was all alone in the house: for he

kept no servants, bein' a misah, although he was weally vewy wick——"

"Very which?" queried Digby.

"Vewy wick!"

"Yes, that's what I'm asking," nodded Digby. "Very which?"

"Vewy wealthay!" snapped Arthur Augustus. "He cwouched ovah his candle, listenin' to the wailin' of the wind woud the house. Suddenly he heard a sound——footsteps were comin' up the stiahs to his woom!"

Arthur Augustus cast an anxious glance at the three girls.

"You are not feelin' nervous, deah gals?"

"Not at all," smiled Ethel.

"Carry on!" urged Lady Peggy. "What were the footsteps? The giddy ghost's?"

Arthur Augustus looked decidedly disconcerted.

"Well, yaas—as a mattah of fact, they were!"

"Well, what happened?"

"The ghost appeahed in the doorway—a howwid spectah with a gween face and bulgin' eyes——"

"Must have looked like Baggy after a feed!" grinned Blake.

Baggy Trimble, the Falstaff of the Fourth, who was sprawled in a chair beside the hearth, glared at Blake indignantly.

"Oh, really, Blake——"

"And the spectah cwied in sepulchwal tones, 'Jaspah Flint, the hour has stuwck! You have for yeahs been a wicked wascal and a misewable misah! You have gwound down widows and orphans to wob them of their monay——'"

Arthur Augustus got no further.

In the excitement of telling his story the swell of St. Jim's had flung out a gesticulating arm. The next moment he had lost his balance completely, and Arthur Augustus and the chair went over backwards with a crash.

"Oh! Bai Jove! Yooooop——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter from the juniors.

But then their laughter died away abruptly.

A startling thing had happened. In falling, the swell of Jim's chair had struck the heavy carving that flanked the great fireplace, and—as they all realised a moment later—in so doing must have released a secret spring. With a faint creak, a small square of the panelling beside the fire-

place had opened inwards, revealing a black cavity in the wall.

"Look!" yelled Tom Merry.

"My hat!"

"The secret panel!" cried Eric Kildare.

From Sir Napier Wynter there broke a breathless exclamation.

By absolute chance they had discovered at last the whereabouts of the secret panel, behind which, as they knew, was hidden the fateful paper that they had searched for so long in vain!

CHAPTER 3.

Found!

"O W! Oh! Oh deah!"

Arthur Augustus scrambled breathlessly to his feet.

As yet the swell of St. Jim's did not realise what had happened. So far he had not noticed the opening in the wall beside him. He adjusted his monocle and gasped.

"Oh deah! I—I fell ovah—"

"Go hon!" grinned Blake, seizing him by the arm. Blake, like everyone else, was on his feet. "Look, Gussy! It was a rotten ghost story—but it's been useful, after all!"

The swell of St. Jim's stared in the direction of Blake's excitedly pointing finger, and jumped as he saw the dark square opening beside the fireplace, round which the others were eagerly crowding.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

And in a moment even the swell of St. Jim's had quite forgotten about the startling adventure of Jasper Flint, the miser, on Christmas Eve.

Already Kildare had switched on the electric lights. Sir Napier stooped and peered into the opening.

"Gad!" he ejaculated. "This is a slice of luck! We should never have found this secret panel in a month of Sundays—"

"Is the paper there, sir?" cried Talbot.

"Yes!"

And Sir Napier reached in and took out of the dark cavity a small folded paper—the paper that contained, in code, the secret of the identity of the traitors who had aided the Wolf in his revolution against President Garcia in far-off Rioguary.

There was an exclamation of quiet satisfaction from Kildare's uncle as he unfolded the paper and held it to the light.

"Yes, this is it right enough!"

"Hurrah!"

There was an excited cheer from the juniors. Lady Peggy, her pretty red hair gleaming in the firelight, drew a deep breath.

"How ripping!" she gasped.

Kildare was examining the carving beside the hearth. He pressed the knob which the swell of St. Jim's chair had evidently struck. With a faint creak, the open square of panelling swung back into place. He pressed it again, and it opened once more.

"Simple enough!" said the captain of St. Jim's laconically. "But difficult to find when you don't know where it is—as we've learnt for ourselves!"

Sir Napier glanced round at the others with gleaming eyes.

"This is splendid!" he exclaimed. "Now this paper is in my hands again, I shall not rest till I have succeeded in decoding these names upon it, and cabled them to Rioguary. Eric, come with me into the library, and we will see what we can do. Once we can tumble to the key of the code—"

"We'll help you, sir, too!" cried Tom Merry eagerly.

"Rather!"

Sir Napier smiled.

"Good! Perhaps one of you youngsters may tumble to the secret of the code where I have failed for so long."

In an excited group the juniors and the three girls followed Kildare and his uncle to the library. A bright fire was burning there.

They all gathered round the big table in the middle of the room.

"Here is the first name in code—just an apparently meaningless jumble of letters," muttered Sir Napier. "Can anyone make sense of this?"

He read out the first collection of letters—MEFG, KIWGMRRMYD.

"Sounds like double-Dutch to me," said Kildare, with a shrug.

"But it means something, nevertheless," said his uncle grimly. "If only we could discover the secret of the code, we should find that those jumbled letters spell, actually, the name of a man—the name of one of the treacherous hounds in the service of the President of Rioguary who have plotted to overthrow law and order there and set up that scoundrel known as the Wolf as president in the place of President Garcia."

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He stared at the paper, with knitted brows.

"There are more letter M's than anything," said Manners thoughtfully. "Perhaps that stands for E, since that's the most common letter in English—"

"Unfortunately, this is Spanish," Sir Napier reminded him.

"What's the next name, sir?" asked Reginald Talbot.

"XECGSD, WIYZKLN," read Kildare's uncle.

"My hat! That's a worse one than the first!" grinned Levison.

"Sounds like Russian, or something!" chuckled Digby.

"It certainly seems terribly puzzling," said Cousin Ethel in an almost hopeless tone.

"My hat, yes," agreed Lady Peggy.

For a long while they discussed the mysterious jumbled letters, searching vainly for a meaning in them.

But at last the girls went up to bed, and soon afterwards the juniors followed, leaving Kildare and his uncle seated at the table with pencils and paper, still puzzling over the precious document.

"Seems to me that gang of South Americans needn't have been so jolly eager to get hold of that paper and destroy it," grunted Blake, as the juniors ascended the wide staircase from the firelit hall. "Looks to me as if those giddy names will never be decoded!"

"Oh, rot!" laughed Tom Merry. "If they mean anything—and we know they do—it's possible to solve the code sooner or later."

"By the way, deah boys," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, as they reached the top of the stairs, "I nevah finished tellin' the thwillin' stow of Jaspah Flint, the misah. If you care to come along to my woom I will tell you the west of it. It is feahfullay thwillin'—"

"Oh, rats!" grinned Levison.

"Bai Jove! Weally, Levison—"

"That's all right, Gussy!" chuckled Monty Lowther, patting the swell of St. Jim's on the shoulder. "We should only have nightmares, you know, if you finished your thrilling story—"

"Yaas, that's so, deah boy," nodded Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "I had bettah not finish the stow, pewwaps. It would be wotten if it made you dweam of Jaspah Flint the misah, and the spectah—"

"Oh, it's not that I'm afraid of, old chap!" explained Lowther gravely. "I was thinking it might make us dream of you—and that's the worst nightmare I can think of."

"Bai Jove! You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the juniors, chuckling, dispersed to their rooms, leaving the swell of St. Jim's snorting with indignation.

But even though Gussy's story had failed to thrill his fellow juniors, Arthur Augustus had at any rate the satisfaction of knowing that it had not been told in vain.

For, after all, it had been thanks to Jasper Flint, the miser, that the precious document hidden at Llanfellyn Towers had at last been brought to light!

In the room he was sharing with Monty Lowther, Tom Merry went to the window and drew back the curtain, staring out into the night.

Snow was still falling thickly, swirling down in ghostly clouds, piling thicker and thicker on the window-sill and on the silent trees in the park.

He let the curtain fall back into place, and crossed to the cheerful fire that was burning in the grate. Monty Lowther, seated on a chair by the fire unfastening his shoes, glanced up curiously at the captain of the Shell's thoughtfully frowning face.

"Penny for 'em, old hoss!" grinned Lowther.

Tom shrugged.

"I was only wondering," he said slowly, "if we're right in thinking that the Wolf has given up all idea of getting hold of the paper and destroying it before it can be decoded."

"Oh, rats!" retorted Lowther carelessly. "Don't you worry about the Wolf—we shan't see him back at Llanfellyn Towers again!"

Tom did not answer as he began to undress in the glow of the fire.

But in his heart Tom was very doubtful—as Sir Napier Wynter himself had confessed to Eric Kildare to feeling doubtful—that they had yet seen the last of the Wolf and his band of revolutionaries!

CHAPTER 4.

A Shock for Two!

"READY, you chaps?"

"All serene!"

"Good! Come on, then!"

And Jack Blake softly opened the door of his bed-room and peered out into the passage.

"All clear! Come on!"

"Mind how you carry the giddy ghost——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With soft chuckles, Blake, Herries, Digby, and Ernest Levison stepped out into the passage.

They were clad in pyjamas and dressing-gowns.

Blake was carrying a weird and wonderful object—the home-made "ghost" with which they had planned to jape Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Baggy Trimble, who were sharing a room at the end of the passage.

The "ghost" consisted of a broom topped with a large pumpkin and draped with a sheet. A stick tied across the broom gave the impression of arms, with the sheet draped over it all; and the pumpkin, with holes cut for eyes and mouth, and an electric torch fastened inside, made as frightening a face as any spectre could have desired!

Carrying the "ghost" very carefully, Blake crept along the passage towards the end room, with Digby, Herries, and Levison at his heels.

They halted outside the door, listening. Blake grinned.

From within came a sound something like the grunting of a pig. It was Baggy Trimble snoring.

"Carry on!" grinned Levison. "Gussy's keen on spooks—we'll let him see one."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"S-sh!" muttered Herries. "They'll hear you!"

He opened the door silently and peered into the room.

A dying fire lit the room dimly. The sleeping figures of Baggy Trimble and the swell of St. Jim's could be seen in the two beds. Blake and his grinning companions stepped into the room.

With the lusty snores of Baggy Trimble filling the room, it was very unlikely that their faint footsteps on the floor would disturb the two sleeping juniors. But it was with very careful steps that they crossed towards the beds.

Their idea was to fix it to the bed-rail of the swell of St. Jim's bed. But their plan miscarried.

Herries, as he passed the foot of Baggy's bed, did not notice that Baggy, in his usual slovenly manner, had left his clothes lying on the floor—in great contrast to the neatly-folded garments of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy!

The next moment Herries had caught his foot in the folds of Baggy's coat.

He pitched forward with a gasp, and fell against the rail at the foot of Baggy's bed.

There was a sudden grunt from Baggy Trimble. He rolled over in his bed, opened his eyes, and sat up.

To the Falstaff of the Fourth, waking suddenly in the middle of the night in the darkened room, everything was so dim that he did not see the figures of the juniors in the gloom.

All he saw was the swaying white figure of the "ghost," and the wide, grinning mouth and glaring eyes of the lighted pumpkin.

For several seconds Baggy gazed at the apparition with fallen jaw, dumb with terror. Then a fiendish yell broke from him.

"Oh! Yaroooooough

Baggy's face was absolutely green in the firelight.

"Help!" shrieked Baggy, in a quavering voice, the beads of perspiration standing out on his fat face. "Ow! Help! It's a g-g-ghost!"

His hair was standing on end, his eyes riveted on the dimly swaying apparition.

Baggy would have given a good deal just then for the earth to have opened and swallowed him.

But he was too terrified even to dive under the bedclothes. With chattering teeth, he sat and gazed with horror at the grinning "spectre."

Even yet he had not seen the shadowy figures of Blake & Co. The light was too dim.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had opened his eyes, roused by Baggy's yells of fright. The swell of St. Jim's sat up with a jerk in bed, hastily snatching his eyeglass from the chair by his side and jamming it into his noble eye.

"Gweat Scott!"

The sight of the horrible apparition in the gloom by the foot of Baggy's bed brought a stifled exclamation from the lips of Arthur Augustus.

"B-b-bai Jove!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's. "Oh! Gweat Scott! A g-g-ghost!"

For the moment, at any rate, even the swell of St. Jim's had not realised that the apparition was actually a very solid affair indeed. In the shadowy firelight the lighted "face" of the pumpkin, with its glowing eyes and horrible, grinning mouth, waving above the dim white folds of the sheet, turned the heart of Arthur Augustus cold.

By now Digby, Herries, and Levison had dropped out of sight at the foot of the two beds. Blake, still holding the broomstick, was effectively hidden by the sheet with which the ghost was draped.

It was all the japers could do to stifle their merriment.

"The spectah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, in a strangled voice. "The spectah of Llanfellyn Towahs!"

"Rescue!" wailed Baggy. "Help! Oo-er!"

Blake took a couple of steps towards the beds. At the sight of a ghost approaching him Baggy found the use of his limbs at last.

With a wild yell he dived under the bedclothes.

But Arthur Augustus was made of sterner stuff.

His first instinct of natural terror over, the swell of St. Jim's pulled himself together.

Arthur Augustus did not believe in ghosts. Somehow, it still did not occur to him that there was a human figure hidden behind that swaying white shape with the glaring face—but he felt sure it could not be a real ghost.

To Arthur Augustus it seemed that it must be some strange illusion of his senses. At all events he meant to find out.

Springing to his feet amid the bedclothes, he hurled a pillow at the face of the apparition.

Crash!

The pumpkin went flying across the room as the pillow struck it. The broomstick, knocked violently backwards, caught Blake on the nose, and the leader of the Fourth gave a yell.

"Yow!"

Blake sat down with a bump and another yell while Arthur Augustus, gazing at his suddenly revealed figure in utter astonishment, realised in a flash the whole truth.

His face went crimson.

"B-bai Jove!" Blake, you wottah——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter from Herries, Digby, and Levison, as they jumped up. From Baggy, under the bedclothes, there came a terror-stricken groan.

To Baggy, the laughter of the japers sounded like the fiendish cackling of the denizens of another world.

"Help!" moaned Baggy, in a stifled voice. "Oh! Grooooooh! Help!"

But Arthur Augustus could not even find his voice. His wrath was too great.

The next moment he had leaped from the bed and hurled himself at the grinning figure of Jack Blake. His fist took Blake in the eye, and the leader of the Fourth went over with a yell.

"Oh! Yooop!"

"Take that, you wottah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, dancing wildly in his purple-striped pyjamas. "You wotten japer——"

(Continued on next page.)



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Blake scrambled up.

"Hands off, you ass!"

"Wats!"

Again the swell of St. Jim's fist landed, this time on Blake's nose. Blake gave an angry roar and flung himself wrathfully at his indignant chum. The next moment the two were struggling together in a wild embrace.

Biff! Biff! Biff!

"Take that, you fwabjous ass!"

"Ow! Take that—"

"Chuck it, you asses!" grinned Levison; and with the aid of Herries he dragged the two apart. "Joke's over!"

"You wottahs!" panted Arthur Augustus. "I demand an apology—"

"Oh, rats!" growled Blake, massaging his swollen nose.

"I considah—"

"Br-r-r!"

"Look heah—"

Arthur Augustus broke off, very suddenly.

From the passage there had come a quick shout. Past the open door of the bed-room two figures went racing—Tom Merry and Monty Lowther.

"What the dickens!" gasped Herries.

"Where are they off to?" cried Digby.

For a moment Blake & Co. and Levison stared at one another in utter bewilderment. Then they rushed to the door and out into the passage.

From the passage leading to the north wing of the old house came the sound of the running footsteps of Tom Merry and Lowther, dying away rapidly in the distance.

Why Lowther and the captain of the Shell should be racing through the dark house at midnight was a mystery that startled and bewildered the Fourth-Formers.

"There's something wrong!" cried Blake.

"Come on!" breathed Levison excitedly.

A moment later Blake, Levison, Herries, and Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were pounding down the passage in pursuit of those distant, retreating footsteps.

CHAPTER 5.

A Mystery of the Night!

"JACK!"

Blake halted abruptly as he heard his name called.

He had been racing along the passage to the north wing, with the other four bewildered Fourth-Formers, in their attempt to catch up with Tom Merry and Monty Lowther.

A door had opened, and Lady Peggy had stepped swiftly into the passage.

"Jack!" she cried again. "What's the matter? Is there something wrong? I heard somebody run past the door—"

Lady Peggy was looking very pretty in her dressing-gown, but her face was puzzled and startled.

"There's something up!" breathed Blake. "We don't know what it is—but Tom Merry and Lowther went bolting along here—"

He turned to run on, but his girl chum held his arm.

"My hat!" breathed Lady Peggy. "You don't think it's something to do with those South Americans? It can't be they've come back?"

"Oh, no—of course not!" answered Blake swiftly.

But at her words a sudden startled suspicion leapt into his mind.

What if Peggy had guessed the truth?

"I'll go and find out what's happening, Peggy," he muttered.

He ran on down the passage. At the end of it was a flight of back stairs leading down to the kitchen quarters. Levison, Herries, Digby, and the swell of St. Jim's had already vanished down them.

Blake followed. In the passage above Ethel and Doris had joined Lady Peggy, both girls looking surprised and troubled. Like Lady Peggy, they had both been awakened by the running footsteps of Tom Merry and Monty Lowther passing their door.

As Blake raced down the narrow stairs he heard a clock strike midnight somewhere in the big, rambling old mansion.

At the foot of the stairs a dim window, through which he could see the steadily-falling snow still swirling down, revealed a group of vague figures. There was the click of an electric-light switch, and Blake found that Herries and Digby Levison, and the swell of St. Jim's were gathered there, with Tom Merry and Monty Lowther.

"Tom, what on earth's up?" cried Blake swiftly.

Tom Merry glanced at the leader of the Fourth. There was an odd expression on the face of the captain of the Shell.

"I've been telling these chaps. Monty and I woke up

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at the row that was going on in Gussy's room—we sleep next door, you know. We came out to see what the rag was. And at the far end of the passage we saw a shadowy figure!"

"Great pip!"

"As soon as we appeared, the chap, whoever he was, turned and vanished in the direction of the north wing," went on Tom. "We raced after him, followed him down these stairs—and then he seemed to vanish into thin air!"

"Who on earth could it have been?" breathed Blake wonderingly.

Tom did not answer.

"You couldn't recognise him?" asked Blake.

For a moment Tom still hesitated. He glanced from face to face.

"You chaps will think I'm dreaming, of course," he said abruptly. "But both Monty and I fancied it was a familiar figure, although it was too dark for us to see his face. But his figure, as I say, seemed familiar to both of us—"

"Who was it, then, dear boy?" interjected the swell of St. Jim's in puzzled bewilderment.

"I couldn't swear to it," muttered Tom. "We aren't sure. But it looked as though it might have been—Charcas, the South American!"

"What?" gasped Levison. "Impossible!"

"Charcas!" echoed Herries, in a startled tone. "How could it have been Charcas?"

Charcas, the young South American revolutionary who had posed at St. Jim's for a while as the son of President Garcia of Riquay, had vanished from the neighbourhood of Llanfellyn Towers with the rest of the Wolf's accomplices, after their failure to gain possession of the precious paper that they had striven so desperately to get.

For Charcas to have been roaming about in the house itself to-night seemed so utterly impossible that the other juniors stared at Tom Merry and Monty Lowther with evident incredulity shown in their faces.

"Impossible!" repeated Levison. "Even if Charcas had come back in search of that paper, he couldn't have broken into the house to-night—"

"I admit it seems unlikely," nodded Tom, with a troubled frown. "But we saw someone, unless it was a ghost! Since there aren't such things as ghosts, who was it?"

"You must have imagined it," muttered Blake. "Some trick of light and shadow looked like a figure at the end of the passage—"

"Rats!" grunted Lowther. "There was someone prowling about, who bolted when we came along. That's certain!"

"But—"

There was a step on the stairs.

The tall dressing-gown-clad figure of Eric Kildare came hurrying down towards the group.

"What's wrong, kids?" exclaimed the captain of St. Jim's, glancing from face to face. "You woke me up when you sprinted past my room! Is this just a rag, or is there something wrong?"

Swiftly Tom Merry explained. The captain of St. Jim's stared at him in astonishment.

"You really mean to say you thought you saw Charcas upstairs to-night?" he ejaculated.

"Well, I don't say it was Charcas; it looked rather like him, that's all," answered Tom doubtfully. "But it was somebody. I'm sure he came down these stairs. But there's no one about down here apparently—"

"We'll soon rout him out if there is!" broke in Kildare grimly. "But half a minute—what about Talbot and Manners? And young Trimble? Perhaps it was one of them you saw—"

"Twimble's upstairs in my woom now, Kildare," put in Arthur Augustus, shivering a little in his elegant pyjamas. Unlike the others, the swell of St. Jim's was not in a dressing-gown. In the excitement, he had not had time to slip one on before leaving his bed-room.

"You'd better go upstairs and put on a dressing-gown, D'Arcy," said Kildare. "You look in to see if Talbot and Manners are in their room. Not that it seems likely that they would be sneaking about the house in the middle of the night," he added, with a thoughtful frown.

"Wight-ho!"

Arthur Augustus vanished up the stairs, and the others began a systematic search of the kitchen. But though they examined every room and cupboard, there was no sign of any midnight marauder.

Arthur Augustus had soon returned with the news that Talbot and Manners were sleeping in their room. Whoever it was that Tom and Monty Lowther had seen, it was certainly not one of the St. Jim's party, it was quite evident.

"There's no one about down here, anyway," muttered Kildare at last. "If there was, it's clear he's got away out of the house somehow." Suddenly his eyes gleamed. "By

gad! We'll soon make sure of that! His tracks in the snow will give him away!"

Kildare hurried upstairs again, and returned in a minute with a few clothes pulled over his pyjamas, and a powerful electric torch in his hand.

Opening a side door, the captain stepped out into the snow.

"Wait here, kids," he muttered, and vanished along the side of the house, his electric torch casting a vivid gleam of light on the snow that lay in smooth drifts against the wall.

After what seemed a long wait, Kildare reappeared, coming from the opposite direction. He stamped into the passage, kicking the snow from his boots.

"I've been right round the house," he said briefly. "There are no footmarks in the snow from any of the doors or windows. No one has left the house to-night."



Springing to his feet amid the bedclothes, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy hurled a pillow at the "face" of the ghostly apparition in the gloom!

"And it's pwetty certain no one is hidin' down heah now," put in Arthur Augustus, with a glance at Tom Merry. Tom shrugged.

"I suppose you think I must have been imagining it all?" he said quietly.

"Looks like it, young 'un," smiled Kildare.

"But I saw the figure, too!" broke in Monty Lowther. "I'll swear it was not imagination!"

"Then how are we to account for the fact that after a thorough search down here, we haven't found anyone in hiding, and that the lack of any footprints in the snow proves that nobody has left the house recently?" asked Kildare.

"I—I can't account for it," admitted Lowther, with a frown. "But, all the same—"

"Besides, how could anyone have been in the house at all to-night, other than ourselves?" persisted Kildare. "All the downstairs doors and windows were fastened, we know, and—"

"Then if we didn't really see anybody, all I can say is the giddy house is jolly well haunted!" exclaimed Monty Lowther impatiently.

"The house is certainly supposed to be haunted by the figure of a ghostly Crusader, as we know," smiled Kildare. "But I hardly think it's likely you and Tom Merry saw the Crusader!"

"Well, it's a blessed mystery!" said Tom Merry quietly. "But I'm beginning to think Monty and I must have been mistaken, after all, I'll admit."

"I'm sure we weren't!" persisted Monty Lowther doggedly.

But it was quite evident that neither Kildare nor the rest of the juniors could believe that he and Tom Merry had actually seen a shadowy figure in the house that night; and even Tom Merry was beginning to feel doubtful about it.

Monty Lowther did not argue further, as they made their way upstairs again, and found the three girls waiting anxiously outside their room. Kildare reassured them, and they all dispersed to their various rooms.

There was a very thoughtful look on the face of Monty Lowther as he climbed back into bed, after Tom Merry had put out the light.

Monty Lowther was still by no means convinced that he and his chum had been the victims of an illusion that night.

But even Lowther had to admit to himself that if he and Tom Merry had really seen the shadowy figure of a mysterious midnight marauder lurking in the passage, and it had not been a ghost, it had certainly vanished in an uncannily ghost-like manner!

And with that puzzling thought, Monty Lowther fell asleep.

CHAPTER 6.

Charcas Again!

"O H! Yarooooop!" Baggy Trimble awoke with a yell, to find the grinning face of Reginald Talbot above him—and in Talbot's hand was a large sponge, from which a trickle of icy water was splashing on to Baggy's fat little nose.

"O w! Stoppit, you beast!" gasped Baggy, who did not like cold water at any time, particularly not first thing in the morning.

"Well, turn out, you fat slacker!" grinned Talbot cheerily. "Brækker's nearly ready. The rest of us have been up half an hour, having a snow-fight while you've been fugging under the blankets. Show a leg, porpoise!"

"Oh, really, Talbot!"

"Hop out!"

"I—I think I'll just have five minutes' snooze, old chap," mumbled Baggy, snuggling down under the blankets, with a wary eye on the

sponge in Talbot's hand. "I—ow! Oh! Yooooop! Stoppit!"

Talbot had not answered in words. He had lifted the sponge over Baggy's face again, and squeezed an icy trickle of water from it before Baggy had time to dive under the blankets.

"Turning out?" inquired Talbot amiably.

"No!" roared Baggy. "Go and eat coke—"

"Well, if you won't come out at the top of the bed, you'll have to come out at the bottom!" grinned Talbot.

He groped under the blankets at the foot of the bed for one of Baggy's fat ankles, and grasped it, despite Baggy's frantic kicks. With a mighty heave, the muscular Shell fellow hauled Baggy Trimble out on to the floor. The Falstaff of the Fourth landed on the carpet with a bump and a yell, inextricably mixed up with sheets and blankets.

"Oh! Yarooooop!"

Baggy's wild howl rang out just as the grinning face of Tom Merry appeared in the doorway. Tom, like Reginald Talbot, had been out snowballing in the crisp air of the wintry morning, and was looking very cheerful and ruddy as he grinned into the room.

"Hallo, hallo—"

"Just helping Baggy get up," explained Talbot gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha! I see!"

Baggy scrambled to his feet, with a glare at Talbot that, if looks could kill, would have stretched that cheerful youth lifeless on the floor. Reginald Talbot chuckled, and left the room grinning, while Baggy sniffed and grunted disconsolately and shivered in the fresh morning air.

But, even so, Baggy was a few minutes late when he rolled into the dining-room for breakfast. He took his place with a sulky growl, and a glare at Talbot.

There were no servants waiting on them. The staff at Llanfellyn Towers had only just been renewed, and as yet Sir Napier had engaged no menservants. Sir Napier and his guests were thus able to discuss openly the question of the precious document that had been discovered on the previous evening.

Sir Napier confessed that though he had sat up late puzzling over the mysterious jumbled letters written upon it, he had gone to bed no nearer to the solution of the problem it presented.

"By the way, Uncle Napier," said Kildare, with a glance at Tom Merry and Monty Lowther, "a queer thing happened in the night—"

"What's that?" exclaimed the baronet sharply.

Kildare told him of what had taken place. Sir Napier glanced at Tom Merry with rather a startled gleam in his eyes.

"Gad!" he ejaculated. "You really thought you saw someone in the house?"

Tom nodded.

"Yes," he confessed. "I did. But I think now I must have been mistaken. When we examined the doors and windows downstairs it was pretty clear it was impossible for anyone to have broken in. Besides, where could he have vanished to? Kildare searched all round the house for footprints in the snow, and there weren't any."

He glanced across the table to Monty Lowther.

"What do you think, Monty?"

"Dunno what to think," answered Lowther candidly. "Last night I'd have bet my boots we hadn't been mistaken. But this morning, looking back on it, I can't feel so sure, after all!"

Despite his conviction last night, Monty Lowther, in the light of morning, had come to the same conclusion as Tom Merry—that it would have been only too easy to have imagined seeing a shadowy figure in the dimly-lit passage.

But there was a faintly worried look in Sir Napier's eyes as he rose from the breakfast table, with the meal over.

The juniors and the girls wasted no time in trooping out into the snow with their toboggans—with the exception of Baggy Trimble, who preferred to hug the fire indoors. But the rest spent the morning on the smooth, snowy slopes behind the house, and returned for lunch with their faces fairly glowing from their exertions.

In the afternoon, Kildare and his uncle again worked hard to solve the code of the mysterious document, while the juniors and Ethel & Co. enjoyed a long tramp among the mountains. Darkness had fallen by the time they got back to Llanfellyn Towers.

Sir Napier and Eric Kildare were still no nearer to solving the code; it was quite evident that it was a supremely complicated and difficult one. But they had good news in another direction, for on their return the juniors learnt that old Broom, the butler, had recovered consciousness, and was on the right way to recovery; so the hospital authorities had telephoned to Sir Napier.

After tea, Sir Napier took the precious paper from his pocket, and glanced at it, with frowning brows. Then he shrugged.

"I don't mean to be beaten by this code!" he exclaimed. "But to-night is Christmas Eve, and we'll enjoy ourselves, instead of worrying over this. I'll put it back where we found it for the time being—that secret panel is about the safest place for it, I imagine."

Accordingly, the paper was returned to the little cavity behind the movable panel in the hall, and the panel shut upon it.

After tea, the juniors and the girls danced to the gramophone until it was time to change for dinner. Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., Talbot and Levison came downstairs again looking very smart in their evening ties and waistcoats, and soon afterwards Ethel, Doris, and Lady Peggy joined them.

Baggy Trimble came rolling down the stairs last, as usual. He crossed to the fire, and dropped into a vacant chair beside Cousin Ethel—despite the fact that Arthur Augustus had been about to take it.

The swell of St. Jim's glared at him.

"Bai Jove! You have bagged my chair!"

"Plenty more, aren't there?" grinned Baggy.

Baggy knew as well as anyone that Arthur Augustus, who had a great admiration for his pretty cousin, was anxious to sit beside her.

But Baggy also enjoyed Ethel's company—even though Ethel did not, perhaps, particularly like his proximity. But she was far too kind-hearted a girl ever to show her feelings in the matter.

"Plenty more chairs, Gussy!" sniggered Baggy.

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus surveyed Baggy with feelings almost too deep for words. But it was impossible to eject Baggy from the chair in the presence of the girls.

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There was a sudden metallic sound on the floor, as if a coin had been dropped. Baggy, glancing down, saw a shining half-crown lying near his chair.

"Have you dropped a coin, Twimble?" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"My hat! Y-yes, rather!" gasped Baggy.

He made a dive for the coin. When he turned again, the swell of St. Jim's was seated elegantly in the chair beside Ethel, smiling innocently. He had one hand in his pocket.

"Bai Jove! I discovah, Twimble, that I am half-awcown short. I must have dropped that coin myself. Thanks, deah boy!"

The swell of St. Jim's held out his hand for the coin. Baggy, in the presence of the girls, dared not refuse to hand it over, since it was clear enough now that it was not his. With a furious snort, as he realised how he had been tricked by the imperturbably smiling swell of the Fourth, he gave up the half-crown, and turned away with an angry snort.

The juniors chuckled. Arthur Augustus, slipping the half-crown back into his pocket, turned to devote his attentions to Cousin Ethel, who was smiling, too.

"Beast!" muttered Baggy, under his breath.

His eyes lit up the next moment, however, as he saw that there was a vacant chair beside Lady Peggy.

It was Blake's chair, for on the arrival of the girls, Blake had taken good care to bag the seat next his girl chum.

At the moment Blake had risen to put another log on the fire. With the calm cheek of which Baggy alone was capable, the Falstaff of the Fourth dropped into the chair at Lady Peggy's side.

"Well, I'm blessed!" gasped Blake, as he turned to discover the fat figure in his seat.

He surveyed Baggy with a glare that was little short of ferocious.

Blake was the last fellow in the world to make a scene in the presence of the girls, but he yearned to jerk Baggy out of his chair by the ears and plant a shoe behind him.

He choked back the indignant protest that rose to his lips and breathed hard. Baggy grinned at him serenely, safe in the knowledge that Blake would not touch him in the presence of the girls, and turned a smirking face to the tomboy of Spalding Hall.

"How did you like the tobogganing this morning?" inquired Baggy chattily, shifting his chair a little nearer to his pretty neighbour. "I didn't come out this morning, you know—I've got rather a delicate constitution—"

"My hat! Delicate, is it?" murmured Lady Peggy, eyeing Baggy's fat frame critically.

"We well-built chaps are often a bit delicate under our athletic exteriors," explained Baggy. "You see—oh! Wow! Yaroooooh!"

Baggy broke off with a sudden wild howl.

He had not noticed that Blake had stepped to the window and raised the lower sash, scooping up a handful of snow from the sill outside. Therefore it was a complete surprise to Baggy suddenly to feel something slimy and icy sliding down his collar on to his fat spine.

"Ow! Oh! Yaroooooh!"

Baggy leapt to his feet, dancing wildly and clawing at his collar.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter from the other juniors, who had seen the handful of snow that Blake had dropped down Trimble's neck.

"Yow! Whooooop! Oh!"

Baggy was still performing what looked like the dance of an Indian on the war-path. The melting snow was trickling far down his back now, icy and wet.

"Groooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other juniors yelled. Blake, with a quiet chuckle, slipped back into the chair at Lady Peggy's side.

"Whatever is the matter with Trimble?" cried Doris Levison, in great astonishment.

"Ow! Oh dear!" gasped Baggy, wriggling his fat shoulders frantically.

He caught sight of Blake seated in the chair he had so abruptly vacated, and his jaw dropped. He understood now!

"Why, you—you—"

Baggy broke off, struggling for words. Blake chuckled. But even Baggy dared not say what he thought in the presence of Ethel & Co. With a furious snort, the Falstaff of the Fourth rolled away up the stairs, intent upon changing his damp shirt.

"Whatever was the matter with Trimble?" asked Ethel in bewilderment.

"Ahem!" Blake coughed. "I—I rather fancy some snow dropped down his neck, you know," he murmured.

"Serve him right, too," said Lady Peggy with a gurgle of laughter.

(Continued on page 12.)

FIRST-CLASS INFORMATION ABOUT A FIRST-CLASS CLUB!



Mr. Parker POPS IN

TO SEE LIVERPOOL.

"LIVERPOOL? Yes, they grow some of the **BEST FOOTBALLERS** at Liverpool!" This opinion is heard outside this great industrial centre just as much as inside it. And if you've ever seen this famous team playing, you would say the same!

Oldest Team in the League.

SOME few years ago a footballer of my acquaintance, who had travelled quite a lot and played for several teams, paid rather a remarkable tribute to the Liverpool club: "I shall be quite content," he said, "to die, as a footballer, at Liverpool."

That was one way of saying that the officials of the Liverpool football club were about the nicest, kindest masters in the world. And there is evidence other than that given by this player that the Liverpool club are good masters. It has been said, with a certain amount of truth, that no player joining the club ever left it of his own free will. And it is also a fact that very few players have got the "sack" from Anfield.

Within the memory of all of us, Liverpool have had the oldest team in the League. They had servants of long standing like Donald McKinlay, Ephraim Longworth, and Tom Lucas; fellows who stood in the breach in defence for years, and were very good, too. Then there is still on the staff Elisha Scott, Tom Bromilow, and others who have been there for years and years.

But the trouble with a football club which gains the love of its players is that those players will get old. And there must come a day when they are not quite young enough to be good enough to win football matches, and then the side must be rebuilt.

A Cosmopolitan Crowd.

DURING the last year or two the Liverpool football team has to a very large extent been re-built, and the man who goes there to-day must, first and foremost, be a linguist. Never in any football club dressing-room have I heard so many different languages. There is Lancashire, for instance, some very good Irish, more than a touch of Scotch, a little bit of ordinary English, and mixed with it all you can, if you get certain players in the right mood, get some of the real native stuff which is spoken in the wilds of South Africa. So, as a general introduction, here's the most cosmopolitan club in the Football League to-day—Liverpool.

Take a look round with me. Here are a couple of well-built lads who were so keen to play for the best masters in English football that they came all the way from South Africa to do it. One of them keeps goal, and his name is Arthur Riley. As a pet title they call him "Zulu" Riley. Now, the Liverpool side has always been famous for tip-top goalkeepers. I could run through a list of names of men who have stood between the posts for the

club which would soon convince you of that fact. They once had the great Sam Hardy standing under the bar for them!

It is no use discussing whether Riley is as good as the best whoever kept for the "Livers," but he is good enough for anything, and good enough to keep the Irishman, Elisha Scott, from the first team. This means something because every forward I have talked to who has had experience of League football since the War declares that Scott is the best keeper he has ever tried to beat.

ARTHUR is by way of being a bit of a cricketer as well, but he told me that he was not nearly so good in this direction as a fellow South African of the Liverpool team—Gordon Hodgson. And when Riley told me this I remember that Hodgson played for Lancashire at cricket on several occasions last season, and it is thought by the officials at Old Trafford that he may be the natural successor to Ted Macdonald as the Lancashire fast bowler. Incidentally, Hodgson is also a very fine baseball player, and many other members of the Liverpool side are also keen on that game. Which means that, in addition to having to know other languages when you call at Anfield, you must also have a smattering of American.

And the Scots now at Anfield. Why they have simply been shipping them wholesale to this port in the last few months, and there must now be about as many Scots on the staff at Anfield as any other place on the football map.

Old Pair of Boots.

CENTRE-FORWARD JAMES SMITH arrived from Ayr not so long ago, and as soon as he got into the side he scored a couple of goals. Now this player once scored no fewer than 66 goals in a single season for Ayr United, and I thought he might have a good tip to pass on to you lads as to how it was done.

"What you need most," he said, in a real Scottish accent which I do not attempt to write, "is an old pair of boots which know where the goal is situated." Smith showed me what he meant. The Liverpool club trainer was very keen to get Smith fitted with a new pair of boots when he arrived at the ground, but Jimmy likes the old ones better. "I don't think I should ever score with a new pair of boots," he said.

Smith couldn't feel lonely when he arrived at Anfield, but anyhow, to make quite certain that these Scots get that "home from home" atmosphere, two more players from beyond the border have recently been secured. Archibald

McPherson (that's real Scotch if you like!) and Robert Ireland (which ought to be real Irish). Both these lads came from Glasgow Rangers, and are making good. Tom Morrison from St. Mirren is another from that self-made land of cakes, and then there is also David Davidson. He comes from Forfar. I like that name David Davidson, don't you? It sort of curls nicely round the tongue.

As a matter of fact many of these Liverpool lads are well named, and they have also the sort of names which lend themselves to slight alteration. Take Hopkins, for example, what more natural than he should be called "Hoppy." And believe me, this fellow can hop it along the wing!

THEN they have a forward there named Henry Race, who answers quickly to the pet name of Racey. His rise to the top rank in football reads like a fairy tale. He was a miner in the Durham district not long ago, but the mine was not working and Henry was out of a job. He found his way to Liverpool, asked for a trial, was given this trial and immediately afterwards was signed on as a professional. He went back home to Durham to pack his things, but had no sooner arrived there than he received a telegram telling him to hurry back to Liverpool as he was wanted to play in the first team on the Saturday. That's quick promotion if you like!

But though some of the Liverpool players are well named, there are others who might wish that they had been luckier in choosing their parents who gave them the titles which they carry about. Bobby Done, for instance, has a grievance, for he says that it is the most natural thing in the world for the spectators to say "Bobby, you're done," when a forward beats him. But even such a name has its compensations, for isn't it also easy to shout "Well Done!"

Egypt Represented.

TRAINER WILSON then introduced me to the Egyptian member of the side—Edmed. It's a funny name that, but actually there is nothing of the Egyptian about him save the suggestion in the name. Dick Edmed had heard me going round asking the Liverpool players for particulars about their lives, so he had a good one ready for me.

"I am one of a family of nine," he said, "but the only one who has taken to football seriously, though my father used to play a lot."

"That's funny," I said.

"Oh, not so funny as you might think," replied Edmed. "you see all the other children are girls."

That's the way an innocent-looking fellow like me gets his leg pulled.

I looked in to see the manager, and only put to him one question:

"Are you going to win the championship this season?"

"We shall either do that," he replied, "or go down into the Second Division." That was what you can certainly call a non-committal reply, but it was a reminder of the Liverpool failing of doing nothing by halves. It has been said of them right through their history that they have been either at the top or the bottom. It is almost literally true.

"NOSEY."

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The Return of the Wolf!

(Continued from page 10.)

"Snow?" echoed Ethel, in astonishment.

Then she laughed, as she guessed the truth.

Sir Napier Wynter and Kildare appeared, and soon after that the gong sounded for dinner. But it was a meal for which Baggy Trimble was decidedly late!

"Where is Trimble, I wonder?" inquired Sir Napier, after a while, as he noticed the absence of the Falstaff of the Fourth.

Even as he spoke, there was a sound of footsteps in the hall. Without doubt they were Baggy's footsteps. But the pace at which they were coming down the stairs caused the juniors to glance at one another in astonishment.

Baggy seemed to be coming downstairs at breakneck speed!

"What the dickens——" ejaculated Tom Merry.

The next moment the door of the dining-room had crashed open, and Baggy Trimble staggered breathlessly into the room.

His face was white, his eyes wide and staring.

"Help!" panted Baggy, almost incoherently. "Ow! Help! Rescue——"

Kildare sprang to his feet.

"What on earth is the matter?"

Baggy clutched the back of a chair for support. His knees seemed to be shaking under him.

"Charcas!" he breathed in terror-stricken tones. "The South American! He's upstairs! I've just seen him!"

CHAPTER 7.

Vanished!

"CHARCAS?" echoed Tom Merry.

"Gweat Scott!"

In a moment they were all on their feet.

Talbot gripped Baggy by the arm.

"Baggy, what do you mean? Charcas? How can he be in the house——"

"I tell you I've seen him!" panted Baggy. "As clear as I see you! He was at the end of the passage when I came out of my room—he bolted off towards the north wing——"

Tom Merry caught his breath.

"So you've seen him, too!" Tom's eyes went swiftly to Monty Lowther's. "Monty, we weren't mistaken, then, last night. It was Charcas we saw——"

How Charcas, the smiling scoundrel who had deceived them all at St. Jim's, came to be in the house was a staggering mystery. But the fact that Baggy declared he had seen him was proof that the shadowy figure Tom Merry and Monty Lowther had seen on the previous night had been real enough—and that that figure had been Charcas!

Kildare sprang for the door, the juniors pouring out into the hall at his heels. Sir Napier joined them at the foot of the stairs, and they raced up them in a body.

Tom Merry's brain was in a whirl.

Charcas—here at Llanfellyn Towers! In the house itself! It was amazing, bewildering. But unless Baggy had been dreaming, there seemed to be no doubt that Charcas had somehow succeeded in gaining admittance to the house once more, after his mysterious disappearance of the previous night—had been roaming about the rambling old building with cat-like stealth for some mysterious purpose, while Sir Napier's guests had been enjoying themselves downstairs.

But, as on the previous night, there was no sign of the scoundrelly young Rioguanay now, when they came to search for him. Though for half an hour the juniors, Kildare, and Sir Napier Wynter ransacked the house, of Charcas there was no trace.

Utterly baffled, they returned at last to the dining-room.

"It is a complete mystery!" ejaculated Sir Napier grimly.

"It cannot be that Trimble was mistaken, evidently, for Tom Merry and Lowther declared last night that they thought they had seen him——"

"Mistaken?" broke in Baggy indignantly. "Rather not! I saw him as plain as anything! Ugh!"

And the Falstaff of the Fourth glanced nervously at the door.

Ethel and Doris were looking startled and anxious; but Lady Peggy's eyes were sparkling grimly.

"If only you'd caught him!" she breathed.

"If only we had!" agreed Kildare, in a grim tone.

"It's uncanny!" muttered Herries. "How the dickens does he get into the house—and get away again, like a blessed ghost? It's as though he vanishes into thin air——"

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"Well, there is only one thing that can bring him here, however he gets in," broke out Talbot. "That paper——"

"Of course," nodded Sir Napier. "It is the paper he is after."

He frowned deeply, one fist clenched upon the table.

"I wonder if there can be some secret, hidden way into the house, that these scoundrels have discovered?" he exclaimed suddenly. "Some secret tunnel, perhaps, that gives access to the house from somewhere in the grounds?"

"My hat!" breathed Manners in a startled tone.

"Gad! It's possible!" nodded Kildare.

"This is a very old house," went on Sir Napier quietly.

"I have spent most of my life abroad, so it is not very surprising if I do not know all its secrets. Why, I did not even know of that secret panel by the fireplace in the hall till my butler happened to find it, as I told you. For all I know there are other secret panels. What if there is a secret panel somewhere in the building that leads to an underground tunnel which emerges somewhere outside?"

"I fancy that must be the solution," said Kildare, with gleaming eyes. "The way Charcas has appeared, and vanished like a ghost——"

Sir Napier brought his fist crashing down upon the table.

"That must be it!" he rapped out. "And it's up to us to find it!"

He laughed grimly.

"One thing is clear. The Wolf and his ruffians have by no means given up their intention of getting hold of that paper, in order to destroy it before I have a chance to let the government of Rioguanay know its secret contents. But this time the Wolf is more cunning. He's evidently come to the conclusion that crafty methods are likely to be more successful than the rough-and-ready ones he tried at first. Having had the luck to discover some secret way into the house, this scoundrel Charcas is coming and going at will, searching every night, no doubt, for the hiding-place of the coveted document."

"Phew!" breathed Blake.

There was a nervous gasp from Baggy Trimble.

"We'll finish our interrupted meal, then see if we can't find the secret way the scoundrel uses to get into the house," said Sir Napier quietly. "And to-night I shall make a desperate attempt to solve the secret of the infernal paper!"

No one had much appetite left for the remainder of the meal, however, and before long they were all searching eagerly for the mysterious means of access that Charcas seemed to possess to Llanfellyn Towers.

But the search was fruitless.

Though they judged that the secret panel giving entrance to the underground tunnel, the existence of which Sir Napier had become convinced, must be situated somewhere near the foot of the narrow staircase in the north wing, they could discover nothing. They were forced to give up the search at last, and gathered in the hall, baffled.

"It's a giddy mystery!" grunted Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kildare, worried though he evidently was, shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Well, anyway, we mustn't forget it's Christmas Eve!" he exclaimed.

"Rather not!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"You youngsters had better enjoy yourselves, and not worry any more to-night about these queer mysteries," went on Kildare smilingly. "The search for this underground tunnel, if it exists, seems pretty hopeless at this end of it—and it's quite useless to try to look for the other end in the grounds to-night, in the dark, with the snow falling again. My uncle and I are going to tackle that code again; but too many cooks spoil the broth, so you had better leave us to it."

"Sure you don't want our help?" asked Tom Merry.

"Quite, thanks, young 'un! You youngsters enjoy yourselves!"

"Right!" grinned Tom. "We will!"

"Wathah, bai Jove!"

"Good egg!" chuckled Digby.

Accordingly, the juniors and the three girls dismissed from their minds the vague, menacing shadow that seemed to hang over Llanfellyn Towers, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly. They danced and played games, and roasted chestnuts at the great fire in the hall. The old house echoed to cheery laughter and noise in a way that it had not done for many a Christmas Eve.

The only thing that occurred to spoil anyone's pleasure even for a moment was when, with the lights put out in the hall during a game of hide-and-seek, Arthur Augustus kissed Herries under the mistletoe in mistake for his Cousin Ethel. What Herries said was scarcely suitable for the ears of the girls; but fortunately they happened to be out of earshot at the time.

It was nearly midnight—and Christmas Day—by the time they at last went up to bed.

Kildare had announced his intention of sitting up for half the night, on watch, in case Charcas returned to the house by his secret means of access. At three o'clock he had agreed to awaken Tom Merry and Talbot, for them to take over the task.

The precious paper had been returned to its hiding-place behind the secret panel in the hall, its mystery still unsolved.

"If I cannot decode it myself I shall take it to London for Government experts to try to decipher it," said Sir Napier, as he said good-night to the juniors in the hall. "Good-night, everyone!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The juniors trooped up to bed, little dreaming of the exciting happenings that were to take place in that fire-lit hall, gay with Christmas decorations, before morning dawned upon Llanfellyn Towers!

CHAPTER 8.

The Secret Panel!

"WAKE up, young 'un!"

Tom Merry opened his eyes.

Kildare was stooping over him, a hand on his shoulder. Tom sat up with a yawn and a sleepy grin.

"It's three o'clock," explained Kildare. "Everything's O.K.—no sign of a visit from Charcas!"

Tom slipped out of bed and drew on a few clothes, careful not to wake Monty Lowther in the other bed. A minute later he was leaving the room with Kildare. They turned in the direction of Talbot's room, which he was sharing with Harry Manners. Talbot slipped out of bed with alacrity when he realised that it was his and Tom's turn to take on the task of "sentry" in the sleeping house.

"Take this!" muttered Kildare, slipping an automatic into Tom Merry's hand with a significant glance. "We are up against pretty desperate scoundrels, remember!"

Tom nodded grimly, and slipped the weapon into his pocket. With a nod, Kildare turned in the direction of his own room for a well-earned sleep.

Tom Merry and Reginald Talbot moved off along the passage in the other direction. It had been decided that Tom should keep watch in the hall, while Talbot kept guard at the foot of the back staircase in the north wing—the spot at which Charcas seemed to have vanished so elusively.

"Cheerio, old hoss!" murmured Talbot, as he turned off along the passage leading to the north wing. "If Charcas turns up give him an extra biff on the nose from me!"

Tom grinned, and descended into the hall.

The embers of the big log fire were still glowing in the darkness. Tom sat down by them, and settled himself for his nocturnal vigil. The curtains of the window near him were partly open, and through the panes he could see the softly-falling snow, white and ghostly in the darkness.

In the north wing Talbot had switched on a small wall-lamp by the foot of the stairs. He brought a chair from the kitchen near by, and placed it against the panelled wall of the passage leading to the side door that opened on to the stable-yard.

An almost uncanny silence seemed to brood over the house, but for the faint ticking of a clock in the kitchen. Talbot yawned.

"I only hope Charcas does turn up again," he told himself grimly. "Nothing I'd like better than a chance of slogging that bound on the jaw!"

The minutes dragged by. The faint ticking of the kitchen clock along the passage seemed interminable. Once or twice Talbot yawned. But his senses were keenly on the alert nevertheless.

After what seemed an eternity of time he heard the half-hour strike.

"Half-past three!" muttered Talbot.

Talbot's ears were keen. But he did not hear a panel in the wall directly behind him slide back a minute later, so silently did it open. He did not hear the footstep of a dim figure that had appeared in the black opening, as it took a cat-like stride towards his chair.

The first he knew of his danger was the sound of a soft laugh behind him. Talbot leapt to his feet and swung round.

"Charcas!"

The lithe figure of Charcas, the South American, was standing there, with the black cavity in the wall showing whence he had come. In a flash Talbot realised that he had put his chair almost against the secret panel by which the

Riaguayan was enabled, via some secret underground tunnel from outside the house, to enter the building at will.

Charcas' swarthy face was smiling evilly. His black eyes glittered. Talbot opened his mouth to send an echoing shout ringing through the sleeping house; but before he could do so, with panther-like swiftness, the South American had leapt.

A heavy stick crashed down upon Talbot's head.

With a groan, he collapsed in a senseless heap at the feet of his enemy.

Charcas laughed softly.

He stooped over Talbot, turning him over. But it was evident that Talbot was quite unconscious, and would not regain his senses for a long time yet.

"Bueno!"

Charcas stepped over the inert form of the Shell fellow, hurrying towards the kitchen.

After his midnight visits to the house in search of the hiding-place of the precious document that he and his accomplices had striven so long to find, Charcas knew the geography of Llanfellyn Towers well enough. It was for the store-room, next to the kitchen, that he was heading now.

He was back very soon, carrying a can of paraffin in his hand. He set it down in the passage, and from a cupboard under the stairs took a quantity of wood shavings, boxes, and brooms. Silent as a cat, he set to work to pile them in the passage.

"Carajo!" he muttered. "Why did we never think of this before? With the house burnt to the ground, it is not likely that this accursed paper will escape the flames!"

He laughed again, and cast a mocking glance at the senseless figure of Reginald Talbot near the foot of the staircase.

"That will do, I fancy!"

Charcas picked up the can of oil and splashed it over

(Continued on next page.)



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the inflammable pile he had built up and over the floor and panelled walls.

From his pocket he produced a box of matches. He struck one, tossing it among the saturated shavings. They burst into flame.

Hastily he struck another match, igniting the pile at the other side. With a roar, the flames swept up, and a cloud of choking smoke drove him back.

For a moment Charcas hesitated, glancing at the inert form of Reginald Talbot; then he shrugged his shoulders.

Already the flames were leaping high, enveloping the blazing pile in the passage, licking the panelled walls, filling the air with heavy smoke.

A cloud of pungent smoke enveloped the South American for a moment, causing him to cough and choke. He turned hastily to the opening in the wall and stepped through into the darkness. Without a sound, as he pressed a secret spring, the panel slid back into place.

Charcas had gone! And in the smoke-filled passage, where the flames were crackling hungrily as they spread swiftly towards him, Reginald Talbot lay senseless.

CHAPTER 9.

Through the Flames!

TOM MERRY stretched his arms and yawned. It was very quiet in the dim old hall.

Tom drew the smouldering embers in the big grate together with a poker, and a little flame sprang up, casting gleaming reflections on the ancient armour and on the red holly-berries that festooned the walls. Then he leant back in his chair again.

"Hallo—"

He sat up suddenly, drawing in his breath.

A faint smell of burning had touched his nostrils. It did not come from the embers in the grate.

He sniffed, puzzled.

"My hat! Smells as if something's on fire!" he muttered, staring round. He rose and switched on the light.

A sharp ejaculation broke from him.

From beneath the green baize door that led to the kitchen quarters in the north wing a thin trail of smoke was curling.

"Great Scott!"

In a moment Tom was racing across the hall. He swung open the door, and a cloud of rolling smoke drove him back.

"Good heavens!" gasped Tom Merry. "The house is on fire!"

He turned to run to the foot of the stairs, to send a ringing shout of alarm to those sleeping above. Then his eye fell on the big dinner-gong near the foot of the stairs. He leapt towards it, snatching up the gongstick, and the echoes woke as the deep, thunderous note of the gong reverberated through the hall.

Through the open doorway the smoke was streaming in swirling grey clouds. In the heart of it Tom Merry could see the scarlet points of dancing flames, and hear the roar of the fire, which had evidently taken firm hold.

And then, as he heard running footsteps and excited, questioning shouts from above, a cold terror suddenly gripped Tom Merry's heart.

Talbot!

What had happened to Talbot? He knew that Talbot had been on watch in the burning wing. That his chum had raised no alarm seemed to show that he had been unable to do so.

A flash of intuition told Tom the truth. It could only mean that their enemies had come again by the secret way known only to themselves. And Talbot must have been overcome before he could raise the alarm. Then the midnight intruders had deliberately set fire to the house, with the intention, as he realised, of destroying with it the paper that meant so much to them.

And Talbot—

Talbot, probably, was lying senseless somewhere among the flames!

For a moment Tom was numbed with the horror of it; then he sprang to life.

Flinging down the gongstick, he turned and hurled himself into the smoke.

Down the stairs racing figures were coming—Kildare, Sir Napier, Monty Lowther, Blake, Levison, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The crashing note of the gong had done its work well.

But Tom Merry's thoughts were all of Reginald Talbot now.

The smoke swirled about him, stifling and heavy, as he groped his way along the passage past the kitchen door.

"Talbot!"

His voice was little more than a hoarse croak. A moment later he was coughing and choking helplessly. But he recovered his breath and groped blindly on.

The roar of the flames was louder now. Tom could see

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great sheets of fire ahead of him. He was plunging into a veritable inferno of flame, but kept on, stumbling and choking, his eyes smarting, and with panting lungs.

"Talbot!"

There was no answer to his stifled cry.

A hungry flame came licking past him, singeing his clothes. In the swirling gloom Tom almost staggered into a blazing chair—the chair upon which Talbot had been sitting during his vigil.

The very walls seemed to be on fire. The floorboards beneath his feet were burning, as he staggered on.

He was near the stairs now, but they were hidden by what seemed a solid wall of flame. The banisters were well alight, crackling fiercely. Crimson flames swayed and fluttered in the gloom.

Tom was driven back by a hot blast of black smoke. With a crash some of the plaster of the ceiling had fallen, almost striking him. He reeled, his senses dazed, then he plunged forward, reeling blindly through the licking flames.



"Oh! Ow! Yarooooop!" yelled Baggy Trimble. Something is

His coat caught alight, but he beat out the flames with his hand. Fighting for breath, he sprang over a burning patch in the floor, and saw before him, dim amid the smoke, the motionless figure of Reginald Talbot!

The boards were smouldering around the senseless junior. A falling banister fell, flaming, near his head. Here and there sparks had ignited his clothing, and his face was grimed with smoke.

The fire roared and crackled around him, and the smoke billowed over his inert form, hiding him from Tom Merry again, as the captain of the Shell fought his way through the stifling heat towards him.

Choking and blinded, Tom put up an arm to guard his face as a leaping flame licked towards him from the burning stairs. He felt his hand blistered. But he staggered on to where that helpless figure lay, in the middle of the raging inferno.

A blazing portion of the banisters fell and lay across Talbot's legs. Tom kicked the flaming woodwork away with his foot and dropped beside the still figure on the floor.

Luckily he was able to extinguish the smouldering portions of Talbot's clothes. But his senses were reeling now,

Tom glanced up. Immediately above them the plaster was blackened and cracked, sagging dangerously. At any

All around him the smooth snow was touched to crimson by the lurid light of the flames.

Where is Ethel?

Kildare was stooping over Talbot, while Sir Napier led the juniors to where the fire-fighting appliances were kept. The captain of St. Jim's cast a swift, startled glance at Tom Merry.

A black and white illustration of a group of people in a room. A man in a dark suit and striped trousers is on the left, looking surprised or shouting. A woman in a light-colored dress is in the center, looking towards him. A man in a dark suit is on the right, looking towards the woman. In the background, two other men are visible. The room has a doorway on the left and a patterned rug on the floor.

One hand held Talbot's limp wrist, the other groped blindly for the handle. He turned it, and tried to drag the door open—only to realise that it was locked.

"He's had a knock on the head!" he ejaculated. "What on earth's happened? What—?"

"I found him in the burning passage," said Tom jerkily. "I smelt burning, found the passage on fire, and raised the alarm. I—I think Charcas, or some of those scoundrels, must have entered the house by that secret way they must know of, and—knocked him out. Then set fire to the place to destroy that paper—"

"Good gad!"

In a flash Kildare realised how likely it was that Tom's theory was right. And a moment later it was proved, as Talbot's eyes flickered open, and his lips moved.

"Charcas!" muttered Talbot. "I—I—"

He stirred, and, with Kildare's arm under his shoulders, sat up dazedly.

The cold air had revived Talbot. He stared round stupidly.

"All right, old chap!" muttered Kildare soothingly. "What were you saying? Charcas?"

Swiftly, Talbot's memory swept back to that moment when he had discovered himself confronted by the South American. In stumbling words he told what had happened.

"You were right, Merry!" snapped Kildare.

Talbot rose dazedly to his feet, with the help of the captain's supporting arm.

"How—how did I get here?" he muttered wonderingly.

"Tom fished you out, old chap," said Monty Lowther, in a voice that was not quite steady. "Looks to me as if he saved your life!"

"Oh, rats!" mumbled Tom.

His own head was clear again now, though his eyes were still smarting painfully, and his throat was dry and sore. He turned stumbly to join the other juniors, who, under the direction of Sir Napier, were busy with two long fire-hoses, attaching them swiftly to the hydrants in the yard.

"Turn on the water!" shouted Sir Napier.

The water was turned on, and the big hoses swelled and wriggled like giant snakes as it sped along them. With a fierce hiss, two steely-coloured jets of water leapt from the brass nozzles, in through the flaming doorway.

"Feeling better now, young 'un?" asked Kildare, and Talbot nodded.

"I'm all right!"

Kildare turned and ran to help with one of the hoses.

By now the flames had spread to the rooms on either side of the blazing passage. Lurid flames could be seen leaping amid the smoke behind the windows. Kildare, taking the nozzle of one of the hoses from Herries, turned the powerful jet towards one of the windows. It smashed through the glass, beating in on to the flames with a venomous hiss.

The three Spalding Hall girls, in their hastily donned garments, had joined the juniors now. They joined in with a will as, under Tom Merry's direction, a bucket-line was formed between the yard tap and the scene of the fire. With two or three of the women servants also helping, a dozen buckets were soon passing to and fro, materially assisting the work of the hoses.

In grim silence the fire-fighters worked.

A lurid light filled the yard from the blazing doorway and windows. The roar of the flames and the hiss of steam, the creaking of the hand-pump, as Manners, Blake, Levison, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy worked it, were the only sounds in the snowy yard.

Everyone was doing his share. Even Digby, with his arm in a sling, had joined the bucket-line. Baggy Trimble, for once in a way, was working like a Trojan. And Reginald Talbot, though he still looked dazed and ill, was helping with the buckets, too.

Kildare was at one of the hoses, and his uncle at the other. Tom Merry was standing on a big box he had placed outside the window of one of the burning rooms, taking the buckets of water from Cousin Ethel as they were passed up the line and flinging the contents on to the flames within the room.

Though it had seemed at first that the fire had a grave hold upon the building, the efforts of the fire-fighters were already having an effect.

The flames were not spreading farther, it was soon evident. And in a little while Kildare was able to force a way in through the smoke that was still pouring out of the doorway, and, with a wet handkerchief tied round his mouth, to play the hose upon the flaming woodwork of the staircase.

Hacking his way in through the window with an axe, Sir Napier was able at last to enter one of the burning rooms with a hose. By now it was evident that the fight was turning in the favour of the amateur firemen, despite the hold that the flames had taken before their arrival on the scene.

Little by little, the flames lessened in intensity.

Tom Merry and Herries climbed into the other room where the fire had taken hold, as the flames decreased, and,

with the buckets of water that were swiftly handed in to them without pause by the line from the tap, they soon had the upper hand of the remaining points of conflagration.

But it was a long while before the fire-fighters could ease up in their efforts. When at last they did, wisps of smoke and steam were still curling out of the broken windows and the blackened doorway; but, with the exception of a few smouldering pieces of woodwork here and there, the fire was out.

"Huwah!" gasped Arthur Augustus, mopping his begrimed face with a silk handkerchief. "Huwah!"

And the cheer was taken up with a will.

Once again the Wolf and his scoundrels had failed in their intention of destroying the precious document hidden at Llanfellyn Towers.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Sir Napier, as the water was at last turned off. "I thought for a time the whole house was doomed."

He glanced round at the juniors and the girls and the excited women servants.

"Thanks, everybody!" he said quietly. "And, by the way, a happy Christmas to all! I've just realised that it is really Christmas morning!"

"My hat! So it is!" grinned Jack Blake. "Merry Christmas, sir!"

There was a chorus of cheerful Christmas greetings all round. Arthur Augustus adjusted his monocle and glanced round, peering through the lightly-falling snow.

"Mewwy Chwistmas, you chaps!" he called. "Mewwy Chwistmas, deah gals! Ethel—"

Arthur Augustus broke off suddenly.

"Ethel, deah gal!" he shouted.

There was no answer. Of Cousin Ethel there was no sign.

"Queeah!" ejaculated the swell of St. Jim's. "Does anyone know where Ethel is?"

No one did know.

"She was standing under that tree there a minute ago," said Lady Peggy, nodding towards a tall, snow-laden elm that stood at one corner of the yard—the end tree of a line that ran along the edge of the drive and joined the trees in the park.

The juniors stared about them.

"Ethel!" shouted Tom Merry.

There was a faintly anxious frown on the face of the captain of the Shell.

But there was no answer to his echoing shout.

Cousin Ethel had vanished.

CHAPTER 11.

The Hostage!

"THIS is awful!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made that observation in a voice that was a little unsteady.

It was a little later, and the juniors were gathered in the hall, with Kildare and his uncle, and Doris and Lady Peggy.

Though they had searched far and wide for Ethel Cleveland since the putting-out of the fire that had threatened to destroy Llanfellyn Towers, they had found no trace anywhere of the swell of St. Jim's pretty cousin.

"What ever can it mean?" muttered Levison.

His face, like the faces of the others, was dark and anxious.

Ethel's sudden disappearance from the stable-yard had seemed utterly uncanny.

"Oh dear!" breathed Doris Levison. "Where ever can she have got to, I wonder?"

"It—it's frightfully rum!" commented Lady Peggy, with an anxious glance at the others.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus was looking more desperately worried than anyone.

"I don't like the look of it," said Kildare quietly. "We know that these South American villains are still in the neighbourhood—"

"Great pip!" gasped Herries. "You don't think they can have captured her?"

"Oh!" cried Doris Levison, in swift alarm. "Surely not!"

A silence fell—rather a grim silence. The juniors looked at one another.

"Let's have another look for her!" muttered Tom Merry. "I—"

The captain of the Shell broke off abruptly.

A heavy knock had sounded on the front door.

"Bai Jove! Who's this?" breathed Arthur Augustus.

"Not Ethel!" muttered Digby.

Kildare strode to the door and opened it, swinging the door wide. The light from the hall flooded out into the darkness, revealing a figure standing on the snowy steps—a gigantic, bearded figure, the sight of which brought a cry from the lips of several of the juniors.

For the man on the steps was known to them well enough—too well!

"The Wolf!"

The words broke from Tom Merry's lips with curious hoarseness.

In the light from the hall the giant leader of the revolutionaries who had followed Kildare's uncle to England from far-off Rioguary swept off his big black sombrero and bowed mockingly.

"Si, senores!" he cried, in a thunderous tone. "It is I—El Lobo—the Wolf!"

And with a couple of great strides he crossed the threshold and halted in the hall, his black eyes flashing from face to face.

There was a moment's deathly silence. Then Sir Napier stepped swiftly forward.

"You!" he breathed. "What brings you here, you scoundrel?"

The South American laughed harshly. One hand came up and stroked his black beard.

"You are surprised to see me to-night?" he murmured softly. "You thought perhaps I had gone away for good—yes?" He chuckled evilly. "No, amigo, I am still here, I and my friends! El Lobo is not the man to leave a task undone once he has set his heart upon it!"

He caught sight of the two girls by the fireplace, and swept off his hat again, with an extravagant bow.

"Greetings, senoritas!"

His eyes glittered. An evil smile appeared on his swarthy, bearded face.

thundered. "I have come to have delivered into my hands that document of which you have possession—that secret paper——"

"And if we refuse to give it up?" broke in Sir Napier coolly. "What if we not only refuse to give it up, but hold you as a hostage, a prisoner in this house?" He glanced at the levelled weapon in Tom Merry's hand.

"We have you at our mercy——"

"Not so!" purred the Wolf, with glittering eyes. "For if I do not return to my friends within ten minutes, and am not bearing with me that paper of which I have spoken, the pretty senorita, for whom you have been searching, will meet her death out there in the snow!"

He waved a great arm in the direction of the window. "Out there!" he roared, in a voice that echoed through the hall. "We have the missing girl—a prisoner in our hands!"

CHAPTER 12.

The Triumph of the Wolf!

A DEATHLY silence filled the hall as the words of the South American rang out with mocking triumph.

Though the juniors had suspected the dreadful truth, the definite knowledge that Ethel was a prisoner in the hands of the revolutionaries chilled the hearts of all.

There was a sobbing gasp from Doris Levison. And from Arthur Augustus there broke a hoarse cry.

Next Week's Splendid Attractions!

An Extra-long Complete Story of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's, starring Wally D'Arcy of the Third Form, entitled:

"ALL THROUGH PONGO!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Another spasm from our whiskery old Wonder, the Oracle, under the title of
"ASK THE ORACLE!"

A further report from our special football representative, Mr. "NOSEY" PARKER, dealing with the famous BURNLEY Club. And last, but by no means least, another instalment of

"THE WORST FORM AT CODRINGTON!"

Kildare closed the door, and put his back to it. It was a significant gesture. But the gigantic South American laughed softly.

"So!" he murmured. "You think, perhaps, that you have me trapped? Ho, ho!" He shrugged his massive shoulders. "I admit to you that I am unarmed——"

There was a sudden movement from Tom Merry.

Before the fire, while on watch in the hall, the captain of the Shell had slipped the automatic that Kildare had given him beneath a cushion of the deep chair in which he had been sitting.

He stepped swiftly to this chair now, and snatched out the gleaming weapon, swinging round to confront the big scoundrel by the door, the automatic level in his hand.

"Hands up!" he snapped. "We'll find out, anyway, if it's true you're unarmed——"

"Caramba!"

For a moment the South American seemed taken aback. But then he shrugged his broad shoulders and laughed softly.

"Hands up!" repeated Tom Merry grimly.

The Wolf laughed again, and thrust his hands into his pockets with a deliberate movement.

"And if I refuse?" he sneered. "I warn you, my young fighting-cock, that if anything happens to me you will regret it most bitterly!"

Something in his tone brought a startled exclamation to the lips of Eric Kildare.

"You scoundrel!" cried the captain of St. Jim's. "What do you mean?"

The Wolf flung a mocking glance at him.

"I have come to strike a bargain—a last bargain!" he

The face of the swell of St. Jim's had gone as white as paper.

The Wolf gave a bellowing laugh.

"Whilst you were all so busy fighting the flames, which, unfortunately you succeeded in putting out so cleverly, I and my men were watching from the trees. You did not dream of that, eh? And it was easy enough, when the pretty senorita was standing apart from the rest, not far from the trees, for us to capture her!"

He chuckled evilly.

"I have given instructions to my men. Unless I return safely to them with the paper I demand, within ten minutes——"

He broke off with a meaning shrug of his massive shoulders.

"You will never see the senorita alive again!" he finished softly.

"Good gad!"

Tom Merry heard the stifled exclamation escape Eric Kildare.

With a sickening sense of hopelessness at his heart, Tom Merry lowered the automatic. The Wolf grinned malevolently.

"So!" he murmured mockingly. "You change your tune now, my young fighting-cock?"

"You villain!" burst from Sir Napier.

The big South American shrugged. His eyes were gleaming with a cruel light.

"Well, senor?" he cried impatiently. "There is but little time if you are to save the senorita. Do you agree to the bargain? You will hand over to me this paper?"

CHAPTER 13.

Treachery!

For a moment Sir Napier did not reply.

He glanced round, his face set, almost haggard. His eyes rested on the pale faces of the two girls, on the white face of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, on the strained faces of the juniors. His glance met Kildare's.

"We can't refuse!" muttered Kildare hoarsely.

"No," Sir Napier nodded.

He, too, realised only too well that the Wolf's threat was no idle one. Ethel Cleveland was in deadly danger—and in the face of that knowledge all other considerations had to be set aside.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stepped swiftly to Sir Napier's side. The face of the swell of St. Jim's was working oddly. The thought of his cousin's danger had broken his nerve in a way that danger to himself could never have done.

"We must save Ethel, sir!" he panted, in a voice strangely unlike his own. "You will give up that papah to this man?"

Sir Napier's hand fell on his shoulder reassuringly.

"Don't be afraid, D'Arcy! I shall let no harm happen to Ethel, whatever the price of her safety."

"Then you agree?" cried the Wolf, his voice ringing with triumph.

"Yes," answered Sir Napier hoarsely. "I agree!"

He turned towards the fireplace. A deathly silence filled the hall as he stooped to press the knob on the carving beside the hearth that operated the secret spring. With a faint creak the small square of panelling beside the fireplace swung back.

There was a breathless exclamation from the Wolf. He took an eager step forward. But already Sir Napier had reached into the dark opening and taken out the fateful sheet of paper that he and the St. Jim's fellows had defended so valiantly and so long—but which at last they were being forced into surrendering to their enemy.

With a gloating exclamation the giant South American snatched it from the baronet's hand. His eyes feasted upon it greedily.

"At last!" he muttered.

Mockingly he glanced up and met the eyes of Sir Napier Wynter.

"So I win, after all!" he exclaimed in purring tones. "With this paper destroyed President Garcia shall never know where my friends are in Rioguary! He will not be able to quell their activities on my behalf. And so, after all, soon all will be ready for another revolution—and this time it shall be a successful one! When the revolution comes I shall become President of Rioguary!"

He crushed the paper into a ball in his great fist.

A few glowing embers still remained in the grate. Turning, he kicked them into a blaze.

"The flames shall devour this paper, my friends!" he jeered.

And at that moment the lights went out, plunging the hall into utter darkness.

There was a shout from the Wolf.

"Carajo!"

For in the darkness he had felt the crumpled paper snatched from his hand.

"Give me that paper," he thundered. "You fools! If that paper is not given back to me the girl shall die!"

Suddenly the lights snapped on again. The Wolf stood glaring round at the startled faces of the others.

"The paper!" he snarled. "Give me the paper, or I swear the girl out there—"

"Who has it?" cried Sir Napier. "Whoever has taken it, I command him to give it back! Ethel's life is at stake!"

Kildare took a swift step towards the juniors.

"Which of you young fools has the paper?" he cried hoarsely. "Don't you realise what it means? For Heaven's sake—"

But it was Lady Peggy, not one of the juniors, who, to the amazement of all, answered the captain of St. Jim's.

"I've got it!" she said quietly. "I—I didn't think! I forgot Ethel was in danger for the moment—all I thought about was getting the paper back!"

She turned to the Wolf, and held out her hand, opening her fingers. With an angry snarl the South American snatched the crumpled ball of paper from her hand and turned to the fireplace, thrusting it into the glowing embers.

It flamed up instantly, burned brightly for a moment, then darkened to a blackened, charred ball.

Tom Merry groaned inwardly.

After all that long battle of strength and wits between the St. Jim's party and the Rioguaryans, with that precious paper as the prize, the Wolf had won! All that remained of that fateful document was now a few charred ashes among the glowing embers in the fireplace.

A few charred ashes—the very emblem of their defeat!

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"AND now, senores and senoritas, adios!"

The Wolf bowed with a sweep of his sombrero and swaggered towards the door. He swung it open and turned in the doorway with another mocking bow to the silent group in the old panelled hall.

"Adios!" he repeated. "My work here is done! I go now, my friends, back to Rioguary! And there, before long, I shall be President!"

He threw back his head and gave a peal of triumphant laughter.

Sir Napier strode towards him.

"The girl," he said sharply—"she must be set free at once! That was the bargain."

The giant South American shrugged his massive shoulders.

"Bueno!" He nodded. "It shall be done. What more use is she to us?"

He swung on his heel and strode down the steps into the snow. The light from the open door lit up his broad back for some moments, then he vanished amid the lightly-falling snowflakes that still drifted down from the dark sky.

He disappeared in the direction of the trees.

Sick at heart the juniors stood silent, with miserable faces.

A sickening sense of defeat filled them all.

Already Manners was stooping over the fire. But it was soon clear that the paper was destroyed utterly. If he had hoped that part, at any rate, of the cryptic writing upon it had been preserved it had been a vain hope indeed.

"Yes, the villain has beaten us," breathed Sir Napier, with a gesture that showed even more than the tone of his voice how bitterly he felt his defeat.

"Anyhow, Ethel will be safe," muttered Blake. "I—"

He broke off sharply.

From Lady Peggy there had come a sudden faint sigh. Blake sprang towards her, and was just in time to catch her as she tottered, about to fall.

"She's fainted, poor kid!" exclaimed Kildare. "The strain on her nerves has been too much for her!"

He and Blake carried the senseless girl to the sofa, and laid her upon it. Doris bent swiftly over her.

"Get some water!" she said sharply.

Blake nodded and hurried away.

"She'll soon be all right," muttered Herries.

He turned and joined Sir Napier and Tom Merry, who were standing in the lighted doorway, peering across towards the snow-laden trees across the white lawn.

"No sign of Ethel!" said Tom Merry, frowning. "I suppose we can trust the villains to set her free, as the Wolf promised?"

"I feel sure we can," nodded Sir Napier. "They could not have any object in keeping her a prisoner any longer, now that their purpose here is accomplished."

But there was an anxious frown upon his tanned face. He stepped out into the porch, staring across towards the white, silent trees.

And at that moment the faint hum of a motor-car's engine came to their ears through the silent night.

"Listen!" cried Herries. "They're going off in a car!"

"But where's Ethel?" gasped Arthur Augustus, joining them at the top of the steps. "Bai Jove, she ought to have appeared by now!"

"Ethel!" shouted Sir Napier hoarsely.

From somewhere among the trees there came an answering shout. It was the voice of Charcas, and the tone was harsh and mocking, though the words were in Spanish.

"What did he say?" cried Tom Merry.

They could hear the engine of the car among the trees roar up, and speed off down the drive. From Sir Napier there burst a cry of dismay.

Arthur Augustus seized him by the arm.

"What did he say when he shouted? You undahstood?"

"Yes," Sir Napier almost growled. "We've been fooled! Why did we trust them for one moment? They are taking Ethel away with them in the car—despite their promise!"

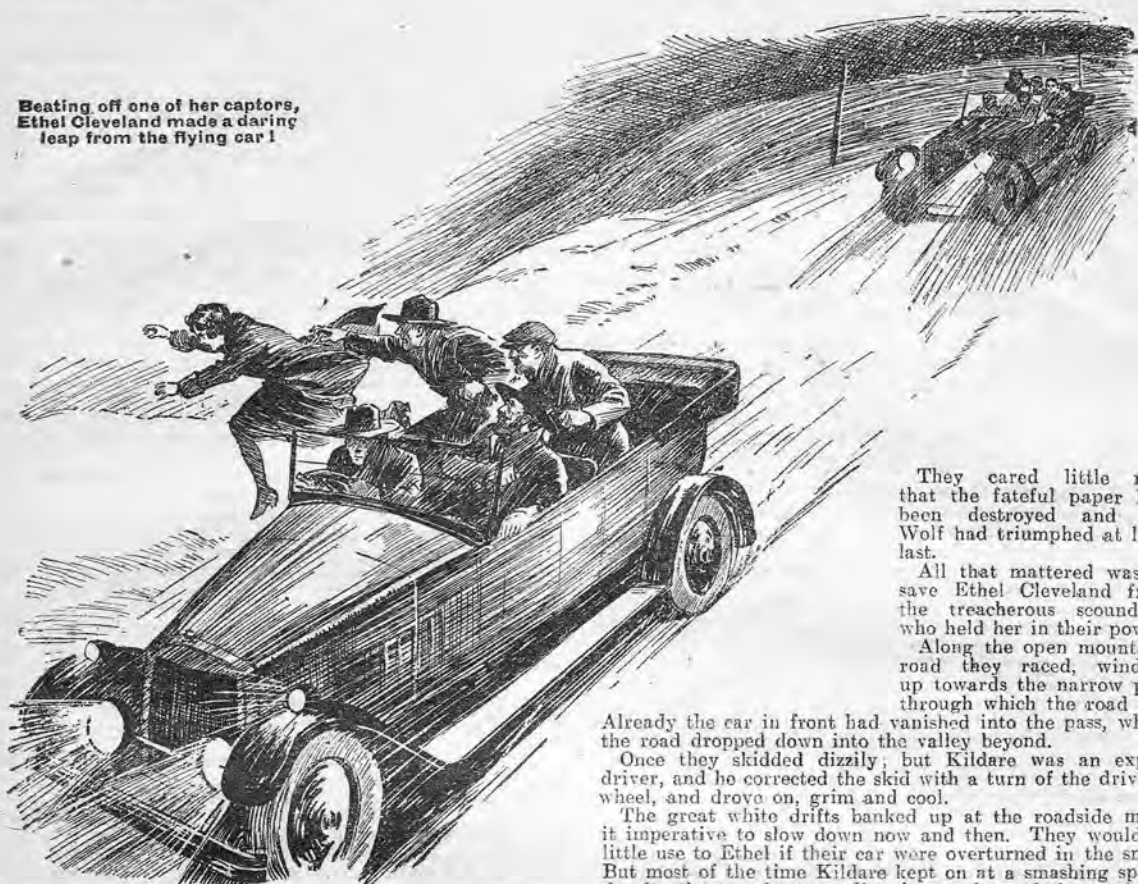
His face was white and haggard-looking.

"Oh, gweat Scott!" breathed Arthur Augustus, his face strangely drawn.

From Tom Merry there broke a cry of consternation.

He realised now how wrong they had been in imagining that the South Americans had no further use for their hostage. They had relied on that supposition mistakenly. Tom Merry saw now—as did the others—that the revolutionaries, with the English police after them, had intended all along to keep Ethel their prisoner until they had, at any rate, reached the coast on their way back to Rioguary. With Ethel in their hands, she might still prove an invaluable hostage; for it was clear to the St. Jim's party now that if they telephoned to the police, to put them on the track of

Beating off one of her captors, Ethel Cleveland made a daring leap from the flying car!



the scoundrels escaping from Llanfellyn Towers in the big, powerful car, the South Americans would undoubtedly revenge themselves, if capture seemed likely, by harming Ethel.

Sir Napier swung round on the dismayed juniors. "Quick!" he snapped. "No time to lose! We'll follow them! Tom, Lowther, Levison—and you, D'Arcy—come with us!"

He raced down the steps, with the four juniors and the captain of St. Jim's at his heels. Round to the garages they raced.

From the lighted doorway Manners and Talbot, Blake, Herries, and Digby, and Baggy Trimble, with Doris Levison and Lady Peggy, who had soon recovered from her faint, saw a car with glaring headlights sweep into view from the side of the house, with Kildare at the wheel.

It plunged in among the trees at reckless speed, roaring down the long drive towards the distant gates, in hot pursuit of the car that was bearing Cousin Ethel away, a helpless prisoner.

"My hat!" muttered Blake. "Can they ever do it—with the roads deep in snow?"

The lights of the car vanished among the snow-laden trees. The roar of the engine died away in the distance.

"Good luck to 'em!" breathed Manners hoarsely. "Good luck!"

CHAPTER 14.

On the Mountain Road!

"THERE they are!"

Ernest Levison flung out a pointing hand.

Far along the glittering whiteness of the mountain-side ahead of them, as they swung out of the great gates of Llanfellyn Towers, the raking headlights of a racing car could be seen through the lightly falling snow.

Kildare's foot trod firmly on the accelerator. The pursuing car seemed to leap forward over the snow like a live thing.

A wintry wind was moaning among the mountains, swirling the snowflakes into drifting eddies. Kildare switched on the automatic windscreen-wiper as the snow began to collect on the glass.

The faces of the six occupants of the pursuing car were set in grim, resolute lines.

They cared little now that the fateful paper had been destroyed and the Wolf had triumphed at long last.

All that mattered was to save Ethel Cleveland from the treacherous scoundrels who held her in their power.

Along the open mountain-road they raced, winding up towards the narrow pass through which the road led.

Already the car in front had vanished into the pass, where the road dropped down into the valley beyond.

Once they skidded dizzily; but Kildare was an expert driver, and he corrected the skid with a turn of the driving-wheel, and drove on, grim and cool.

The great white drifts banked up at the roadside made it imperative to slow down now and then. They would be little use to Ethel if their car were overturned in the snow. But most of the time Kildare kept on at a smashing speed, despite the treacherous, glittering surface of the road. A certain amount of risk had to be taken if they were to catch up with the car in front.

And in that dangerous race through the mountains they could not have wished for a finer driver than Eric Kildare.

Huddled in the greatcoats they had snatched up when dashing out of the house, the occupants of the car stared ahead in silence as the powerful machine thundered on up the winding road.

Tom Merry was seated at Kildare's side.

He glanced at the face of the captain of St. Jim's. Kildare was staring ahead, his eyes glued to the road, his lips tight; his hands on the steering-wheel were steady as a rock.

"Good old Kildare!" thought Tom Merry.

There were times at St. Jim's when even the popular captain seemed something of a thorn in the flesh to the juniors—at times when rags and japes were met with Kildare's judicial ashlant. But at a time like this, Tom was telling himself, Kildare was a chap in a thousand.

A deep drift lying across the road caused Kildare to slow down cautiously. They ploughed through the piled snow, the wheels flinging up the white slush. Beyond the drift the snow was not deep, and the captain of St. Jim's accelerated again.

They raced on.

It did not take them long to reach the pass through which the road led as it crossed the shoulder of the mountain. They wound through the narrow defile, the tracks of the car they were following deep and clear in the glaring light of their headlights.

"We can't be far behind," muttered Monty Lowther.

"If they don't realise yet that we are on their heels they will be going slow on these roads," said Sir Napier.

It was a tight fit in the wide back seat for the four of them. Levison was sitting on Monty Lowther's knees. But it was no time to think about comfort.

If the end of the chase resulted in a hand-to-hand fight, as it might well do, the pursuers wanted all they could crowd in.

The snow was deep in the pass, and they were forced to slow almost to a crawl. But at last they emerged on to the open mountain-side beyond.

The snow had stopped falling and the moon had appeared, turning the countryside into a glittering white panorama.

"Look!" breathed Tom Merry.

Below them, on the road that dropped steeply down the hillside, could be seen the revolutionaries' car.

It was travelling fairly slowly, its headlamps blazing across the snow. They were much nearer to it than they had been before; evidently their enemies had not yet realised the fact of their pursuit.

Kildare pressed the accelerator, and down the winding road the following car went racing.

"They've seen us!" cried Monty Lowther.

Suddenly the car ahead had put on speed.

It was evident that its occupants had seen their pursuers.

"Yaas, they've seen us all-wight!" muttered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy grimly.

At a mad speed—considering the treacherous, snowy surface of the road—the front car had accelerated to racing pace.

It plunged down the hillside, swept round a shoulder of the mountain, and vanished again.

In hot pursuit the car bearing the St. Jim's party roared after it.

CHAPTER 15.

Over the Edge !

BEYOND that high shoulder of hill the road plunged into another pass between two high, glittering slopes of the moonlit mountains.

It wound snake-like, with the tracks of the other car always vanishing ahead round the next blind corner. Kildare, deliberately skidding the car round the bends to save precious moments, kept on at a rapid pace.

On the glittering slopes on either side of the road big boulders were piled. From Tom Merry, as they swung breathlessly round a sharp twist, there broke a sudden, startled shout:

"Look out—"

Seated as he was on the near-side, the captain of the Shell had been in a position to see farther round the right-hand bend than they were taking with a rapid skid. He had seen before Kildare could see it a big boulder that lay in the centre of the narrow road.

There was a sharp exclamation from Kildare.

At the pace they were travelling, a sudden application of the brakes could only have spelled disaster.

The captain kept his head even then. Slipping into neutral, he roared up the engine, and changed swiftly into lower gear. Cutting off the engine instantly, he brought the car to a standstill with scarcely a skid, one of the front wheels practically touching the jagged rock that barred their path.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "That was a narrow shave!"

He opened the door and sprang out. The others tumbled out after him.

"So they thought they'd wreck us!" muttered Sir Napier, with a grim laugh.

The marks in the snow showed plainly enough where the car in front had been brought to a standstill, and its occupants had climbed out to roll the boulder from the edge of the hillside into the road, before speeding on.

It was a harder task to drag the boulder back on to the slope than it had been to roll it into the road! But the road was so narrow that until the boulder had been dragged on to the foot of the steep slope, it was impossible for their car to proceed.

They managed the task at last, and scrambled back into the purring car. Kildare hastily slipped in the gear-lever, and they sped on once more, accelerating swiftly as the captain changed up.

But the delay had enabled their quarry to forge ahead.

When they emerged at the other end of the pass, on to another bare hillside, there was no sign of the car ahead.

"Well, we can't lose them, anyway!" said Kildare coolly, his eyes on the tracks in the snow.

On and on through the moonlit road led them, among the towering mountain peaks. Through narrow valleys, over the great bare shoulders of snow-clad hills, through shadowy defiles, over narrow stone bridges with surging mountain streams beneath. For two miles or more they followed the car-tracks in the snow before getting a glimpse of their quarry again.

But at last, high on a wind-swept moor, they could see far ahead of them the yellow glare of distant headlamps, and the tiny, dark shape of a racing car.

"There they are!" breathed Tom.

It was an eerie, thrilling drive through the white moonlit mountains, with the icy air streaming past them, and the tracks of the revolutionaries' car ever ahead of them, deep and clear. But the St. Jim's party had scarcely time to think of the thrill of it! It was of Cousin Ethel that their thoughts were.

And gradually, slowly but surely, they were overhauling the car in front!

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It was evident that the driver of the car ahead had not the same steady nerve as Eric Kildare.

On the snowy roads, with the ever present danger of a skid to unnerve the man at the wheel, only a superb driver could keep up the pace that Kildare was making.

But Kildare's hands never wavered as, with eyes glued to the treacherous road flying past beneath their racing wheels, he kept on at a slashing speed.

They swept round a wide bend, past deep, gleaming drifts, to find that their quarry was less than a quarter of a mile ahead on a dangerous stretch of road that wound over a hill-top. The moon, which had been obscured for a while among the black clouds, appeared again suddenly, lighting up the scene with an eerie, unearthly light.

Nearer and nearer to the other car, as it wound with desperate speed up the twisting road, they climbed in hot pursuit.

Nearer and nearer—

"We'll catch 'em in another mile!" muttered Monty, with excitedly gleaming eyes.

They were nearing the top of the hill now. On their right rose the desolate, jagged hill-top. To their left, the ground fell away steeply from the edge of the road, growing more and more precipitous as they roared on.

They could make out now the figures in the car ahead.

Five of them altogether—Charcas at the wheel, the Wolf at his side, two others in the back seat with Ethel between them. Tom Merry recognised the head of one of the pair beside Ethel as being the little saw-toothed man who had attacked Sir Napier in the train, during the journey of the St. Jim's party to Wales.

Nearer and nearer to the racing car in front!

It swept over the wind-swept summit of the hill, and vanished. But soon the pursuers were passing over the lofty crest themselves, with miles of snow-bound countryside spread below them in the white light of the moon.

Lurching and swaying dangerously on the skiddy road, the leading car plunged down the steep hillside at break-neck speed.

And behind them, overhauling them foot by foot, came their grim pursuers!

Crack!

Above the roar of the engines, a sudden sharp report rang out on the icy air.

From the rear seat of the front car, there came a stabbing flash of flame, and a bullet whistled past Tom Merry's ear, causing him to duck instinctively.

"Gweat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "The soundwells are fivin' at us—"

"Heads down!" yelled Kildare, as another bullet came whining up the hillside from the rushing car below.

But the speed at which they were travelling made the aim of the man with the automatic wild and uncertain. The second bullet flew more than a yard wide of them.

And he did not fire again!

"Look!" shouted Tom breathlessly. "Ethel—"

The slim figure of Cousin Ethel had risen in the back seat of the revolutionaries' car. Tom Merry saw one of the South Americans grasp at her, but the girl beat him off with a desperate blow.

"She's going to jump out!" yelled Monty Lowther.

The next moment Cousin Ethel had leapt from the flying car.

They saw her fall into a deep white drift beside the road. But what followed caused everyone to turn their eyes back to the car from which she had so daringly escaped.

Evidently the unexpected, amazingly plucky act of their prisoner had startled the four South Americans immeasurably. Charcas, at the wheel, turned his head instinctively as he heard the shouts from his companions—and that moment of distracted attention on the part of their driver cost the fugitives dear!

The car swung to the side of the road, where the steep, precipitous hillside took a turn upwards and then dropped sheer to the valley below. Faintly above the noise of the cars' engines, to the ears of the St. Jim's party, came a desperate scream.

They saw Charcas wrench at the wheel to bring the car back on to the road.

With spinning wheels, the front car twisted round, skidding out towards the brink. Tom Merry caught his breath with horror as he saw the dark shape of it, with piercing headlamps blazing to the sky, go hurtling out over the precipitous edge, falling, falling, like a doomed monster, into the abyss.

CHAPTER 16.

The Secret of the Code !

"HARK!"

"Here they come!"

"They're back—"

In the big hall of Llanfellyn Towers, Manners and Talbot, and Blake & Co., and Baggy Trimble, and Doris and Lady Peggy, jumped eagerly to their feet.

From outside had come the sound of a motor-car. A great log fire was crackling cheerily in the grate now. During their anxious wait, the remaining juniors and the two girls with them had not thought for a moment of going back to bed. They had waited where they were, passing the time by roasting chestnuts and brewing cocoa. The dancing light of the flames glowed cheerfully on the scene, with its shadowy ceiling, and the Christmas decorations to remind them that it was Christmas morning!

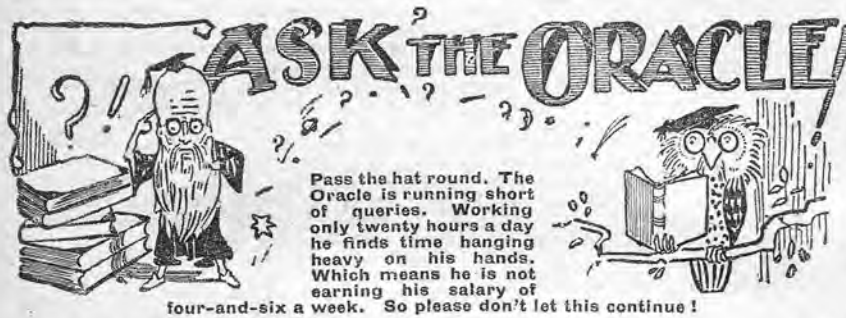
Outside, dawn was breaking.
"Yes, they're back!" breathed Dor's Levison.
Jack Blake hurried to the front door and flung it open. The others crowded to his side.
"Ethel!" yelled Reginald Talbot, a wonderful relief lighting up his face, as it had the faces of all the rest.
For the first thing they saw was the smiling figure of Cousin Ethel jumping from the car that had drawn up outside, at the foot of the steps.
"Yes, it's me!" laughed Ethel, hurrying up the steps.
"All safe and sound!"
The juniors in the doorway gave an excited cheer. Then Blake gripped Talbot's arm.

"Look! Great pip! Charcas!"
For the figure of Charcas, the South American, was climbing sullenly out of the car, with Tom, Merry and Monty Lowther keeping a grim watch upon him.

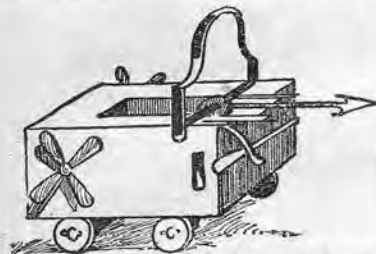
"What the dickens—"
"How on earth—"
There were breathless ejaculations and questions from the group at the top of the steps as Charcas was hustled up them, his eyes glittering savagely, but with an expression of recognised defeat upon his handsome, swarthy face. He stepped into the hall, with Tom and Monty on either side of him, and stood sullenly with his eyes on the floor. Levison and the swell of St. Jim's, Kildare and his uncle, followed them in, and Kildare shut the door.
"Hallo, you chaps!" grinned Monty Lowther. He sniffed.
"My hat! Cocoa! I can smell it!"

Blake, with an excited chuckle, hurried to the fireplace, where the cocoa was simmering on the hob and cups were waiting ready for their return.
A wonderful change had come over the spirits of those who had been waiting so anxiously.

(Continued on next page.)



Q.—What is a Ballista?
A.—This question comes from a chum in the North who has been reading an old-time romance, and is stumped over a word he came across. That word was "Ballista," and the hero of the story talks about using one on his enemy to get him



A military engine of war—but not in use now!

out of a certain stronghold. My chum thought that this ballista might be a long sword, or a large size in bow and arrows. No, chum, it is not quite that. A ballista is a military engine, as shown in the sketch, that was used for hurling darts and stones. Now you can see why the hero of that romance wanted one to remove his opponent off the face of the earth!

Q.—What town in South Africa was defended during the Boer War by the chief of the Scout movement?

A.—Mafeking, which was held by General Baden-Powell, as he then was called.

Q.—At what age may a fellow join the Royal Air Force?

A.—Between 18 and 25, "Regular Reader," of Hull. If your eyesight is bad, as you seem to imply, this doubtless would handicap you for joining, for, of course, all candidates have to undergo a strict medical examination. Any letters sent care of the Editor of the GEM will reach me.

Q.—Who owns Sumatra?

A.—To test him I put this query to the office-boy, remarking that it had been sent in by Jack Pentelow, a Hackney reader. The O.B. said it was either Lord Derby or Sir Abe Bailey, and he thought it was entered for next year's Derby. He expressed his disgust when I told him that Sumatra was merely an island in the East Indies. If that lad was any more ignorant he'd be unconscious! But to reply to you, Jack—Sumatra is owned by Holland.

Q.—Why does a ham have a paper frill?

A.—This, Geo. Smedley, of Maltby, is due to a very old-time custom. At the old baronial feasts, the whole ham was passed round the board and each guest had to hold it with his left hand while he carved his own portion with his right. So the frill, which in those days was made of linen, saved him from getting his fingers greasy.

Q.—Where did the expression "not enough room to swing a cat" originate?

A.—Such is the very interesting question sent me by a girl reader of the jewel of papers who wishes to be known as "Sal." Really, it has nothing to do with swinging a cat by the tail, as a lot of people imagine when they refer in this way to the smallness of a room. It is an old Navy term, supposed to have come from the days when some ships had quarters so cramped that the sailors used to say there was no room to swing a cat—the cat-o'-nine-tails, wielded usually by the bo'sun.

Q.—Who is Bogoljubow?

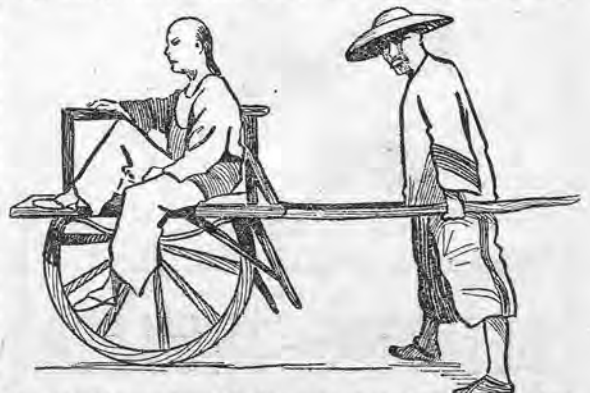
A.—One of the finest chess players in the world, Samson Fisher, of Ashby-de-la-Zouch. He has beaten most of the masters and his recent battle with Alekhine at Wiesbaden was the talk of the who's chess world. He would have beaten me, too, in the Lyons Corner House, but that I hid his best pawn in my whiskers. To pronounce his name, you should first take a big chew of pepsin and then say it quickly like this—Bogoljubow.

Q.—What is a one-wheel barrow of China?

A.—In the East, China to be precise, they use a very large one-wheel barrow, as illustrated by our GEM artist, to carry both passengers and goods. It's a kind of taxi to the Orientals.

Q.—Do Americans talk English?

A.—Waal say! Whadyer think of that, bo's and bo'esses? Does "Young Gramologue," of Dartmouth, think he's the nifty Smart Alec handing a lobster the lemon when he slams over that brand of wise-crack? The Americans, chum, get off their chests a luxurious lingo which they call "good Yewnited States," a tongue which undoubtedly had its origin in the English language. Many words are spelt differently by them instead of a pair of socks, for instance, they would write "sox." Theatre becomes theater, and is pronounced in the American language as "thee-ay-ter." "Aluminium" is pronounced and spelt in the States without a second "i." An Italian to them is an "Eye-talian," and a lieutenant, or as we say "left-en-ant," is pronounced "loot-en-ant."



How the Chinese travel in the land of the Orientals—a one-wheel barrow which is equivalent to our taxi!

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The sight of Cousin Ethel, smiling and happy and safe, was like a magic tonic for them all! The juniors gripped her hands, and Doris and Lady Peggy kissed her joyfully. Ethel threw off her coat, with a happy laugh.

"Yes, I'm back all right!" she said. "Thanks to my rescuers!"

"Oh, wot, deah gal!" grinned Arthur Augustus. "It was the way you jumped out of that cab that we have to thank more than anything! Bai Jove, I've nevah seen anythin' more pluckay!"

"But what's happened?" cried Blake, with eager impatience, as he gave Ethel a cup of steaming cocoa, and the others handed cups to her rescuers. He glanced grimly at Charcas. "How did you capture thir rotter, too?"

There was a muttered imprecation from the South American.

In quiet tones, Sir Napier told their story. The listening juniors caught their breath as they learnt of the disaster to the South Americans' car, a few moments after Ethel had leapt from it, to land safely in the deep snowdrift beside the road.

"My hat!" breathed Herries. "They—they went over the edge?"

"Yes," nodded Sir Napier grimly. "If the hillside had not been deep in snow, of course, they would all have been killed. As it was, two of them were badly hurt, and Charcas was so dazed at first that we were able to climb down and collar him without much difficulty—"

"But the Wolf?" cried Digby.

Sir Napier frowned.

"Unfortunately, that villain got away. After he had scrambled out of the drift into which he fell, we saw him vanish into the edge of a big wood at the foot of the slope. It would have been useless to attempt to follow him."

"What about the two injured ones?" asked Manners.

"They were badly hurt, young 'un," explained Kildare. "We left them in a cottage near the scene of the accident. It was the cottage of a shepherd—a powerfully built chap, if ever there was one! When he heard our story, he promised us that the scoundrels should not leave his place until the police called for them. In any case, they are too badly hurt to give any trouble."

"If only the Wolf hadn't escaped us!" grunted Monty Lowther gloomily.

"Anyway, you've got Charcas and the others!" grinned Blake.

There was a harsh laugh from Charcas. His sullen face lit up with a sneering smile that revealed his gleaming white teeth.

"What do I care?" he cried mockingly. "The Wolf has escaped—"

"You'll probably care a good deal when you are facing the authorities on a charge of arson!" cut in Kildare coolly. "That is a pretty serious thing in England, Charcas, as you'll learn!"

The South American shrugged, with an air of easy bravado.

"What do I care?" he repeated. "The Wolf is safe—my leader! He will return to Rioguary, and soon there will be a revolution there that will place him in the shoes of President Garcia!"

"You seem pretty sure of that!" snapped Levison.

"I am very sure!" Charcas' eyes glittered. "Thanks to the destruction of that paper, which was burnt before your eyes, the agents now working for the Wolf in Rioguary will never be discovered. They will continue their secret efforts on his behalf—and, thanks to them, the time will soon be ripe for the Wolf to strike!"

He threw back his head and laughed.

"Ours is the triumph!" he shouted excitedly, his eyes gleaming with an almost fanatical light. "When that paper was destroyed, under your eyes, that was our victory! You cannot deny it! Yes, we have beaten you!"

"He's right there!" muttered Tom Merry. "They've won really. Oh, well—"

He shrugged his shoulders rather hopelessly.

There was a sudden chuckle from Blake.

"Half a jiff," grinned the leader of the Fourth. "I think Peggy has got something to tell you!"

Sir Napier, Eric Kildare, Tom and Monty Lowther, Levison and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, stared at Blake in surprise. Then they glanced at Lady Peggy.

"What have you got to tell us?" ejaculated Sir Napier wonderingly, surprised by Blake's tone.

Lady Peggy grinned cheerily.

"I couldn't tell you before you buzzed off to rescue Ethel," she explained. "I fainted, you know. The excitement, I s'pose, of knowing how I'd fooled him—"

"Fooled him?" echoed Kildare in astonishment. "Whom?"

"Why, the Wolf!" chuckled Lady Peggy. Her eyes were very bright. "You remember how the light went out just as he was going to stick that blessed paper on the fire?"

"Yes!" breathed Tom Merry.

"And I'd taken it? I expect you thought I was an awful ass to try that, with Ethel's safety at stake," went on the tomboy of Spalding Hall. "But it worked!"

"What worked?" gasped Monty Lowther.

"Why, my little wheeze!" laughed Peggy. "You see, the rolled-up paper the Wolf snatched from me, threw in the fire, and destroyed, wasn't the giddy secret paper from Rioguary at all! As a matter of fact, it was a piece of paper I'd been sketching old Gussy on—Gussy tobogganing, you know, and landing on his face in the snow—"

"B-bai Jove!"

"It was lying on a chair, and I had just time to pick it up and roll it into a ball before the lights went on again," finished Lady Peggy, with dancing eyes. "It was me that put out the lights, of course, though I hardly dared think the wheeze would work! But—well, it did!"

She went to the chimney-piece, and took from it a piece of paper that everyone recognised.

"Here's the real secret paper," she added, with a laugh. "I stuck it behind a cushion on the sofa as the lights went up."

For a moment there was a breathless silence in the hall.

Lady Peggy handed the paper to Sir Napier, who took it like a man in a dream.

The silence was broken by a gasping cry from Charcas.

The face of the South American was a picture of amazement and fury.

"Carajo!"

He flung himself forward, making a wild snatch at the paper in Sir Napier's hand. But in an instant Kildare and Tom Merry had grasped him and dragged him back. For a few moments he struggled fiercely; then, as he realised that he was helpless, he quietened down.

"So you don't win after all, Charcas!" chuckled Tom Merry softly.

Charcas did not answer. But his eyes, as they rested on the smiling face of Lady Peggy, held an expression that showed his feelings eloquently.

"That's not all, either!" put in Blake serenely. "As a matter of fact, we've been examining that giddy paper while you've been out on the trail, and we've spotted the solution to that code!"

"What?" yelled Tom Merry.

"You really mean that you've made sense of these jumbles of letters?" ejaculated Kildare.

"Rather!" nodded Blake. "It was Manners that hit on it, as a matter of fact."

And when Charcas had been taken away and locked in a store-room, with barred windows, there to await the arrival

Another MYSTERY!



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of the police, and to reflect at his leisure over his defeat, Manners explained the secret of the code.

"I once read a book about codes," he explained, "and I remembered that a fairly common kind is where certain letters are the key; the key-letters are put first in a row of twenty-six letters that are arranged in alphabetical order. If, say, Y was a key-letter, Y would stand for A, Z for B, A for C, and B for D, and so on.

"It was a lucky guess that gave me the key-letters for this code. I suddenly thought of what seemed a likely phrase—'Vive el Lobo!' I once picked up a bit of Spanish, and I knew that meant 'Three cheers for the Wolf!' roughly speaking. So I tried the initials of that phrase—V, E, L. And they worked! In that jumble of letters the first letter is from an alphabet beginning with V, if you see what I mean; the second from one starting with E; and the third with the key-letter L. Then back to V again."

He took a piece of paper from his pocket. "Here it is, written out," he grinned. "See how it works?"

start with G, for example, you'd write B. If you wanted G for the second letter as well, you'd write K. Twig?"

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus, adjusting his monocle and surveying Manners with great admiration. "How fidgetfully clever!"

"Oh, rats! Simply a bit of luck that I guessed the key-letters!" grinned Manners.



With piercing headlamps blazing to the sky, the South Americans' car hurtled out over the precipitous edge!

The others crowded round eagerly. Beneath an ordinary alphabet Manners had written three others:

"ABCDEF GHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
VWXYZABCDEFGHIJKLMN O PQRSTU
EFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTU V WXYZ ABCD
LMNOPQRSTU V WXYZ ABCDEF GHIJK."

"It's simple enough!" he chuckled. "Whatever letter you want, you just read it off the top alphabet. For the first letter, you take the letter below it on the top line; next, on the second line; and so on. If you wanted to

He glanced at Sir Napier.

"We've decoded the whole thing," he said quietly. "The first lot of letters was M, E, F, G. That spells Raul. The whole name, we found, was Raul Pelligrini. The next was Carlos Benegas—"

"Good gad!" gasped Sir Napier. "I know those two men well—high officers of the Rioguan army! The scoundrels! To think that they are traitors!"

He clapped Manners on the shoulder.

"Splendid!" he cried. "These names shall all be cabled at once to Rioguan. And when the Wolf returns home I am afraid he will find all his friends rounded up, and himself a captured prisoner instead of a coming President!"

"So we win, aftah all!" chuckled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Ha, ha, ha! Rather!"

And a lusty cheer from the St. Jim's juniors echoed round the firelit hall of Llanfellyn Towers, as the grey light of Christmas morning streamed in through the tall window upon the happy faces of Sir Napier Wynter and his guests.

That was a Christmas Day that the juniors remembered! So, too, did their girl-chums of Spalding Hall, and the captain of St. Jim's.

Without delay, a cable was sent, by means of the telephone, to Rioguan, informing President Garcia, in another code, of which Sir Napier and the President alone knew the secret, of the names of the traitors. Soon after that the police arrived, and Charcas was taken away from

(Continued on page 28.)

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OUR POPULAR SCHOOL SERIAL!

The Worst Form at Codrington!

By
David
Goodwin



INTRODUCTION
On Next Page.

At last the chance comes the way of the Codrington conspirators to bring about the complete downfall of their Form master, the Woolly Lambe.

Sent to Coventry!

I GAVE my London work up, lads, because my wish has always been to have the mastership of a Form in a big Public school, and my wish has been fulfilled at Codrington. I don't mean to clear out unless I'm wanted to."

"Nobody'll want you to, sir!" chorused Taffy Wynne & Co. enthusiastically.

The Woolly Lambe coloured slightly with pleasure.

"I have to be rather rough on the Remove sometimes, you know. But what I want to say to you is this—I've given you a full explanation because you've been so mixed up with the affair that it's due to you; but I want your promise to say nothing about this in the school."

"You've the right to order us to, if you like, sir," said Taffy, "and, for my part, I'd do any mortal thing you asked me. You've my promise."

"And ours, sir" chorused the others.

Mr. Lambe shook hands with them.

"Till I give you leave to speak, then," he said. "Come along."

They followed him back to the library.

"The Woolly Lambe for ever!" murmured Birne behind his back. "But it's rough on us, this promise."

"Not it!" said Dercker. "I foresee it's goin' to lead to the giddiest jape of the whole term."

"It's a fact!" cried Kent-Williams, hurrying into THE GEM LIBRARY.—No 1.141.

the dormitory at three in the afternoon, with a look of concern on his face. "You've told me to find out, an' I've done it. The Woolly Lambe ain't arrested at all. He's caught the thief, an' Sir Harry's plate's been found. They're making a giddy hero of him!"

"Are you sure?" exclaimed Ferguson. He and Kempe were the only other occupants of the dormitory.

"Dead sure! He turned up at Roydon with the thief, an' was complimented by the police, an' Sir Harry fell on his neck an' wept with gratitude."

Kempe uttered an exclamation of dismay. As for Ferguson, his very veins swelled up with wrath; he could not speak, and went purple in the face.

"And those beasts—Wynne and his pals—were right in the thick of it again!" groaned Kent-Williams.

"Let's go and see what's going on. All the idiots are flockin' into Number Twelve. I believe they've turned right round, and are backing up Lambe now."

The three conspirators went to the prep room, and their worst fears were realised. The Remove, stirred to its depths by this last exploit, were more inclined to cheer for the Woolly Lambe than to abuse him.

Taffy and his chums had been back from Roydon for some time, and, though they kept Mr. Lambe's secret as promised, they gave a full account of his turning up with the thieves in custody.

"By gum! He's a jolly good chap, after all—the Lambe!" cried Walsh enthusiastically. "You can say what you like, but a fellow who's up to a game like that ain't a bad sort for a master."

"Good old Lambe! I always said he was all right!" vociferated Johnson.

"Did Beckford's servants count the gold plate after it had been in your hands?" sneered Ferguson. "They'll be able to put the missin' articles down to the thieves."

Taffy turned and regarded him coolly.

"Oh, you're there, are you?" he said. "How d'you like the way things are turning out? I should think you feel like change for a threepenny-bit in ha'pence—eh?"

"Cheer up, Fergy! Don't look so down in the mouth!" said Birne. "I told you you were an ass long ago, but you didn't believe it. You see it now, don't you?"

"I see you sucking up to this precious gaol-bird who goes about giving his pals away!" said Ferguson viciously. "And I've seen that all along. You—"

"Dry up!" said several threatening voices. "You can chuck all that rot now. Lambe's a rippin' sort!"

"All right!" shouted Ferguson. "Keep your run-away gaol-bird, then. If you like havin' a stone-breakin' convict over you—why, do! There are three of us here who aren't so fond of company off the treadmill, and we mean to manage things our own way. Wait till the smash comes, and he's shown up, and then you'll see what the Remove's got to be proud of—our ex-master doin' ten years penal!"

There was silence for a moment or two, and Dereker, flushed with anger, jumped up on a form next the wall.

"Here, you chaps!" he cried. "Here's something for you to look at! We've got three chaps here who are too good to associate with Lambe—fine, honest, straightforward chaps—Fergy, Kempe, and Kent-Williams!"

He pulled out of his pocket the anonymous letter that had been sent to Roydon, and flourished it before the eyes of the Remove.

Ferguson and his friends made a rush at Dereker, but the Taffy brigade kept them back. The Form were anxious to hear what was up.

"Look here, an' see what these beauties call fair play!" cried Dereker. "They made up this letter between 'em, and Kent printed it, and sent it to Sir Harry, so as to arrive when we were all at dinner."

He read out the anonymous message, warning Sir Harry Beckford that his guest was a thief, and containing the other accusations.

There was a moment's pause, and then came a howl of execration from the whole Remove.

"It's a lie! We never wrote it!" roared Ferguson.

"I'd nothing to do with it, and I'm willing to swear it!" cried Kent-Williams shrilly.

"I saw Kent-Williams with my own eyes handin' it in at the village post-office!" announced Dereker. "And Jelly saw them plottin' it in the afternoon. It's written on Codrington impot paper, and I say it's the work of the Ferguson crew!"

A grim silence fell on the room.

"Well, you fellows," said Dereker finally, "what do you say? If these three fine, straightforward chaps are too good to associate with Lambe, I think they're too good to associate with us."

"This ain't funny, Derry," said Johnson. "It's serious."

He jumped up on a form.

"The Remove is hot stuff, but it plays the game. I move that Ferguson, Kempe, and Kent-Williams, who've disgraced the Form, be cut by everybody in it."

"Hear, hear!" shouted twenty voices.

"We've never had a low-down trick like this played before; and sneaks who write anonymous letters to a man's host aren't up to the Remove standard. I move the three rotters referred to be hereby sent to Coventry, and made to stay there!"

"Hear, hear!—Carried unanimously!" shouted the Remove.

Ferguson, nearly frothing at the mouth with anger, strode up to the form and shook his fist in Johnson's face. He was breaking out into a furious tirade, when the rest of the Remove pressed round him dangerously.

"None of that!" they cried. "If any of you three cads as much as open your mouths, we'll give you a Form licking, and run you through the gauntlet, as well as cut you!"

"And you're lucky to escape it!" said Taffy contemptuously. "Get, while you've a whole skin!"

The aspect of the assemblage was so threatening that the Ferguson brigade, fairly scared, made for the door.

Ferguson paused when he reached it, and turned round.

"Nobody cares for being cut by such a lot of rats as you!" he snarled. "You're welcome to your treadmill pet, and I'll show you before many days are out what he's booked for. Go to blazes, all the lot of you!"

A rush was made, but Ferguson and his two allies fled so swiftly that they made good their escape; and the much-ruffled Remove returned to the prep room.

"That just about settles our game," said Kempe gloomily, as the Fergusons reached the safe seclusion of the pavilion. "We may as well chuck it now."

"Chuck it? What do you mean?" snapped Ferguson.

"I always said sendin' that letter was a silly game," said Kempe despondently. "What good's it done us? I didn't like the idea from the first. It really was a bit low-down, I think."

"Do you?" answered Kent-Williams savagely. "Didn't you join in just as much as any of us? Didn't you say it was a rippin' good notion? You sweep, you know you did! We all had an equal share in it."

"It was your notion, and I say it was a rotten one!" said Kempe angrily.

"All right, just say it again, and put your fists up!" spluttered Kent-Williams, dancing with rage. "If I have any more of your cheek, young Kempe—"

"Here, dry up, you two!" growled Ferguson. "We shan't make matters any better by quarrelling. The only way to get our own back is to hang together, and put all we know into it. You say Lambe's on top, and the Form swears by him. Well, is that goin' to last? How long d'you think this bobby-hunted beauty is likely to humbug everybody? He's got to the end of his fether now, and he'll come down with a run—with a little help from us."

Kempe and Kent-Williams were doubtful about it at first, but Ferguson's fiery eloquence soon stirred them up. They were as keen as ever in half an hour, and promised the Woolly Lambe a first-class disaster for a finish. The rest of the day was spent in plotting various schemes and piecing together the evidence.

The Man with the Cropped Hair!

THE Remove, in class, in House, and on the football-field, treated the three as if they did not exist. Not a soul spoke to them. The seniors noticed it, and though Ferguson & Co. treated it all with lofty disdain, they were secretly galled by it.

"Even the fags are losing their respect for us," grumbled Ferguson.

"If ever they had any," growled Kempe.

"You're a despondin' brute, Kempe. It's a half to-day. Let's go right away from all these rotters, an' not come back till we've settled on a plan that'll bring victory."

They fulfilled the first part of the programme well enough. Leaving the rest of Codrington on the football-field, they wandered away to Quex Woods, and thence to the open moors behind the hill just to the north of the school.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,141.

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Convinced that Mr. Wollaston Lambe, their new Form-master, is an escaped convict, Taffy Wynne & Co. and Ferguson & Co., rival factions in the Remove, the most unruly Form at Codrington, determine to bring pressure to bear to rid the school of the new master. Their efforts prove of little avail, however, for the Woolly Lambe not only shows that he is capable of taking care of himself and his Form, but starbles the school by catching a cracksmen in the act of looting the school's strong room. Although Wynne & Co. are now ready to back up the Woolly Lambe, Ferguson and his cronies are still determined to expose him. Later, Taffy Wynne and his chums, together with Canon Wyndham, the headmaster of Codrington, and Mr. Wollaston Lambe, are invited to dine at Roydon Hall, the home of Sir Harry Beckford, a governor of the school. Kent-Williams at the instigation of Ferguson, expresses an anonymous letter to Sir Harry warning the wealthy baronet that the Form-master is a thief. Sir Harry promptly ignores the incriminating missive. Next morning, however, news is received to the effect that a robbery has taken place at Roydon Hall, and Taffy & Co. are requested to return there immediately. Remembering two men they had seen acting suspiciously in a cutcart under an old bridge, Taffy and his cronies make a close examination of the spot and discover the hidden loot. In the highest of spirits they rush to Roydon Hall, where they learn to their astonishment that the Woolly Lambe has captured the thieves, and that the Form-master is none other than Mr. Slade Melhuem, one of the greatest crime investigators in England!

(Now read on.)

Somehow the fertile invention of the partners seemed to have left them. They could not think of any sure way to bring the Woolly Lambe to book. They were as convinced as ever that he ought to be in the hands of the police; but how were they to get him there?

Suddenly a strange voice broke on their ears.

"Young gents!"

They all looked at each other wonderingly, and then stared round about them. Nobody was to be seen. The wood and the moor were empty of all life.

"Young gents! Don't make no row. I wants a word with yer."

The voice came from the dry ditch, which was half screened with briars and whortleberry shrubs. And in the uncertain light a round bullet-like, close-cropped head poked up through the undergrowth.

"Great Scott!" said Ferguson, starting back.

"Sh!" went on the voice. Beneath the head was a scraggy, rather brutal-looking face, and as its owner slowly rose a little higher, the juniors saw he was clad in a drab-coloured suit marked with broad black arrow-heads.

"It's all right!" said the stranger hoarsely. "I'm a pal, I am. You wouldn't give away a pore bloke, would you, gents?"

"A convict, by gum!" said Kempe, staring at the man with wide-open eyes. "Who are you? Have you escaped from Longmoor?"

"That's it, guv'nor!" said the man, looking from one to the other with eyes that were sharp as a ferret's. "I've come over nineteen miles, mostly on me stomach, after adventures as'd make yer 'air curl. I'm an innocent man, wrongly convicted, gents!"

Ferguson felt especially nervous, for he guessed what the fugitive needed most was clothes, and as he was the biggest of the three, his own clothes would be the only ones of any use to the convict. It would be awkward if the escaped man insisted on having them. A fight with such a tough customer was out of the question. The chums eyed him warily, and were ready to make a bolt for it.

"We've no food," said Ferguson shortly, "and we must be getting back. We'll leave you—"

"No, stop a bit, young sir" said the convict earnestly, "an' I'll tell yer why it is I've come to this 'ere place. You belongs to Codrington School, over there, don't yer?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Ah, I knows the place! Well, there's a chap gone there, I've heard, who I wants to see werry bad." An ugly look came over the man's face. "D'yer know of a bloke there of the name of Lambe?"

"Know him?" said Ferguson. "Why, he's our Form-master!"

"Is 'e, indeed, though?" A cunning expression came into the man's eyes, and he scanned the faces of the boys keenly. "Now, that's a bit of luck! Fancy me runnin' across you like this—quite accidental! Your master, eh? Now, I should think, from what I knows o' him, that he's a rough 'un to have for a master."

"He's a beast!" said Ferguson viciously. "An unmitigated beast!"

The convict's eyes twinkled again.

"He's no pal o' yours, then? I thought he wouldn't be. I'd like," he added slowly—"I'd like some'ow to see Lambe for five minutes—only for five minutes, or even less, it'd be plenty."

"D'you think he'd help you, then?" asked Ferguson, feeling that strange events were moving.

"Elp me! I dunno 'bout that. I might 'elp him, though—yes, I might 'elp 'im to something."

"You've a grudge against Lambe," Ferguson said. "I can see."

"So I 'ave," returned the convict viciously—"a bit of a grudge. Same as yourselves, young gents."

"You needn't trouble to put on any mysteries with us," said Ferguson. "We've seen a lot of this game, and a kid could see what's up. You've been mixed up in some crime or other with Lambe—you're innocent, for all I know—and he's split on you to save himself. You're doing time, while he's as free as air. And you're wild about it, naturally. He's betrayed his old pal, and I don't wonder at your wantin' revenge."

The convict listened to this open-mouthed; then he broke into a cackle of laughter, rocking himself to and fro.

"You're a clever young gent, blow me if you ain't!" He laughed afresh, doubling himself up. "Fancy your guessin' of it like that! You're a sharp 'un!"

Ferguson winked at him.

"It's no good tryin' ter hide nothin' from you," said the convict, with another fit of laughter.

"I know what's o'clock pretty well," said Ferguson, wagging his head. "I'll tell you a thing or two about Lambe that's happened since you've been in prison."

He related the incidents of the Remove master's hiding under the willow-bushes, the midnight visitor who climbed up the ivy, and other matters with which the reader is acquainted. The convict listened, and said not a word.

"Well, he's fair put on you, hasn't he?" remarked the man at last. "An', by the way, will you get me something to eat?" asked the man. "Yer needn't be afraid; I'll never mention you gave me anything."

Ferguson hesitated.

"I don't know. We'll see about that. But here's some chocolate if you're hungry."

He tossed a cake of it over to the man, who tore the silver-foil off and wolfed the chocolate greedily.

"Yer want ter know, do yer?" he said, watching the boys' faces. "Did yer ever hear o' this bloke Lambe by any other name?"

"No," said Ferguson, listening with interest.

"Never 'eard him called Methuen—Mr. Slade Methuen?"

"No, never heard the name," Ferguson answered. "Is it an alias of his?"

"Might ha' been," said the man cunningly. "Well, never mind, if you don't know it."

"But you haven't told us what you've had to do with him."

"I reckon I'll keep that to meself, after all. Don't you try to know more'n's good for yer, young gent. You'd be glad to get a bit o' your own back?"

"Yes, we should!"

"Werry well. Now, suppose you was to get me a suit o' clothes on the quiet, an' some grub, so's I have a fair chance, an' then tell me where I'm likeliest to run across Lambe, alone an' by himself?"

The convict's eyes twinkled as he said the words, and Ferguson hesitated.

"What do you want to do when you meet him?" he asked cautiously.

The convict bit his lip.

"Oh, nothing much, guv'nor! But I want to put one over on 'im, an' do it properly. I want to tackle him fair an' square, like an Englishman, an' mean to pay 'im for the dirty trick he done me!"

The three partners exchanged glances.

"I can't clear meself—I know that. He got me too tight. I'm tried an' sentenced—it was a year ago—an' I've made things worse for meself by breakin' prison. But only let me give 'im a proper thrashin', fair an' square with fists, an' no byplay, an' I'll work out the rest o' me sentence an' be happy over it. That's all I want."

"You won't do any more than that?"

"D'yer want me to?" asked the convict, glancing at him covertly.

"No, no! I mean you aren't going to bludgeon him, or anything of that sort?" said Ferguson hastily.

"Nothing dangerous?"

"No fear!" said the convict. "Fists is good enough for me. I scorns all cowardly tricks. I'm an honest man, I am! But there's one thing 'e'll very likely get," he added, looking at Ferguson—"there'll be a big shindy over it afterwards, an' when the question comes up again I'll lay he gets his deserts, an' gets shoved into Longmoor. There's things—er—as didn't come out last time."

Ferguson's eyes shone.

"So that 'e'll get taken away out o' Codrington, an' put where he won't bother nobody," added the convict, watching the boys. "Serve 'im right!"

There was another pause.

"Look here," said Ferguson, "if we help you, and

give you the chance, will you keep our names out of it?"

"You bet I will, young sir! I'll take me oath on it!" Ferguson drew his two partners aside, and consulted with them in a low voice.

The three agreed at length, and, very excited, also decidedly nervous, they returned to their grim acquaintance in the ditch, who had been watching them narrowly.

"We'll help you," said Ferguson, "and we'll get you the best disguise we can. I know where to put my hands on a pretty good one."

"Oh, love you, young sir, you're a proper pal!" said the man. "They'll be searchin' for me round 'ere before 'long, an' I shall need it. I'll lay most uncommon doggo."

"When we've got it for you we'll tell you where you can lie in wait for Lambe. The rest you must do yourself," said Ferguson.

"Let me alone for that," said the convict, with a leer. "Get me the duds, an' bring 'em here. Then give us the office, an' leave the rest to me."

Ferguson glanced at his watch, and, beckoning to his companions, led the way stealthily through the wood. Then, choosing the loneliest route, the three partners hurried back to the school for the necessary disguise, Kempe, at least, feeling rather shaky about the knees.

"How d'you think you're going to disguise him?"

"We've got the very thing right on hand. Where did you put those wigs and whiskers and stuff that you bagged from Saunderson, Kent?"

"They're all in the chest in our box-room."

The three conspirators soon reached the place, and Kent-Williams hauled out from the bottom of the chest a wooden box in which were half a dozen wigs, some whiskers and moustaches, grease-paint, and other theatrical necessities.

They belonged to the outfit Saunderson had hired at Fordbury some weeks before. The clothes, uniforms,

and so forth, had gone back to the shop, but Saunderson had long been lamenting the loss of the other things, for which he had had to pay, as may be remembered. Ferguson's gang had "looted" them.

"These are a real bit of luck for the convict chap," said Kempe, his spirits reviving. "What's the make-up to be?"

Ferguson selected carefully a dark, well-made wig with slightly wavy hair and a pair of close side-whiskers, of a short, horsy-looking cut.

"Kent, nip down to the pavilion and go into the men's lobby," said Ferguson. "There's a suit of old tweeds Lodgey wears when he's helping to roll the pitches; they hang up behind the door, and they'll be about the size. Wrap 'em up, and meet us at the back of the grove. I'll bring a sack to carry the things in. Kempe, go and collect some grub. The fellow's got to be fed, or he'll get taking risks and be nabbed."

"Where am I to get it?"

"Go and forage, you ass! If you don't buck up and sharpen your wits, we'll leave you out of the deal altogether."

Kempe looked as though he would not have minded very much if they did; but he departed on a maraud-

ing expedition to such of the Fifth Form studies as were left unguarded by their owners.

In the meantime, Ferguson collected several other necessities, including an old soft hat, a pair of hob-nailed boots from a disused room, and a small sack, which he stuffed under his coat.

Ten minutes later the three cronies foregathered at the back of the little grove behind the school, and put their loot together. Kent-Williams had obtained the suit, and Kempe produced half a loaf of bread and a leaden-looking pork-pie.

"That'll keep the chap awake thinkin' of his sins," said Ferguson, weighing it in his hand. "Shove everything in the bag here, and let's be moving."



There was a rush made at Ferguson and his pals. But the three cads managed to escape the anger of their Form, and retreated to the study.

They set off for the moor, taking it in turns to carry the sack. Just before they left the low grounds, Ferguson stopped and cast an uneasy look up the hill.

"Isn't there somebody up there?" he said.

"It looks like Taffy and one of his confounded pals," returned Kempe.

Two figures were certainly moving away over the crest of the hill, and disappeared beyond it.

"Think they've seen us?"

"No. What does it matter? We'd better take a good look-out that there are no other chaps about, though, before we rouse up our bird."

They followed Ferguson's advice, approaching very stealthily the wood at the outskirts of which the convict's hiding-place lay.

Ferguson dumped the sack down and gave a whistle. The unpleasant-looking head of the fugitive poked up out of the ditch.

"You done a treat," he said. "I never saw you coming till you left the wood. Got the stuff?"

"Yes," said Ferguson, unpacking the sack. The pork-pie and bread came out, together with the other things the boys had brought with them to give to the man.

"Gimme those fust," said the convict eagerly. "I'm perishin' for want o' grub."

He grabbed up the food and attacked it ravenously, making short work of it. Meanwhile the boys sorted out the clothes and make-up ready for the convict to don.

Ferguson & Co. were in a bad state of nerves, looking constantly about them. But no one came in sight.

At last the convict finished eating and turned to the clothes. Then, rapidly getting out of his grey-coloured suit and accusing ringed stockings and forage cap, he thrust them under a bush, and drew on Lodgey's garments.

"These'll do a treat!" he said. "Boots as well? That's good!"

He took a careful look round, and then left the ditch and walked into the wood, the boys following rather apprehensively.

There was a spring bubbling up through the ground near the side, and a little way below it a pool of crystal-clear water had formed. The man looked down into it, and it showed his reflection almost as well as a mirror.

"It's a fair knock-out!" he said. "I shouldn't know it was meself lookin' up at me. You three young 'uns are reg'lar trumps!"

"And now," said Kent Williams, "as you've got all you want, we may as well—"

"Who goes there?"

The words rang through the wood in a sharp tone of command, and, turning, the four saw a mounted warder of Longmoor, in uniform, a rifle across his saddle-bow, riding towards them through the trees.

Ferguson's heart bounded against his ribs, and the other two looked aghast. The only cool one of the four was the convict.

With a quick frown at Ferguson, he went on talking in his ordinary voice, and turned to look quite calmly at the warder.

"Who are you?" said the official sharply, addressing himself to the convict after a glance at the boys. "What's your name?"

"My name's John Chesham," said the convict, in tones of surprise. "I'm a jobbing gardener, an' I'm on the tramp to Fordbury. Why?"

"Take your hat off!"

The man, looking still more astonished, did so, and showed his dark, wavy hair.

"All right," said the warder, with a nod, turning his horse. "Sorry to trouble you. Only orders."

"Are you lookin' for someone, then?" asked the man, replacing his hat.

"Yes; escaped convict from Longmoor," said the warder, as he turned his horse and rode away. "If you should see anything of him, inform the nearest police at once."

The official left the wood and rode straight out across the moor towards Codrington, and the convict, watching him disappear, congratulated himself on a narrow escape!

(Further thrilling chapters of this rousing school serial will be found in next week's bumper number of the GEM.)

THE RETURN OF THE WOLF!

(Continued from page 23.)

Llanfellyn Towers, sullen and beaten, with the unpleasant knowledge that not only would he now have to suffer his deserts, but that, after all his scheming, his chief, El Lobo, was doomed never to succeed in becoming President of Riogway!

And when, later in the day, old Broom, the butler, well on the road to recovery now, returned from the hospital to spend Christmas under the roof of the house that to him was home, there was further reason for delight on the part of Sir Napier and his guests.

With their exciting adventures over, and victory theirs, not even Baggy Trimble had anything to grumble at now in regard to the hospitality of Llanfellyn Towers!

Two days later an answering cable arrived at the house in the mountains from President Garcia. From it Sir Napier and the others learnt that the traitors had already been safely rounded up.

They also learnt that the President had changed his mind about sending his son to St. Jim's.

His anxious inquiries concerning his son were soon put at rest. The real Garcia, who had been kept a prisoner by one of the Wolf's agents in England during Charchas' brief masquerade in his place at St. Jim's, was soon traced by the police, thanks to information grudgingly gained from Charchas himself. And the real son of the President arrived at Llanfellyn Towers none the worse for his temporary captivity a few days after Christmas, there to spend the rest of the holidays in the cheerful company of the St. Jim's juniors.

He was a thoroughly good sort, in contrast to the scoundrel who had stepped into his shoes. And the juniors could not help but feel sorry that he was not to come to St. Jim's after all, but was to return to his father in far-off Riogway.

But one thing was certain—neither Eric Kildare nor the girls of Spalding Hall, nor the School House juniors themselves would ever forget their exciting Christmas as Sir Napier's guests!

The Christmas holidays passed all too quickly for Tom Merry & Co. and their girl chums. Sir Napier made the ideal host and the years and cares fell away from him in the exuberant merrymaking of his youthful guests.

But all things come to an end, and so it was that first day of Term at St. Jim's saw Tom Merry & Co. back at school eager to start the New Year.

And in the warmth and comfort of their studies during the long winter evenings, they told and retold the adventures of the most stirring Christmas they had ever spent under the menace of the Wolf.

THE END.

(You've enjoyed this novel series? Of course! There are still better stories in store for you during 1930. Next week's yarn: "All Through Pongo!" is a typical example of the treats to come.)

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