

AS GOOD AS A CHRISTMAS PRESENT!



2
DIG INTO THIS YARN AT ONCE, BOYS, AND SPEND A MERRY—

ST JIM'S FOR



CHAPTER 1.

A Tussle in the Snow!

TOM MERRY looked out of the dormitory window in the School House of St. Jim's, and gave a whoop of delight, which awakened every boy who had not already been aroused by the jangle of the rising-bell. Manners and Lowther sat up in bed, rubbing their eyes sleepily.

"Ger-ooooh! Jolly cold!" said Monty Lowther. "Going to be a cold Christmas. What are you whooping about, Tom, you lunatic?"

"Hurrah!"

"What's the matter?"

"Snow!"

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"Eh?"
"Snow!" trilled Tom Merry.
"S-N-O-W! Snow! It's falling as thick as you like, and the quad looks like a winding sheet. Snow! Get up, you lazy beggars! Fancy lying in bed when the first snow of the season is on the ground! Get up, and let's go and have a look for Figgins & Co. before breakfast!"

"Good idea!" exclaimed Manners, jumping out of bed.
"Get up, Monty! Get up, you fellows!"

But the fellows of the Shell were already tumbling out of bed. Christmas was close at hand, and in a few days St. Jim's was breaking up for the holidays, but until this morning no snow had fallen on the old school.

The coming of the snow meant fun. There was not a boy in the School House who, as soon as he saw the snow, did not want to go out and look for the New House fellows. There was no fun like a battle of snowballs in the quad.

"Buck up!" exclaimed Tom Merry, who was moving like lightning himself. "The giddy water's frozen in the jug! Groo—it's cold! Get a move on, you fellows!"

In a remarkably short space of time Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were dressed, and with scarves wound round

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—CHRISTMAS WITH TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S!

MERRIE CHRISTMAS!

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.

their necks, they sallied forth from the dormitory. The other fellows followed. As the Terrible Three ran along the passage Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy came out of the Fourth Form dormitory.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake. "You know it's snowing. I see. Were you looking for us? We were just coming to look for you, as a matter of fact."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "We are goin' to give you a high old time, deah boys."

"Pax!" exclaimed Tom Merry, laughing. "Keep your warlike ardour for the common foe, Gussy! No good rowing each other, Blake, with such a splendid opportunity of giving Figgins & Co. the kybosh. We were just going out to look for them. You kids come along—"

"Who are you calling kids?" demanded the three Fourth-Formers with one voice.

"Sorry; I meant cads—that is to say, my respected House fellows," said Tom Merry. "Now, don't start ragging in your own House, but come and have a go at the enemy."

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "Come on, Blake!"

And the School House juniors poured out into the quadrangle. The ground was a sheet of white. Paths and plots had disappeared. The walls and the buildings had a spotless sheeting, and every chimney, every window-sill, was gleaming white in the wintry sun. Snow was still falling in feathery flakes.

The juniors rushed out with a whoop. Snow was what they had wanted for a long time, and here it was at last, and plenty of it. Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's, came tramping through the snow. He was evidently an early riser. He gave the juniors a cheery nod and a good-morning, and then jumped as a snowball spattered in his left ear. But Kildare was a good-tempered fellow, and he only brushed the snow off and laughed as he walked on.

"Here, drop that, Gore!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "The person of the captain is sacred, and most seniors would have licked you for that cheek. Keep your snowballs for Figgins & Co. Hallo, the New House bounders are coming out!"

The door of the New House was open. The rival Houses of St. Jim's were always on the warpath, and neither party was likely to lose this opportunity of settling old accounts.

A swarm of juniors belonging to the Shell and the Third and Fourth Forms had poured out of the New House. Conspicuous among them were Figgins & Co.

Figgins—long and lean and muscular; Wynn—short and plump; and Kerr—the keen and canny Scot, were the three known all over St. Jim's as Figgins & Co., and they were three of the best.

"There they are!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Come on!" "There they are!" exclaimed Figgins at the same moment. And both parties came on promptly.

They gathered snowballs rapidly, and the missiles flew thickly as the rivals of St. Jim's approached to closer quarters. The air seemed full of them, and full, too, of gasps and yelps as they came home on noses and ears. A tall young man who had come in at the gates and was crossing towards the Head's house paused in dismay as he found himself between the two contending parties.

A snowball caught him on the right ear, and he staggered, and then another from the opposite side caught him on the left, and he righted again. Then another landed under his chin, and a fourth knocked his hat off.

"Goodness gracious!" gasped the young man. "Dear me! This is—er—annoying!"

"Come on, deah boys!" shouted D'Arcy, who had old scores to wipe off against Figgins & Co. "Come on, and

give 'em socks!" The swell of the School House was charging gallantly, eyeglass in eye, and snowballs in hand. "Give the howwid boundahs beans, deah boys!"

And the missiles flew from the excited swell of St. Jim's, but D'Arcy was about the worst marksman in the School House, and his snowballs went anywhere but near the target. The tall young man we have mentioned was trying to recover his hat when D'Arcy's fusillade, missing Figgins & Co. by about half a dozen yards, fell thickly upon him. He was biffed right and left, and with a gasp he sat down in the snow. Tom Merry, rushing on to meet the enemy, nearly fell over him.

"Here, don't get in the way!" exclaimed Tom Merry indignantly. "You're stopping our snowballs. I think you might have been more considerate, I do really."

"I—I—I assure you I am not stopping them on purpose, Merry!" gasped the stranger.

Tom looked at him as the young fellow pronounced his name.

Then he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Mr. Dodds."

He dropped his snowballs and seized the hands of the tall young man, and helped him to his feet. Figgins & Co. were rushing on, pelting Tom Merry, and Mr. Dodds received spattering missiles all over him. Tom gallantly placed himself between the visitor and the enemy's fire.

"Hold on, Figgy!" he shouted. "It's Mr. Dodds."

"Oh, is it?" said Figgins, lowering his arm. "We're—ha, ha, ha!—we're sorry, sir."

"Awfully—ha, ha, ha!—sorry, sir!" said Kerr.

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

"I am afraid you weccived some of my snowballs, sir, that were intended for these howwid boundahs, and in that case I beg to apologise most sincerely."

"Oh, don't mention it!" said Mr. Dodds, rubbing the snow from his handsome, clean-shaven face, and setting his hat right again. "It is all right. I came here to see you, Merry, but I don't

want to interrupt your sport. Don't mind me!"

And he walked on towards the House.

"Jolly good sort!" said Figgins. "I like your taste in curates, Tom Merry. Let him get clear, and then we're going to give you socks."

Mr. Dodds disappeared into the principal's house.

Then the School House and the New House parties were at it hammer and tongs. Tom Merry was well backed up, and he led gallantly, and the New House fellows were driven back right up to the door of their own House.

There, however Figgins & Co. rallied them, and they came on again, and the School House fellows were driven back, and a desperate affray raged in the quadrangle.

The snowballs fell as thick as hailstones, and some of the excited juniors, coming to close quarters, grappled with one another, and fell into the snow.



Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had singled out Kerr for his special vengeance.

"Go for 'em!" shouted Figgins, rallying his followers. "Down with the School House!"

The New House juniors came rushing on. The School House party fell back—all except Arthur Augustus! Gussy was seeing red, and he went straight for Kerr.

Kerr had five or six snowballs under his left arm. He saw Gussy coming, and he pelted him steadily. Missile after missile smashed on the aristocratic features of Arthur Augustus, but nothing would have stopped the swell of St. Jim's then. He came right on, and threw his arms round Kerr's neck in an affectionate hug.

"Here, get off!" exclaimed Kerr. "Don't, before the people! We're not in the garden by moonlight alone, and—"

"You boundah!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

Kerr's foot slipped in the snow, and they went down, D'Arcy on top. Kerr gasped as the swell of the School House rubbed his features in the snow.

"Rescue!" spluttered Kerr. "Drag him off!"

Figgins and Wynn came to the rescue in a moment.

They seized hold of Arthur Augustus and pulled, but Arthur Augustus seemed to be fastened to Kerr like a limpet to a rock.

"Welease me!" shouted D'Arcy. "Welease me immediately! I am goin' to give Kerr a feahful thwashin'—"

"Here, come off!" grinned Figgins. "Yank him off, Wynn! He's too funny to live!"

Pratt and French came to aid, and Gussy was dragged off by main strength. Kerr jumped up.

"He's filled my nose and ears with beastly snow!" he exclaimed. "Let him have some of the same medicine. Roll him over!"

"Right-ho! Roll him along, kids!"

"Welease me! I wefuse to be wolled along—"

D'Arcy's protests were ineffectual. The juniors, howling with laughter, rolled him through the snow. They say that a rolling stone gathers no moss, but a rolling junior certainly gathers plenty of snow, and so D'Arcy found. The snow clung to him and stuck to him, and covered him and hid him. Faint gasps came from the midst of the snow, and feeble protests:

"I am weally gettin' quite wet! Pway welease me! I distinctly wefuse to be tweated in this beastly mannah! Wescue, deah boys—wescue!"

"Hallo, they've got hold of Gussy!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Rescue!"

He led a rush for the spot where the unfortunate swell of the School House was taking his punishment. Figgins & Co. were laughing so much that they were not for the moment ready for battle. The rush of the Terrible Three drove them back, and the New House fell back on all sides from the School House rally.

Blake picked up Arthur Augustus, and set him upon his feet. The swell of St. Jim's was covered with snow and gasping for breath. His eyeglass and his cap had disappeared.

"Weally," spluttered D'Arcy, "this is a vewy wuff game! I weally—"

"Oh, you are all right!" said Blake. "Come on, Herries!"

They rushed on. Right back to the New House porch went Figgins and his party, followed by a shower of missiles. This time they strove to rally in vain. The School House pressed the attack, and the juniors receded right into the porch.

Figgins & Co. made a desperate rush, but they were collared and plumped down into the snow, and Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy sat on them there. Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther led a rush into the porch of the New House, to drive the demoralised enemy fairly into their quarters.

"Boys!"

The figure of Mr. Ratcliff, the Housemaster of the New House, appeared in the doorway. But the excited juniors hardly noticed him. Snowballs were flying, and several of them biffed into the features of Mr. Ratcliff, and he sat down on the mat. He jumped up again in a rage.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "It's Ratty! Bunk!"

And the School House party promptly "bunked." Mr. Ratcliff ran out into the quadrangle, with a vague idea of wreaking his vengeance upon them, and his foot slipped in the snow, and he rolled over. By the time he was on his feet again there was not a junior on either side to be seen. They had taken the opportunity to make themselves scarce.

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CHAPTER 2.

Rough on Figgins!

TOM MERRY came into the School House flushed and rosy from the tustle in the quad. He met Mr. Dodds in the Hall. The curate had removed the traces of his rough handling by the rival juniors, and he looked his handsome, reverend self once more. He nodded pleasantly to Tom Merry and his chums.

"I'm breakfasting with the Head," he remarked. "I shall see you afterwards, Tom. I have some messages for you from Miss Fawcett, and I also want to speak to Figgins."

"Right-ho!" said Tom cheerily. "Chapel's at nine, you know, so there's lots of time. My old governess is all right, I hope. No bad news?"

"Oh, not at all; quite the contrary!" said Mr. Dodds.

The chums of the Shell passed into the dining-room. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy were at the Fourth Form table. Arthur Augustus was looking very red and rumpled, and he was rather troubled in his mind, as he had not had time to put himself tidy before breakfast.

"I wonder what Doddy has to tell us," Tom Merry remarked, "and what he wants to see Figgins for? I hope there's nothing wrong with the Figginses, or any of the little Figs!"

Breakfast over, the Terrible Three repaired to their study. There Mr. Dodds came to join them. Tom Merry pulled out the armchair for the honoured guest. There was still twenty minutes before morning chapel, and time for a chat. Mr. Dodds sat down, and stretched his long legs. He laid a parcel on the table, at which the chums looked curiously.

"Now for Miss Fawcett's messages," he said. "In the first place, Miss Fawcett is anxious about your health, Tom."

Tom Merry coloured a little.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett had coddled him ever since he was a baby, and although he had grown into one of the heartiest and most athletic youths at St. Jim's, the good old soul persisted in regarding him as an exceedingly delicate lad.

"Oh, that's all right, sir!" said Tom. "Look at me!"

"Well, you certainly look healthy enough," said Mr. Dodds, smiling.

"One more message. Miss Fawcett will be glad to see at Laurel Villa any of your friends whom you would like to bring home for Christmas."

"Right-ho!" said Tom. "Manners and Lowther are coming. Lowther's uncle is abroad, you know. And Manners is coming, too, because I shall punch his head if he doesn't. We three have sworn a solemn oath never to be separated again, so we're bound to go together."

Mr. Dodds smiled as he rose.

"Very good. I shall be at Laurel Villa for Christmas."

"That will be jolly!" exclaimed Tom Merry, with real pleasure. "Won't it, kids?"

"Rather!" said Manners and Lowther.

The curate smiled pleasantly as he shook hands with the three.

"And now I will run across and speak to Figgins," he remarked. "I have a less pleasant message for him. His father will not be in England this Christmas, and arrangements are to be made for Figgins to stay at St. Jim's over the vacation."

"Oh, I say, that's rotten!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yes, it is not nice for Figgins. Sir Fortescue Figgins asked me to tell his son, as he was called away in a hurry. Good-bye, my dear boys!"

"And Mr. Dodds left the study and the School House, and crossed the snowy quadrangle to the New House. He knew his way to Figgins & Co.'s study, and he went up, hoping to find Figgins there. He was not disappointed. Figgins was in the room, but Wynn and Kerr were not to be seen.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Figgins cheerfully, laying down the football boot he had been carefully patching. "That you, Mr. Dodds? This is an honour! Take a chair. Not that one; it falls down unless you balance it carefully. This is the visitors' chair."

Figgins drew out the best one in the study, and Mr. Dodds sat down.

"I'm sorry we snowballed you in the quad, sir," said Figgins. "Accidents will happen."

"Quite so," said Mr. Dodds. "That is nothing. I have a message for you from your father, Figgins."

"He's all right, I hope, sir?" said Figgins anxiously.

"Quite well, Figgins. But he has, unfortunately, been called abroad all of a sudden, and will not be in England for Christmas."

Figgins' face fell.

"That's beastly!" he said. "Poor old dad! And I—"

"I am making arrangements with Dr. Holmes for you to remain at St. Jim's during the vacation," said Mr. Dodds. "I'm sorry for this, Figgins. But you will be well looked after here."

"Ye-es, I suppose so," said Figgins.

A bell began to ring. Figgins started up.

"That's chapel," he said.

"You'll excuse me, sir."

"Certainly!"

Mr. Dodds shook hands with Figgins, who hurried away.

Poor Figgins' face was very glum. It was a bitter disappointment to him.

"Hallo! What's the matter?" exclaimed Kerr, meeting him. "You look as if you were going to a funeral, Figgy."

"Oh, nothing!" said Figgins.

Kerr looked at him curiously, but said no more.

Wynn asked the same question when he met Figgins, and received the same reply. The Co. were puzzled.

It was a blow to Figgins. Like the rest of the juniors, he had looked forward to the Christmas holiday by the home fireside. St. Jim's was a splendid place—in term time, but when deserted for the vacation it would be lonely and desolate. The luckless lads who remained over the vacations had what they graphically described as a "rotten" time. The Head himself would be away, and though every arrangement was made for the comfort of the boys staying behind, they were naturally downcast.

It was not a pleasant prospect for Figgins. The chums of Study No. 6 noticed his glum looks when they met in the Fourth Form class-room. Mr. Lathom was taking the class in Latin, and Blake turned to Figgins while Kerr was construing.

"Anything up?" he inquired.

"You weren't hurt in the row this morning, were you?"

"Rats!" said Figgins. "Of course not!"

"Then what do you mean by going about with a face like a fiddle?" demanded Blake.

"Oh, it's all right!"

"Oh, if it's a beastly secret, keep it, and wrap it up in cotton-wool!" said Blake.

"It's not a secret," said Figgins, grinning. "It's only a message I've had by that blessed curate. My governor's gone abroad, and I'm to stay at St. Jim's over Christmas, that's all."

"Hard cheese!" said Blake sympathetically.

"Beastly hard!" said D'Arcy, who overheard the New House leader's reply. "I sympathise with you frowm my heart, Figgay. It's wotten for you!"

"D'Arcy, you are talking!" rapped out Mr. Lathom.

"Yaas, sir. I was sayin' it was wotten—"

"You will take fifty lines, D'Arcy!"

"But I was only sayin' that it was—"

"That will do, D'Arcy!"

"But I was only sayin'—"

"A hundred lines, D'Arcy!"

"But—"

"Another word and I shall cane you!"

Arthur Augustus relaxed into indignant silence. It was evidently of no use arguing with the master of the Fourth.



Knox's box bounced and crashed from stair to stair, and the lock and the rope broke at the same moment!

"That's what I was thinking," said Tom Merry, with a nod. "Why shouldn't I ask him to come with me to Huckleberry Heath? You two chaps are coming, and he would be jolly enough with us. Of course, he's our deadly foe in a sense, but he's a jolly good fellow, and although we're rivals here, we should get on well, I think."

"Good idea!" exclaimed Monty Lowther heartily. "And it's just like you, Tom. Our little rows here needn't make any difference."

"Certainly not!" said Manners. "I should be glad to have old Figgy, for one, and— But, I say, what about Miss Fawcett? She gave you permission to bring your friends—our two noble selves—but another one—"

"Oh, she's all right!" said Tom Merry. "I'll just send her a wire and ask her permission. But I know what her answer will be."

"Then ask Figgins."

"I will. I'll go and speak to him now, and if he says 'Yes,' I'll buzz off to the village and send the wire."

Tom Merry strolled away to the New House. Figgins was delighted to accept the invitation, and Tom Merry returned to the School House to tell his chums that Figgy was coming.

"Are you fellows coming along to the post office to send that telegram?" Tom asked.

"Yes, rather! A run will do us good, and we may be able to hunt up a row with the village kids. They gave D'Arcy a horrid time the other day."

The Terrible Three walked down to Rylcombe, and the wire was dispatched to Miss Priscilla Fawcett, at Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath. It was brief, but to the point:

"I want to bring Figgins for Christmas.—Tom."

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CHAPTER 3.

A Warm Reception!

TOM MERRY came out of the Shell class-room with a thoughtful frown upon his face. Monty Lowther nudged Manners.

"There's some new wheeze coming," he said. "What is it, Tommy? Some new dodge up against the New House? Get it off your chest, my son!"

The three juniors walked back to the school without meeting any of the village boys, and the row did not come off. A little later the reply to the wire was received at the school:

"Bring Figgins by all means. Take care of your chest.—
PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

CHAPTER 4. Tom Merry Umpires!

BLAKE was scratching his nose in a thoughtful way. Herries and D'Arcy looked equally reflective. It was evident that some weighty matter was exercising the intellects of Study No. 6.

"I don't exactly know how to fix it," said Blake.
"And I don't," Herries observed. "It's a difficult matter."

"Yaas, wathah!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "Pewwaps I can suggest a way out of the beastly difficulty, deah boys. You wequiah a fellow of my bwains to—"

"Oh, rats! Don't you start thinking, Gussy, or you will break something—"

"I wegard that as a wude remark, Blake. I was thinking," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity, "that we should call in an umpire to decide for us."

"Well, that's not a bad idea for a silly kid," said Blake encouragingly. "If you keep on like this, Gussy, I've no doubt you'll grow quite intelligent in time."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Hallo, there's Tom Merry!"

Blake spotted the hero of the Shell passing the door. "He shall umpire for us. I say, Merry! Mer-r-r-ry!"

Tom Merry stopped and turned back, and looked into Study No. 6.

"Hallo, kids!" he said cheerfully.
"Who are you—never mind! I say, Merry, we want you to umpire for us."

"Certainly; but this seems to me rather late in the season for cricket. Why don't you leave it till next April, or May—"

"Oh, don't rot, Merry! We're not thinking of cricket, you ass!"

"Well, I must say you're polite to a chap you want to umpire for you," said Tom Merry good-humouredly. "I'll referee with pleasure, if that's what you want; but how you're going to play football with the snow on the ground—"

"Ass! We're not going to play football—"

"Then if you're not going to play cricket or football, I don't see what use you've got for an umpire or a referee. Good-bye—"

"Stop, fathead! Come in. We want you to decide a question for us."

"Oh, I'll do that!" said Tom Merry, coming into the study. "A chap of my age ought to be always willing to help youngsters out of their difficulties."

Tom was two months and seven days older than Blake; a fact which he never allowed the chief of Study No. 6 to forget. Blake looked daggers.

"Go ahead, Blake! I'll take the armchair, if you don't mind."

He calmly lifted the astonished D'Arcy out of the armchair and sat himself down in it. It was the only one in the study, and, though extremely worn, was very comfortable.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Thanks, Gussy; I'm quite comfy."

"I wasn't thinking of that, Tom Mewwy. I was thinking—"

"Never mind what you were thinking, Adolphus. Go on, Blake, and let's know what the trouble is," Tom Merry said, with the air of a magistrate.

"My name is weally not Adolphus, an'—"

"Rats! Go on, Blake, or Gussy will never leave off talking."

"Well, this is how the matter stands," said Blake, while D'Arcy found a new seat on the corner of the table. "There's three of us here—"

Tom Merry glanced round the study.

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"Quite correct. Did you do that in your head, Blake?"

"I'll do something to your head if you don't shut up!" said Blake. "There's three of us here, but there used to be four. You remember old Digby, who used to be in this study with us. He left soon after you came to St. Jim's."

"Oh, yes, I remember old Dig," said Tom Merry. "What about him?"

"Why, he's gone to live with his people in Devonshire, you see, and they've got him at a school nearer his home than this is. We miss him a lot, of course, and he says in his letters that he misses us, though he seems to have a pretty good time where he is. Now, we want to see him again, and he wants to see us, and I had the idea of a reunion at Christmas."

"And a jolly good idea, too," said Tom Merry.

"Now Dig would ask us all down to his place for the vacation, like a shot," said Blake, "only his people couldn't take in three, I think. As we're all to be together—that's settled—the question is which of us three is going to have the whole four with him."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Now, I have first claim. My govannah has a weally nobby place, and it's not far fwm your home at Hucklebewwy Heath, Tom Mewwy, and we might be able to see somethin' of you during the holidays."

"Good!" commented Tom Merry. "Now what's your claim, Blake?"

"Why, I want 'em to come to my place," said Blake. "As chief of this concern, I've a right to give orders. D'Arcy and Herries say that this is a case in which the chiefship doesn't count. I say that's all rot!"

"Ahem! Now, Herries, what's your idea?" said Tom, looking at magisterial as he could. "I must hear all claims before I decide."

"Why, you see," said Herries, "my place is a jolly place by a lake, and we should have lots of skating and sliding, and other sorts of fun. Then Dig promised a long time ago to spend Christmas with me, and I'm going to keep him to his word."

Tom shook his head solemnly.

"The claims are conflicting," he remarked. "It's a difficult question to decide. In the first place, are you sure that Digby will come to whichever of you has the honour of entertaining the rest?"

"Yaas, wathah! Dig won't mind."

"That's all right," said Blake. "Dig doesn't care a brass button so long as we're all together again."

"In the second place," said Tom Merry, "as you called me in to umpire, are you willing to abide by my decision?"

"I suppose so," said Blake doubtfully.

"Yaas, wathah! It's no beastly good callin' in a wewewee unless you agree to abide by his decision," said D'Arcy.

"I vote that we allow Tom Mewwy to decide, and bind ourselves to accept what he says. That's playin' the game."

"Very well," said Blake. "I agree."

"Right-ho!" Herries remarked. "Count me in."

"That's settled," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I'll give a decision according to my best judgment. It's understood that whatever it is you'll do as I tell you?"

"Yes, that's understood."

"The claims being of exactly equal weight," said Tom Merry, "it becomes necessary to suggest a fourth expedient."

"Get it off your chest, kid!"

"And that is, that you don't all go to Blake's place, because the other two claims are so good; that you don't go to D'Arcy's place for the same reason; and that you don't go to Herries' place for the same reason, too; but that you all come to my place, and bring Digby along with you."

Tom Merry delivered this decision with becoming gravity. The chums of Study No. 6 looked at the umpire, and at one another.

"That's my decision," said Tom Merry, getting up.

"I suppose you're rotting," said Blake.

"Not at all. You are to come to my place, and bring Dig along. That's settled."

"But—you ass—we can't raid you like that—"

"My dear chap, it will be a pleasure to me, of course, or I shouldn't ask you," said Tom Merry, with his usual candour. "And as you bound yourselves to respect the umpire's decision, you've got no choice in the matter. Of



course, if you thought you wouldn't be comfy with me, that would be a different matter."

"Rot!" said Blake. "Nothing of the kind. We came to your place once, and had a royal time. But—you boulder, you've caught us in a trap! We—"

"I say, Manners and Lowther are coming home with me," said Tom. "And old Figgins is coming, too."

"Is he?" exclaimed Blake. "That alters the case. My hat, we shall be quite a party!"

"Then you'll come?"

"Certainly!" said Blake, laughing. "If your guardian is agreeable."

"Oh, I shall go and send her a wire!" said Tom Merry. "Now I can count on you, kids?"

"Yes; and thanks."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Right-ho!" said Herries. "It will be jolly. It will remind us of the time we went down to Huckleberry Heath in a motor-car, and if D'Arcy could get his Cousin Ethel to come over—"

"Bravo!" exclaimed Tom Merry, delighted. "He can, he will, he shall. Do you remember how old Figgins stranded us and took the lady home in his side-car? That was a jolly time."

"I am suah Ethel would be charmed," said Arthur Augustus. "Come to think of it, deah boys, this is weally a wippin' ideah of Tom Mewwy's, and it's vewy kind of him, too."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "We shall be a jolly party, and no mistake about that. I'll be off and send that wire now."

And Tom Merry left the study in high good humour. He left the chums of the Fourth in a similar mood. It was, in fact, an excellent way out of the difficulty, and everybody was pleased.

"Hallo, kid!" exclaimed Manners, meeting Tom in the Hall. "Where have you been? We've been looking for you."

"In Study No. 6. Blake, Herries, D'Arcy, and Digby are coming down to Laurel Villa for the Christmas vac," said Tom cheerfully. "We've just arranged it."

Monty Lowther gave a whistle.

"My hat, we shall be a ripping party!"

"Rather! Are you coming down to Rylcombe with me to send a wire to my governess? I shall have to let her know, you know."

"Oh, come on!" said Manners laughing. "We shall wear out that post office if we keep on like this. Let's buzz."

They buzzed. They were soon in the little post office at Rylcombe, and the young lady who sent the telegrams smiled at Tom Merry's sunny face. Tom took a form and a pencil, and wrinkled his boyish brow.

"You can't get it into twelve words," said Monty Lowther, shaking his head. "You can't fix that anyhow. I say, miss, can you send the address free at Christmas-time?"

"No," said the telegraph girl, smiling.

"That's a rotten omission of the postal authorities," said Monty Lowther. "I shall alter that when I get into Parliament. Make it a two bob's worth, Tom."

"Can't," said Tom. "End of the term, you know. I'm just on stony. I've got a bob and a penny."

"Turn out your pockets, Manners! Show up!"

Manners turned out his pockets and showed up. But he, too, felt the "draught" at the end of the term. His show-up produced an assortment of what an American would call "notions"—pencil, string, sealing-wax, toffee, a broken penknife, and a lot of caramels—and threepence in net cash!

"That makes one-and-four altogether," said Lowther. "I wonder if I've got anything. If I have I'll shove it in for the good of the cause."

Monty Lowther went methodically through his pockets. A sixpence was all he found, after long and careful searching.

"One-and-ten," said Manners. "You'll have to shove it all into twenty-two words, Tom, that's all. We'll help you."

"There's the address," said Tom Merry. "That's got to go in—Miss Fawcett, Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath, Sussex—that's seven. 'I'm bringing Blake, Herries, D'Arcy, and Digby down for Christmas,' that's seventeen. 'Tom,' that's eighteen. 'That leaves us four words over.'"

"Can't waste 'em," said Lowther. "Make it a bit more explicit. Say 'as well as the others,' that will do."

"No, that's five, and we haven't got another penny."

"Make it 't'others, then," suggested Manners. "As well as 't'others."

Tom Merry scratched his curly head.

"I say, is 't'others' one word, miss?" he asked.

"Yes, I think it will go as one," said the smiling girl.

"Thank you. Please send that for me."

Tom passed in the scribbled form.

"One-and-ten, please," said the girl.

Tom Merry passed over the money with the air of a prince, and the telegram was ticked off. The chums left the post office and walked through the snowy street towards Rylcombe Lane.

"I say!" exclaimed Manners suddenly. "We needn't have sent those other four words, you know. We might have saved fourpence."

"My hat! So we might!" said Lowther.

Tom Merry looked at Manners in deep disgust.

"Well, you might have thought of that a little earlier," he said. "There's fourpence—the last, last fourpence in the coffers of the firm—clean chucked away! Rotten!"

CHAPTER 5.

Another Telegram!

"F IGGINS!"

"Oh, Figgy!"

Kerr and Wynn uttered the name of their leader in reproachful tones. The Co. seemed to be distressed.

"Oh, I say!" said Figgins. "You shouldn't take it like that, you know. It was awfully decent of Tom Merry to ask me."

"Very likely," said Fatty Wynn. "But as soon as I knew you were going to stay at St. Jim's over Christmas I immediately thought of asking you to come down to my place in Wales, and if you had told me before Tom Merry asked you—"

Figgins looked uncomfortable. He had not wished to appear to be fishing for invitations, but he had really been over-sensitive on the point. Either of his chums would have been glad to have him for the holidays.

"And I would have carried you off to my place," said Kerr. "You've never been to Scotland—and that is as good as saying you've never lived. It was beastly of you to accept Tom Merry's invitation, Figgy. I say it out straight! It was beastly!"

"Rotten," said Fatty Wynn, wagging his head. "Very rotten."

"Inexcusable."

"Distinctly beastly."

"Oh, I say!" said Figgins. "I'm sorry, you know, but—but Tom Merry was awfully decent about it. I only wish you two chaps were coming to Huckleberry Heath with me."

"I've a good mind to ask Tom Merry," grinned Kerr. "I hear that he's taking Study No. 6 along, and Digby is coming up from Devonshire."

"Is he?" said Figgins, with interest. "I should like to see Dig again. What rows we used to have when he was in Study No. 6 in the School House with Blake and Herries. Good old Dig! I wish you were coming, and that's a fact—"

"Letter for you, Figgins," said a Third-Form youngster, putting his head into the study.

"Hand it over," said Figgins.

The Third Former tossed the letter in, and Figgins caught it. He glanced at the writing and gave a whoop.

"It's from Smythe—old Marmaduke!"

The Co. were interested at once. Marmaduke Smythe was the son of a millionaire, and he had come to St. Jim's about the biggest "boulder" the old school had ever seen. He had gone through some rather painful adventures, too; but the juniors had reformed him. He had good stuff in him all the time, and Figgins & Co. had brought him out, and he had lent such valuable assistance in a row with the School House that the chums had admitted him to their noble company as one of the "Co."

(Continued on the next page.)

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Marmaduke's father had been very pleased by the reformation of Marmaduke. He had taken the boy home when he was quite cured of his little unpleasant ways, and Figgins & Co. had rather missed him, though he had not been with them long.

Figgins was glad to see the letter from him. He opened it at once, and glanced over the contents, and then his face was a study.

"I say, no bad news, I hope," said Kerr anxiously.

"N-n-no," said Figgins. "It's an invitation for Christmas. He wants us all three to go and spend the vacation with him. Apologises for not writing earlier, as he's only just got home from a trip to Mentone with his mother and sisters."

"Too late!" said Kerr tragically. "If we could all go together, we'd make excuses to the people at home. But as you're booked for Huckleberry Heath— Oh, Figgy, how could you?"

"Well, I never thought of Marmaduke," said Figgins. "I knew he was abroad, you see. It will be a disappointment to him. He never wanted to leave St. Jim's, although he was so rotten about coming here at first. It's unlucky."

"You'll write to him, I suppose, and tell him you're going to Tom Merry's place? Mind you tell him you had already accepted."

"Of course!"

So the letter was written, and Figgins & Co. walked down to the school post office and duly posted it. The box was in the school wall near the gate, and they met the Terrible Three coming in.

"Hallo, where have you been?" asked Figgins.

"Down to the post office to send a wire," said Tom Merry.

"I say, I've thought of a ripping idea as we came home."

"What is it? Some new wheeze?"

"No. It's a jolly good idea, and would work out well if we acted upon it, and I should like you three to promise before I tell you."

Figgins looked rather suspicious.

"What is it? Something up against the New House, you boulder?"

"No. Honour bright. It's a ripping idea, and nothing against your old House," said Tom Merry. "A sort of peace-on-earth and general goodwill idea."

"Well, in those circumstances, I think we can promise," said Figgins. "What do you say, you chaps?"

"Oh, that's all right!" said the Co.

"Very well, this is the idea. Figgins is coming with me for Christmas, and, though we shall be a jolly party, he's bound to feel rather lonely without the Co. My idea is that you two chaps should write to your people, and explain to them that you can't leave Figgy at such a time as Christmas, and come along with him. Will you?"

The Co. looked at one another.

"Well, that's jolly good of you, Merry!" said Kerr. "I don't know—"

"You've promised."

"I don't know—" said Fatty Wynn.

"You've promised."

"So you have," chuckled Figgins. "It's a go, Tom Merry, if your guardian will stand the strain. I'll answer for these kids. They're under my orders."

"Oh, Miss Fawcett will be delighted! I'll just send her a wire—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Manners and Lowther together. "Another wire!"

"Well, I'd better let her know, because of getting the rooms ready, you know. Laurel Villa is a rambling old place, with endless rooms—but, of course, you've seen it," said Tom Merry. "There's room for an army, and the more the merrier. You're coming?"

"Yes, and many thanks," said the Co. "We'll come, never fear. It will be jolly to be all together."

"Yes, and I can promise you some larks," grinned Tom Merry. "Come on, kids, let's go and send that wire— Hallo, that's dinner! We shall have to leave it till after school. I say, I'm jolly glad you're coming, kids!"

The boys went in to dinner. After that meal, Tom received a wire from Miss Fawcett in reply to the one he had just sent concerning Blake, Herries, D'Arcy, and Digby.

"Bring your four friends by all means. Mind you do not get your feet wet.—PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Manners. "You're going to get some hygienic advice every time, I see, Tom. The last time it was something about your manly chest. Now it is your tootsies. I—"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom Merry. "Time we got to the classroom."

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"You'll get some more when you send the next wire, about the Co. coming," grinned Monty Lowther. "Luckily, Miss Fawcett can't send pills or cod-liver oil by wire."

The chums of the Shell went into the class-room. In the dusky December day the lights were already on for afternoon lessons. Snow was coming down again with the fall of the darkness, and the sheeting of white in the quadrangle grew thicker and thicker.

"My word!" said Monty Lowther, when they came out after work. "We shall have a jolly tramp down to Rylcombe through this. Better think twice about that wire, Tom."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "Who's afraid of a little snow, I'd like to know?"

"Oh, I'm not! But we shan't be allowed to go out in it if they see us. We shall have to dodge the prefects."

"Well, that won't be for the first time, my son."

"What about the tin? I found a penny in the study, but you can't send a telegram for a penny, Tom. I'll borrow a bob off D'Arcy."

Tom Merry went off in quest of D'Arcy while his chums were putting their coats on. Arthur Augustus was toasting chestnuts by the fire in Study No. 6.

"Have some beastly chestnuts, Tom Mewwy?" he asked hospitably.

"Well, I've had a good many of your 'chestnuts' in the way of jokes," Tom Merry remarked. "Still, I'll have some real ones now. But I really came here to raise the wind. Can you lend me a bob?"

"Yaas, wathah! I'll make it a pound, if you like."

"My dear Gussy, you are as generous as you are good-looking, but a bob will do. Thanks. I'll let you have this back before we break up. These are jolly chestnuts. We're going down to Rylcombe to send a wire, and you can get a lot more cooked in time for our return, if you like. Put 'em on fancy plates in our study, and mind they're warm."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

But Tom Merry was gone. He rejoined his chums, and they went out into the dusk. The gates were not locked, and the Terrible Three found it easy to make their exit. Kildare appeared at the gates as they set their faces towards the village, and called out to them. Apparently they did not hear, for they kept on, and quickened their pace, and the December mist swallowed them up.

The snow was deep in the lane, and growing deeper. There was little wind now, and the flakes came down heavily and steadily. The juniors were well wrapped up, with thick scarves wound round their necks, and their caps pulled down over their ears. The exercise made them warm as they tramped on, the snowflakes whitening on their shoulders and their caps.

They reached Rylcombe, and the telegraph girl smiled as they came into the post office. Tom smiled, too, and raised his cap, and a shower of snow scattered on the floor. He took a form and a pencil.

"Make it twelve this time," urged Monty Lowther. "Thirteen is the outside limit. Still, as we're sending such a blessed lot of wires, they ought really to come cheaper. I say, miss, is there any reduction for quantities?"

"Not at present," said the girl, laughing.

"Miss Fawcett, Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath, Sussex," said Tom Merry. "That's seven. 'Bringing Kerr and Wynn as well.—Tom.' That's fourteen."

"Cross one out, then. There's only one and a penny."

"Say also, instead of as well," suggested Manners. "That will fix it."

"Good wheeze. 'Bringing Kerr and Wynn also.—Tom.'"

Tom Merry wrote it out on a fresh form, and passed it to the telegraph girl, and it was ticked off to Huckleberry Heath, and the chums of the Shell passed out into the dusky winter evening again.

As they left the post office, three pairs of eyes fell upon them. Without noticing that they were being stared at, the Terrible Three strode on, and Messrs. Pilcher, Grimes, and Craggs exchanged a wink and a chuckle. Pilcher, Grimes, and Craggs were the leaders of the village youths with whom the boys of St. Jim's were frequently at war, and it occurred to them that Fate had placed the enemy into their hands on this rough winter evening.

"My 'at!" said Pilcher. "Now's our chance, boys! Go and fetch some of the chaps, Craggy, and we'll follow them, and give them a warm time once they are out of the village. Some of them shoved Grimey under the village pump the other day. This is where we get our own back!"

Unsuspecting the treat in store for them, the Terrible Three tramped on towards the school. The going was slow in the thick masses of snow under foot, and they had no particular cause for hurry. The thought of danger had not crossed their minds.

The first hint of it was a snowball, which caught Tom Merry on the back of the head and sent him pitching

forward. He dropped on his hands and knees. There was a yell in the winter dusk, and a pounding of feet in the snow. Manners and Lowther whirled round at once, and Tom was on his feet again in a twinkling.

Five or six dim figures loomed up in the dusk. Snowballs flew with deadly aim, and smote thickly on the chums of the Shell.

"It's Pilcher's gang!" gasped Tom Merry. "Look out!" The chums grabbed up snow, and were soon sending back rapid missiles. But more figures loomed up behind Pilcher & Co., and it was evident that they had nine or ten foes to deal with. The villagers made a rush.

It was impossible to face the odds. To be captured and rolled in the snow was not a pleasant prospect. The chums of the Shell took to their heels and ran.

"They're running!" yelled Pilcher. "After them!" The Rylcombe boys ran, too. They were close behind, and a snowball caught Monty Lowther in the neck. His

across country to escape, stopped as he saw that they had disappeared into the barn.

Pilcher put his hands to his mouth, and shouted to the boys in the barn.

"You can stay there as long as you like, young 'uns! We don't mind waiting! But when you come out, look out for squalls, that's all!"

And the Terrible Three looked at one another in dismay.

CHAPTER 6.

To the Rescue!

"MERRY!"

No reply.

"Merry!"

Mr. Railton, the master of the School House, was taking call-over in the Hall. But there were three vacant places in the ranks of the Shell. Of the three, Tom

Even though it was holiday-time the chums soon took sides in the pillow fight. It started as a House affair, but suddenly it became a battle between the Shell and the Fourth!



foot slipped, and he went down. Tom Merry helped him up in a jiffy.

"It's no good running!" muttered Tom. "They'll have us! Follow me!"

His chums obeyed without question. Tom Merry darted through a gap in the snow-covered hedge, and Manners and Lowther followed.

"After them!" shouted Pilcher again.

Tom led the way direct towards the old barn, where the juniors of St. Jim's had sometimes held meetings. It was a ruinous structure, with only the walls and a small portion of the roof standing.

Tom ran into the barn, followed by his chums. The interior was very dark, save where gleamed the snow that had piled in thickly through the gaps in the roof.

"Good wheeze!" muttered Monty Lowther. "We shall keep them off here all right!"

Pilcher & Co. were coming full pelt across the snow-covered field. Tom Merry dragged an old bench across the doorway of the barn—the door had long been gone.

"Now get snowballs!" he muttered. "We'll keep 'em off here!"

The three chums had a pile of snow close at hand, and they set to work with energy to manufacture snowballs. Their hands worked like lightning. Pilcher, who had at first thought that the St. Jim's boys had made a break

Merry's was the first name called, and it became clear that the hero of the Shell was conspicuous by his absence.

Mr. Railton looked up with a frown.

"Merry!"

Blake, in his place with the Fourth, was greatly inclined to say "Adsum" for the missing lad, but although that might have served with the short-sighted Mr. Lathom, it was of no use with the Housemaster.

Mr. Railton marked Tom Merry's name absent and called the next.

"Lowther!"

No reply.

"Lowther!"

So Lowther was marked absent, and the next name was called. The next was Manners, and he also failed to respond.

"Manners!"

There was no reply. The rest of the roll answered, the Terrible Three being the only absent members. The assembly broke up, the boys dispersing to their Houses, with the exception of Study No. 6 and Figgins & Co., who remained to speak.

"I say, do you know where Tom Merry is?" asked Blake. "He went down to the post office," said D'Arcy. "He told me he was goin' to send a telegram."

"That's so," said Figgins. "I know he was going to send one."

"But he has had plenty of time to get back, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, "unless he has been lost and has pewished in the snow."

Blake snorted.

"Do you think he's the kind of a kid to perish in the snow?" he demanded.

"Yaas, wathah! I've heard of twavellers pewishin' in the snow on the Alps!"

"But there aren't any Alps in Rylcombe, fathead!"

"I wefuse to be chawactewised as a fathead—"

"Rats! It's possible that they've taken a short cut, or something, and lost their way in the dark," said Blake thoughtfully.

"Likely enough!" Figgins agreed. "Tom Merry may have been carrying out some idea of his, and you never know what's going to happen when he does that."

"Suppose we go and look for him?" suggested Herries. "He's had lots of time to get back to the school, unless something's happened. He may have got into a row with the village lads, or perhaps with the Grammar School fellows."

"That's possible. But I don't see why it should keep them all this time. Still, it's a good idea to go and look for the lost sheep. Let's go!"

"We shall have to get over the wall," Kerr remarked. "Taggles has locked up, you know."

"Well, let's get over the wall, then."

The six juniors soon had their coats and caps on. Taking care to keep out of sight of the troublesome prefects, they reached the old familiar spot where the ivy on the school wall had often helped them out of bounds before. It was not so easy now, however. The ivy was dripping with damp and heavy with snow. But the juniors managed to scramble over somehow.

"Well, that's done!" said Figgins. "We'd better go down towards the village to see if we can see anything of them."

"Bettah look for twacks in the snow," said D'Arcy. "I have heard of Wed Indians followin' a twail by the twacks in the snow."

"Ass! How are we to find any tracks when the snow's still falling?" said Blake.

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"I'm sure I don't know. If I were leadah—"

"You'd make a lovely one. Come on, kids! Let's get down towards Rylcombe, at any rate! If they're coming back we shall pass them."

"Unless they've weally taken a short cut and pewished in the snow."

"Rats! Get a move on you!"

The six juniors went down the lane. The snow was still falling, and the road was a sheet of trackless white. D'Arcy, with his mind full of Red Indians, looked round anxiously, but could not find any signs of one, but all at once he halted with an exclamation.

"Did you heah that?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Figgins excitedly. "It was a shout! There's something going on in the field—near the old barn where we held the theatrical meetings."

"Tom Merry can't be there—"

"Yaas, wathah! They may have gone there to wehearse some play for Chwistmas," said D'Arcy. "They may be keepin' it a gweat secwet."

"Yes, I think I can see them doing that in this weather," said Blake. "I don't see how the fellows can be there, kids, but we may as well have a look. There's somebody shouting there, at all events."

The juniors hurried to the nearest gap in the hedge, and entered the field. The whitened walls of the old barn loomed up ghostly in the winter gloom. Dim figures were moving in the snow, and the juniors made out nine or ten forms rushing excitedly towards the door of the barn, hurling snowballs as they ran.

"It's Pilcher's lot!" exclaimed Figgins. "Nothing to do with us. But who's in the barn? By Jove! Listen!"

A voice was heard ringing from the barn.

"Give 'em socks!"

It was the well-known voice of Tom Merry.

"Come on!" yelled Blake.

And the juniors of St. Jim's rushed pell-mell to the rescue. As a matter of fact, Pilcher & Co. had grown tired of waiting. They had tramped and stamped in the snow to keep themselves warm, and the Terrible Three were doing the same in the barn. It was a trial of patience, and Pilcher's had given out first.

The chums of the Shell knew that calling-over was past at St. Jim's, but they did not leave the barn. Rough handling awaited them if they did, and they had hoped that their comrades would come to look for them. During the enforced inactivity they made a huge pile of snowballs ready for another attack, and now it had come.

The village fellows were rushing on furiously, determined to get into the barn by hook or by crook. Pilcher had had enough of waiting. They came on fast, and the snowballs fell from the doorway with deadly aim. Big and heavy were the snowballs, and very hard, and they were planted out with splendid skill upon the foe. Pilcher and Craggs were bowled over, and their followers rushed on over them. Grimes succeeded in reaching the door, and instead of falling over the bench he dragged it away. Tom Merry hit out, and Grimes dropped like a log. But the way was open.

The tussle was too close now for snowballs. The Terrible Three lined up at the door and used their fists. They hit out well and hard, and for a minute the attack was stemmed. The assailants fell back from the hard knuckles. But Pilcher was on his feet now, and he led them on again determinedly.

Three could not stand against so many. Back went the chums from the rush, and the village boys came swarming into the barn. Tom Merry went to the ground, locked in a grapple with Pilcher, and Manners and Lowther were overborne.

"Got 'em!" yelled Grimes.

"Got 'em!" yelled Figgins, the next moment—and the six juniors from St. Jim's came upon the villagers with a sudden and devastating rush.

The surprise was complete. The villagers were knocked right and left, and in a minute or less they were flying in all directions, with the exception of Pilcher, who was gripped by Tom Merry and could not fly.

"Knocked 'em out!" gasped Blake. "They're gone! Are you here, Tom Merry?"

"Wescue!" shouted D'Arcy, who was too excited to be aware that the enemy had fled and that the fight was over.

"Wescue! Come on, deah boys! Give the beastly boundahs socks, you know! Wescue!"

And he hurled himself upon Figgins, mistaking him for an enemy in the gloom. Figgins lifted him off the ground and sat him in a snowbank.

"It's all over, Gussy!" said Figgins. "You're excited. Sit there and cool yourself for a bit!"

"Weally, Figgins, you are vewy wuff!"

"Ha, ha, ha! What have you got there, Tom Merry? What's that you're sitting on?"

"Oh, that's Pilcher, I think!" said the hero of the Shell cheerfully. He had got the better of his antagonist, and was sitting on Pilcher's chest while he recovered his breath. "You're Pilcher, aren't you, kid?"

"Yes," growled Pilcher. "Lemme gerrup!"

"I don't know about that. What were you going to do with us?"

"Give you a jolly good roll in the snow!" said Pilcher defiantly.

"Then we can't do better than serve you the same. Or do you think we'd better duck him in the river, Figgy?"

"Can't; it's frozen."

"We could break a hole in the ice. We could use Pilcher's head for a mallet. It's much the same material."

"Good wheeze! Collar him and bring him along!"

The juniors crowded round Pilcher and dragged him out of the barn. He struggled desperately, but quite ineffectually in so many hands.

"Now, Pilcher, walk quietly down to the Rhyl," said Tom Merry, making a sign to his comrades to release the prisoner. "If you go quietly we'll— Why, he's off!"

Pilcher had seized the opportunity. He was off like a shot. The juniors made a pretence of pursuit, which caused Pilcher to make a desperate spurt, and he vanished into the night.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Tom Merry. "The ass thought we were really going to duck him! I say, it was jolly good of you fellows to come to the rescue like this."

"Rather!" said Manners. "They had us that time, and we should have had a rough handling if you hadn't come up. You came just in the nick of time."

"Yaas, wathah! I'm glad I've brough't the fellows along."

"You brought us along!" said Figgins. "I like that. Phew! The snow's coming down. Let's get off, kids. It's too cold to stick here listening to Gussy!"

"Weally, Figgins—"

But the juniors were off. They reached St. Jim's without misfortune, and the Terrible Three stopped at the frost-rimmed iron gate.

"You'll have to go in here," said Blake. "We can't come in with you or it will give the show away. Come along, you chaps!"

The rescuers re-entered the school the way they had left it, while Tom Merry rang up Taggles. Then the Terrible Three went in to face the music, but when Tom Merry explained the circumstances Mr. Railton excused them and they departed from the Housemaster's presence feeling very satisfied. When they went into the study, Tom Merry found a familiar buff envelope, addressed to himself, lying on the table.

"There's your answer, from Miss Fawcett!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Let's hear it."

Tom slit open the envelope and read out the telegram.

"Certainly bring Kerr and Wynn. Wrap yourself up well for the journey.—PRISCILLA FAWCETT."

CHAPTER 7. More Telegrams!

"DIG!" Blake uttered the name in a kind of whoop.

It was the day before breaking-up, and evening school was just over, and the boys were pouring out, when the station hack from Rylcombe came grinding through the snow, and a well-known form hopped out in front of the School House. Blake, Herries, and D'Arcy spotted him together, and they made a simultaneous rush.

It was Dig, their old chum of Study No. 6—Digby, as large as life. Blake hugged him round the neck in the most affectionate manner, and Herries seized one hand and D'Arcy the other, and they worked away at Digby's arms as if they mistook them for pump-handles.

"Here, draw it mild!" gasped Digby. "Love me as much as you like, but don't dislocate all my giddy bones. Chuck it!"

"Dig, it's a treat to see you again!"

"Rather!" said Herries. "Same old face; same old grin—not a bit changed."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "It's a weal pleasuah, Dig, old fellow. A regular tweek, and no mistake, you know. How do you do?"

"How did you was?" asked Blake. "How— Oh!" Dig was struggling to release himself, and his feet slipped on the frozen steps.

"He's going!" yelled Blake.

Digby was certainly going, and Blake was going with

him. They rolled down the steps of the School House, and Dig tightened his grip on the hands of Herries and D'Arcy to save himself, with the result that he dragged them down, also. The four juniors rolled down into the snow in an inextricable heap.

"Going—gone!" exclaimed Tom Merry, looking out of the door. "Here, Manners—Lowther! Come and help me sort these merchants out!"

The Terrible Three ran down the steps to help. Manners ran a little too quickly, and slipped, and shot down, knocking Blake over as he was rising. Blake grabbed Herries, who was getting up, too, and they sprawled in the snow with Manners. Digby sat up and looked round him in dazed astonishment.

"Well, I don't know whether you planned this reception for me," he said. "If you did, it's a great honour, I suppose. But don't let us have any more formalities. I've had enough."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard this as extwemely clumsy of Blake. My eyeglass is bwoken, and my beastlay collar is vewy wumped."

"Same old Gussy!" grinned Digby, as he staggered to his feet. "What's the latest in waistcoats? Hallo, Tom Merry, how do you do?"

He shook hands with the Terrible Three. And then Figgins & Co., who had spotted the new arrival, came racing up, and there was more handshaking. They shook Digby's hands and thumped him on the back till he threatened violence, and then they desisted.

"I say, it's real jolly to see you again, old Dig," said Figgins. "Do you remember the awful lickings we used to give you?"

"No, I don't," said Dig, with emphasis. "I remember the awful floggings we used to give you New House fellows, if that's what you mean."

"Well, the awful lickings we used to give each other," said Figgins, grinning. "I dare say we both gave as good as we got. Remember the time you bagged our concert, you image, and Marmaduke turned the gas off at the meter and dished you?"

Digby chuckled.

"Yes, rather. That was one of our best wheezes, Eggy. By the way, have you heard anything of Marmaduke?"

"Lots! I've got heaps of news for you. You're coming to a brew in our study now—"

"Wrong!" said Tom Merry. "He's coming to a feed in ours."

"Nothing of the kind," said Blake indignantly. "He belongs to Study No. 6, doesn't he? That's where he's coming, aren't you, Dig?"

Digby grinned.

"Settle it among yourselves, my infants. I don't care a rap, so long as the feed is a good one. That's the chief point."

"Now, that's what I call sensible, Dig," said Fatty Wynn approvingly. "You've hit the right nail on the head. Now we've got a pie that's a regular dream."

"We've got a fine assortment of tarts and jam-rolls," said Blake.

"We have game-pie, and cake, and sardines," said Tom Merry. "I really think—"

"Rats! Dig couldn't eat your old sardines. You can get those any time."

"They're not old sardines, fathead. They're—"

"Tell you what," said Figgins, struck by a bright idea, "we'll pool the supplies and feed together. You can all come to my study."

"To mine," said Tom Merry. "Now, you know it's the biggest study in either House, and there are ten of us, so it will be a squeeze."

The argument was unanswerable. Figgins & Co. agreed, and they cut off to the New House to fetch the provisions. Digby was borne in a kind of triumphal procession into the School House. Mr. Railton came out of his study and shook hands with him, and so did Kildare, the captain of St. Jim's. Then he was hoisted shoulder-high, and carried upstairs to Tom Merry's study.

It was undoubtedly an honour, but it was a perilous distinction. Digby was rather relieved when he reached the top of the staircase with no bones broken. They plumped him down rather breathless in the study.

"It's jolly of you to come here to go down with us in the same party," exclaimed Tom Merry. "We'll keep it up a bit to-night. There's no preparation, you know, as the school breaks up to-morrow. Come in, Figgins, if you can find room for your feet."

It was certainly rather a crowd in the study. But Tom Merry had unusually extensive quarters for a Shell boy, and the room had accommodated larger numbers before.

The ten juniors found room, and the table was soon groaning under a collection of provisions.

With a fire blazing in the grate, and an incandescent burner shedding light over the festive board, the study was certainly jolly. Monty Lowther, who had an artistic eye, had brought in some sprigs of holly, which he stuck up round the study, much enhancing the Christmas effect. There was no mistletoe, but, as Blake remarked, that wasn't wanted yet.

Digby's face beamed with satisfaction and good-humour as he looked round the study, and at the familiar faces round him. The feed was good, and the juniors did it full justice.

"This is jolly!" Digby exclaimed at last. "Good old Christmas! It's jolly to see you all again looking so well, Figgins just as lanky as ever, and Gussy just as funny."

"Order! Order!"
"I beg to inform the honourable member that my remarks were not meant in a disparaging sense. But I say, I wish old Marmaduke were here! We only want him to complete the happy family."

"Yes, I wish he were," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I believe he's abroad."

"No, he isn't," said Figgins. "He's home, and he wrote to me to ask us to go down to his place at Christmas, but I was already engaged. I thought——"

"I thought——" said Kerr.

"I thought——" said Fatty Wynn.
Tom Merry stopped his fork half-way to his mouth, and stared at them.

"You seem to have been doing a great deal of thinking," he remarked. "Any result?"

"You see," said Figgins, "it would seem cool."

"Well, everything's cool this weather. But what are you driving at?"

"Well, as we're not going to Marmaduke, what price having Marmaduke with us?"

Tom Merry gave a jump.

"Do you think he'd come?"

"I'm pretty certain he would."

"Splendid idea! I thought he was away, or I should have thought of it. Well, we'll send him a wire, and—and I shall have to wire to my governess, too."

"More wires," grinned Monty Lowther. "You'll make the fortune of the post office, Tom. If I might venture on a pun——"

"No, don't!"

"Order!"

"If I might venture on a pun, I should say——"

"Rats!"

"I should say, why a wire?"

"Rotten!"

"Very rotten!"

"Extremely wotten, deah boy!"

"We'll all go down and send those wires," said Figgins.

"And I pity Pilcher and his lot if they fall in with us while we're altogether! Have another tart, Dig?"

"I wish I could, Figgy. But the storage department is full up."

"Another cup of tea?" said Tom Merry persuasively.

"N-no, thanks!"

"You haven't had any bananas," said Fatty Wynn.

"They're good! I've eaten fifteen of 'em, and I know. You'll have a banana, Dig?"

"No, I won't, Fatty. You may as well scoff the lot."

"Then, as the feast's over, we'll make a move, and send off that wire," said Tom Merry, getting up. "Are you all ready?"

"Yes, we're ready!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors marched out in a body, Fatty Wynn lingering behind for a moment to cram the rest of the bananas into his pockets. He might get hungry during the walk, and Fatty Wynn believed in being prepared for everything.

Kildare met the juniors as they sallied out of the School House into the dusky quadrangle, in cap and coat and scarf. He stopped them.

"Where are you going?"

"Only just going to send a wire, Kildare," said Tom Merry, in his most persuasive tones. "It's not locking up yet, you know, and——"

"But it's foggy in the lane, and——"

"My respected captain, there are ten of us, and if we lose our way, we shall find one another again," said Tom Merry.

"Who ever heard of ten juniors getting lost? Besides, I am going to look after these youngsters very carefully."

Kildare laughed.

"Well, you can go, but mind you're back for calling-over this time."

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"Yaas, wathah!"

So the juniors marched off. They left the gates of St. Jim's and marched down the foggy lane through the snow, two and two. Tom Merry walked with Figgins. He had an important matter to discuss with the New House chief.

"The worst thing about the end of the term," said Tom Merry, "is that one gets beastly stony broke."

"Exactly!" said Figgins. "I've got just three-halfpence left myself."

"Oh, have you?" said Tom Merry. "Excuse me while I speak to Kerr."

He changed places with Lowther, who was walking with Kerr.

"Beastly stony time at the end of the term, Kerr," Tom Merry remarked. "Do you know, I'm in the most broken state I've been in for a long time."

"So am I," said Kerr. "My worldly wealth consists of a French penny. Rotten, ain't it?"

Tom Merry made a grimace.

A few minutes later he changed with Manners, who was walking with Fatty Wynn. Fatty Wynn was already nibbling at a banana.

"I say, Fatty, isn't it rotten getting stony broke just before the vacation?"

"Rather!" said Fatty, with much feeling. "I'm stony broke myself."

There was evidently nothing to be got out of Figgins & Co. Tom Merry tried Blake next, with the same casual remark as a feeler.

"Yes, 'twas ever thus, you know," said Blake. "Most of us are expecting remittances to-night or in the morning. If we don't get 'em, I for one shall have to spend Christmas with a capital sum of twopence-halfpenny in my purse."

"That's bad," said Tom Merry sympathetically. "I say, Herries, are you in the same category? Are you broke to the wide?"

"Stony!" said Herries. "There's a remittance due, but it hasn't come yet."

"It is really a most remarkable circ," observed D'Arcy, catching the remark. "But I find myself absolutely stony at the present moment, too. It is really remarkable, and I think I must have left some Tweaswy notes lying about somewhere."

Tom Merry gave an expressive grunt.

Such a famine in cash had seldom been known among the juniors, and a natural delicacy made Tom hesitate to approach Digby on the subject. But Blake guessed what was in the wind, and called out to Digby:

"Got any tin, Dig?"

"Yes, lots," said Digby cheerfully. "My governor tipped me a pound this morning."

"Corn in Egypt! Give it to Tom Merry."

Digby obeyed without hesitation. Tom Merry grinned as he accepted the crisp note.

"I only want a bob or so," he remarked. "You shall have the change, and I'll pay the bob to-morrow. Hallo! Here we are at the post office. Come in—I think there's room."

There was none too much room for the crowd in the little Rylcome post office. The telegraph girl looked in astonishment at the crowd of snowy juniors.

Tom Merry bowed politely.

"We've come to send another wire," he remarked. "Are you still charging for them? Give me that pencil, Figgy."

Tom wrote out a telegram to Miss Fawcett. It was brief, but to the point:

"Am going to bring Marmaduke.—TOM MERRY."

Then he indited a longer message to Marmaduke. Perhaps the possession of a whole pound made him eloquent,

"Marmaduke Smythe, Esq., 200, Park Lane, London. All the fellows are coming down with me for Christmas—Manners, Lowther, Study No. 6, and Dig, and Figgins & Co. We want you to come, too. Try to get here to-morrow morning to join the party in the train. Don't disappoint us.—TOM MERRY."

"Five shillings and fivepence, please," said the telegraph girl, as she took in the wires and counted the words.

Tom Merry paid up cheerfully, and returned the change of the pound to Digby.

"Well, that's explicit enough, at all events," said Monty Lowther. "No room for misunderstanding that wire, anyway. I hope Marry will get down here in time."

"Oh, he'll come!" said Figgins confidently.

And ten juniors tramped back to St. Jim's through the snow. Later in the evening came the two reply wires. The first was from Miss Fawcett:

"I shall be glad to see Marmaduke. Don't forget a footwarmer in the train.—PRISCILLA, FAWCETT."

Marmaduke's reply was equally satisfactory:

"Coming! Rather! Look out for me in the morning at Rylcombe Station.—MARMADUKE."

CHAPTER 8. Breaking Up!

A FROSTY, sunny morning—cold but bright. Frost on the windows and on the trees, and snow still thick in the quadrangle, save on the cleared path. Roofs still in sheets of snowy white, dazzling in the sun.

Cheery crowds in the quad. All sorts and conditions of vehicles were there to carry the boys of St. Jim's to Rylcombe Station with their belongings. Luggage was in piles, boys of all ages and sizes in crowds, laughing and chattering and shouting.

"Jolly weather!" exclaimed Tom Merry, feeling a gust of sharp wind on his merry face as he put it out of the School House door. "Where's our brake?"

"Ere you are, sir," said the driver of the required vehicle, touching his cap.

He knew Tom Merry, and anticipated a liberal tip.

Tom Merry was in funds. A postal order had reached him that morning from Laurel Villa, Huckleberry Heath, and he had changed it in the Housemaster's study for current coin of the realm. His new funds were burning in his pockets.

"Hallo, Jarvis! Sure the horses won't fall down dead?" asked Tom Merry, looking critically at the animals attached to the brake.

"Yessir!" grinned Jarvis.

"Taggles! Taggles! Taggy! Taggy! Why don't you buck up with that luggage?"

"Which I hain't got a dozen pair of 'ands, nor the strength of a blessed regiment of 'orses!" said Taggles.

"You must take your turn, Master Merry."

"Rats! Taggles, I shall report you—"

"Which I 'aven't got a dozen pair—"

"Taggles is lazy kids! Let's roll him in the snow!"

"If you lays a 'and—"

"Let him off, as it's Christmas-time," said Monty

Lowther. "We shan't see his bonnie face again for three weeks."

"Good! Taggy, you're let off because it's Christmas-time, but don't do it again."

"Of all the young humps!" murmured Taggles. "That dratted Master Merry is the himpest!"

"Let's get our boxes down ourselves!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Taggles is overworked. Lend me a hand with this."

"Look out! That's Master Knox's box!"

"Leave my box alone, you young rascal!" shouted Knox, the prefect.

"I'm helping Taggles," replied Tom Merry, starting the box down the stairs. It was a heavy one, and it slipped from his hold. "Look out there!"

There was a quick scurrying. The box bounded from stair to stair and crashed into the hall, and the cord and the lock broke together. Knox was extremely unpopular as a prefect, and he guessed that Tom Merry's clumsiness was not wholly unintentional.

"You young scoundrel!" he roared.

And he made a dash up the stairs for Tom Merry. Tom was off like a shot, with the incensed prefect behind him.

"Go it, Tom!"

"Buck up, Knoxy!"

Tom went like a champion sprinter along the passage, heading for his study. Knox was left behind, but he came on quickly, and seeing the study door open, naturally concluded that Tom Merry was in there. He dashed in furiously, and the next moment Tom Merry slipped out of an alcove in the passage and drew the study door shut from outside.

Before Knox knew what was happening, Tom, who had changed the key to the outside of the lock, turned it. Knox tore at the door.

"Unlock this door, you young villain!"

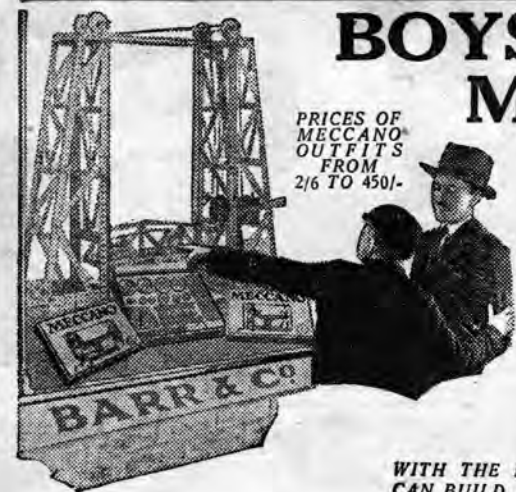
"Merry Christmas, Knox!" called out Tom Merry. "I'll leave the key with Taggles."

"You rascal! Open the door!"

Knox kicked furiously upon the panels. But Tom Merry was gone. His chums stared at him as he rejoined them downstairs.

"Hallo! What have you done with Knox?"

(Continued on next page.)



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"He's in our study. I've locked him in. I say, Taggles—"

"Don't worrit me now, young gentlemen! I ain't got a dozen pairs of 'ands—"

"Oh, all right! I was only wondering whether this five shillings would be any good to you, but I don't want to worry you."

Taggles' expression changed wonderfully.

"Which that is very kind of you, Master Merry, and I'll have great pleasure in drinking to your werry good health this Christmas-time," said Taggles.

"Here you are, then; but mind, drink my health in tea," said Tom Merry. "I don't approve of intoxication, Taggles, and I have often thought of giving you a word in season—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Young gentlemen will 'ave their little joke," said Taggles, pocketing the five shillings. "Which I wish all young—"

"I say, Taggy, you'll fasten up Knoxy's box again, won't you? And here's the key of my study; Knox has got locked in somehow. You might let him out after I'm gone."

"Ha, ha, ha! Certainly, Master Merry," grinned Taggles.

"Hallo, here's Study No. 6! Are you all ready, Blake & Co.?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "We are quite weady. The weathah is beastlay cold, don't you know."

"All the more seasonable," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Get aboard! Taggles will have us loaded up in an hour or two—"

"Which it's all done, Master Merry."

"Good! Here's Figgins & Co. All aboard!"

The youngsters crowded into the brake. The driver ascended to his seat. Tom Merry's party was one of the first to start. There was a shout as the brake rolled off.

"I hope you haven't forgotten your pea-shooters, kids!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I've saved up a special lot of peas for this auspicious occasion."

"I've got mine," said Digby. "I brought it here on purpose. There's Monteith—give him a volley for luck!"

The prefect of the New House jumped as three or four peas smote upon his countenance. The juniors were deadly marksmen. But Monteith also felt the genial influence of the season, and after that jump he laughed and waved his hand.

"Good-bye!" he called out. "Merry Christmas!"

"Good-bye!" roared the juniors, waving their caps. "Same to you, Monty, and many of 'em!"

"There's Kildare—give him one for luck!" said Figgins.

A missile from Figgins' shooter tapped the captain of St. Jim's on the nose. He started, and then shook his fist playfully at the juniors.

"Good-bye, Kildare!"

"Au revoir!" called out the captain of St. Jim's. "Merry Christmas!"

And Kildare walked away with Monteith. He was leaving St. Jim's with the New House prefect that morning, to spend the vacation with him at his house. They had been enemies once, but that was a thing of the past.

The brake turned out of the old gate, and went briskly down the road. The juniors turned to take their last look at the school over the leafless treetops.

"Good old St. Jim's!" said Figgins. "We've had jolly times there, and we'll have some more next term, too. We'll make you sit up, Tom Merry."

"Same to you, and many of 'em," said Tom Merry, gazing back.

The school sank out of sight, only the tall clock-tower still showing above the trees as the brake rolled on.

"Remember how you climbed the tower to fetch my monkey down, Tom Merry?" asked Figgins. "And we all thought you were going to break your neck!"

"Yes, rather! That was a beastly experience, and no mistake. Hallo, there's some old familiar faces—Pilcher, Craggs, and Grimes!"

The three village lads were coming up the road. They drew aside as the brake came by, and the juniors seized their pea-shooters. But Tom Merry called for peace.

"Don't fire, kids! Wish 'em a Merry Christmas instead."

"Good idea," said Figgins. "Hallo, Pilcher! Where did you borrow that face? Merry Christmas, old fellow! Good luck!"

Pilcher grinned.

"Same to you! Bury them features before you come back, won't you? Good luck!"

And Pilcher, Grimes, and Craggs waved their caps as the brake swept by, and the St. Jim's fellows waved back, and so the parting was unusually amicable.

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Mother Murphy was at the tuckshop door as they passed up the street to the station. They gave her a cheer, and she waved her hand and smiled, and even Gaffer Jones worked up a friendly grin upon his leathery features.

"Here's the giddy station!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Now then, down with you! Marmaduke's lying round here somewhere, and we've got to find him."

There was not much trouble in finding Marmaduke. He knew the train the juniors would leave by, and he had had time to get down from London. He was waiting inside the station, and had been there five minutes. He heard the uproar that heralded the arrival of the party from St. Jim's, and came out with an expansive smile upon his plump features.



The fight waxed fierce and furious. School House and New House were having a final fling at one another before they broke up for the Christmas holidays. The air was thick with snowballs, and the old quad rang to the shouts of the smiters and the cries of the emitten!

"Marmaduke!"

Figgins & Co. shouted out his name, and fell upon him and hugged him. Then he shook hands all round with the Terrible Three and Study No. 6. There was hand-shaking enough to dislocate his arms, and thumping enough on the back to dislocate his spinal column. But he came through the ordeal smiling.

Tom Merry took the tickets for the whole party, and they swarmed on the platform. The local train was waiting which was to take them to the junction, where they changed for their final destination. Crowds of St. Jim's boys were arriving every few minutes now, but Tom Merry and his party were first, and first come meant first served in the matter of accommodation.

Tom Merry opened the door of a first-class carriage and marched his flock into it. There were eleven in all, so

there was about room. Then Tom Merry closed the door and held it shut against all comers.

"Sorry, Gore! No room here for anybody! Pass on to the next carriage, please."

"I'm coming in there."

"So am I," said Mellish.

"And so am I!" exclaimed French.

"Sorry, gentlemen," said Tom Merry, with his never-failing politeness, "no entrance for donkeys! Pea-shooters forward! Present! Fire!"

Tom Merry held the handle of the door fast while his comrades volleyed with peas from the window. Gore and his companions fell back from a withering fusillade, and went along to another carriage.

"Victory!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Hallo, here's some of the seniors! If they want to come in—"

"Get out of that carriage, you youngsters!" exclaimed Sefton of the Sixth. "I want it!"

"Go on!" said Tom Merry.



"Open this door! Are you holding it? How dare you!" Tom Merry looked inquiringly at Marmaduke, who was opposite him.

"How dare I, Marmaduke?"

"Blessed if I know!" grinned the heir of millions. "Is it Sefton's face that worries you?"

"Yes, that must be it. Sefty, old man, your face worries me."

"Let this beastly door open, you young hound!"

"Rats! Go and eat coke! There's room for you in the guard's van. That's where dogs have to travel, and you know it as well as I do."

Sefton grasped the handle of the door and tried to turn it. But it is easier to hold a carriage door-handle shut than to open it against opposition. It did not move, and Tom Merry grinned at the angry senior provokingly from within.

"My dear Sefty, it's no good. Dogs are not admitted into this carriage, and you can't come in! Really! Now, don't be naughty, but run away and play."

Sefton reached through the window as he could not open the door. Tom Merry drew back, and Marmaduke, prompt to act, seized the senior's head and held it fast by the ears. Digby just as promptly collared his hair, while Blake and Figgins took care of his hands.

"Ow!" roared the unfortunate bully of the Sixth. "Leggo!"

"You wanted to come in just now," said Tom Merry in surprise. "Some people are never satisfied! Keep him tight!"

"Ow! I'll be the death of you! I'll—I'll—"

"Will you promise to be a good boy if we let you go?"

"I'll wring your necks! I'll—"

"D'Arcy, there's a bottle of lemonade in that hamper. Get it out, will you?"

"Yaas, wathah, Tom Mewwy!"

Arthur Augustus quickly had the lemonade out and opened. Tom Merry took the bottle in his hand.

"Now, Sefty, will you promise to be a good boy? Or will you scoff this lemonade with the back of your neck?"

"It's just as you like."

"I'll skin you alive for this!"

"Very well, if you will have it! Say when!"

And Tom Merry commenced to pour the lemonade over the back of Sefton's head as he was held sprawling in at the window.

"Ow! Don't! I'll leave you alone! Leggo! Leave off!"

"Good! You can scuttle, Sefty."

The senior was released. There were roars of laughter on the crowded platform as he drew back from the carriage. He rubbed the back of his head furiously with his handkerchief. Then he made a rush for the carriage.

"Present! Fire!" sang out Tom Merry.

A volley of peas from the shooters crowded in the carriage window greeted Sefton. The door did not budge, and he staggered back from the stinging fusillade.

"Now, gents, stand back there!"

The train was going to start. There was a general bolt to get on board, and Sefton rushed off. He was in a towering rage, but he didn't want to be left behind. The engine snorted and puffed.

"We're off!" said Tom Merry. "And we've got the carriage to ourselves. Hurrah!"

"Hurrah!" shouted the juniors.

They crowded in the window and waved their caps. They kept up a roar until the train was fairly out of Rylcombe Station and whistling along the snow-covered track. Off for the holidays!

It was always a joyous time. And joy reigned in the crowded carriage.

Half an hour later they changed at Wayland Junction, and boarded the train which was to land them in the afternoon at Huckleberry Heath. Then the hampers were opened, and the juniors feasted royally as the train rushed on its long journey through snowy wastes and leafless woods.

At last came the halt at the little old station so familiar to Tom Merry.

"Uckrbrryeth!"

That was the mystic word chanted by the porter, which Tom Merry translated into Huckleberry Heath for the benefit of his

companions. And they swarmed out of the carriage.

"Hallo! There's Doddy!"

Mr. Dodds, the handsome, athletic curate of Huckleberry Heath, was waiting for them on the platform. There was more handshaking, and they accompanied the curate to the motor-bus he had brought to convey the party to Laurel Villa.

"This is jolly of you, Mr. Dodds!" said Tom Merry. "I always said you were one of the best. Didn't I, kids?"

"You did," said Figgins. "And so say we all!"

"Thank you," said Mr. Dodds demurely. "I hope we shall all have a jolly Christmas, and that I shall not find any fireworks in my boots, or tar in my soap-dish—"

"Or treacle in your bottle of hair-restorer," said Monty Lowther. "Certainly not! Kids, the person of Mr. Dodds

is to be considered sacred. But everybody else in Huckleberry Heath is fair game."

And it was agreed that it should be so. Mr. Dodds laughed, and, in high spirits, the party drove off for Laurel Villa.

CHAPTER 9.

Welcome Home!

MISS PRISCILLA FAWCETT stood in the doorway of Laurel Villa looking out over the long garden into the snowy road. There was a flutter of expectation in the kind old lady's face, and her glance was eager. Hannah, her favourite maid, was hovering round her, looking forward nearly as much as Miss Fawcett did to the arrival of Tom Merry. There was no one in Laurel Villa who did not love the young scamp.

"Let me see," murmured Miss Priscilla. "The rooms are all ready, Hannah—"

"Quite ready, ma'am."

"The beds are all well aired—"

"Beautifully aired, ma'am."

"The new medicines have come down from London—"

"They're all in your room, ma'am."

"The special box of Green Globules—"

"It's on your table, ma'am."

"And the Purple Pilules for Perplexed Patients—"

Miss Priscilla broke off suddenly. "The bus! He is coming, Hannah!"

The vehicle had come in sight on the road. Eleven juniors stood up, waving their caps, as Laurel Villa came in sight and Miss Fawcett was seen standing at the door.

The bus drew to a halt at the gate with a flourish.

Eleven juniors swarmed to the door. Tom Merry hugged

his old governess affectionately, and then hugged Hannah. Monty Lowther hugged Miss Priscilla also, and so did Manners, and D'Arcy, not to be left out of it, hugged Hannah.

All the juniors were not personally known to Miss Fawcett, but they were soon presented. Most of them had visited Laurel Villa on the famous occasion when Tom Merry had had his day out in D'Arcy's motor-car.

The little old lady was quite in a flutter. She was usually dressed quietly to the verge of primness; but now she had burst forth, as it were, into full bloom. A wonderful robe of indescribable colours and priceless material, which Tom Merry's uncle had sent her from India, draped her form, and really became her wonderfully well. Perhaps the pattern was a little startling. But what did that matter?

Tom Merry marched his army to the rooms prepared for them. Three large rooms adjoining one another, with communicating doors, had been prepared for the juniors, and there was plenty of room for the eleven beds. Everything was very comfortable and neat and clean as a new pin.

"Jolly!" exclaimed Blake, looking round. "Like being in a giddy dormitory all to ourselves. Tom Merry, you've really brought up your guardian very well."

"Yaas, wathah! And I congratulate you on the result, Mewwy. I am suah that we shall be quite comfy in these quarters."

"Rather!" said Figgins. "Hallo, Fatty! Where have you been?"

The juniors were busily engaged in removing the signs of travel. Fatty Wynn had come in last. There was a happy look on his face.

"Hush, Figg! I say—"

"What is it?"

"I've just had a peep at the dinner, that's all. Goose!"

"Guzzler!"

"And Christmas pudding—"

"Eh?"

"I tell you there's a Christmas pudding. Honour bright! I suppose Miss Fawcett knows that people don't like to wait till—"

"You giddy Falstaff! She knew you were coming, you see."

"I regard Miss Fawcett as a most sensible old lady. I wish I had a few aunts like her. I'd cherish 'em, and no mistake!"

A bell rang below. Tom Merry finished tying his necktie. He was looking very handsome and happy. The rooms glistened with holly and berries, and the lights gleamed upon jolly faces.

"Now, then, you chaps—"

"Pway wait for me," said D'Arcy, who had insisted upon a complete change of wardrobe after the long journey in the train. "I shall not keep you waitin' a minute, Tom Mewwy. I must apologise for—"

"Don't waste time apologise, Gussy," advised Blake. "Leave that till you get back to St. Jim's. Buck up, or we'll take you down without a coat on."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Buck up!" howled half a dozen voices.

"Same old Gussy!" grinned Digby. "How I remember him! The marvel to me is that you haven't killed him by this time."

"Weally, Digby—"

"Buck up! Shut up! Buck up! Not a word! We'll carry you down without a necktie!"

"If you think I could appear in the pwesenence of a lady without a necktie," said Gussy, ceasing his tying of that necessary article while he spoke, "you are quite mistaken, deah boys. It would be wegardeed as extwemely wude—"

"Are you going to get done?" howled Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Collar him!" exclaimed Marmaduke. "Bring the boundah down! Don't let him tie his necktie!"

"Weally, Marmaduke—"

But the chums were fed-up with Gussy's delays by this time. Tom Merry stood by, laughing, as they seized and hustled him to the door. D'Arcy's dressing was quite complete, save for the necktie, and that went to the floor under a dozen feet.

"Pway welease me!" exclaimed D'Arcy. "I could not possibly appear in the pwesenence of Miss Pwisilla Fawcett without my beastlay necktie, you know. I insist upon bein' immediately weleased."

"Rats! Bring him along."

"Tom Mewwy, I appeal to you. Can I possibly appear in the pwesenence of—"

"Looks to me as if you've got to," said Tom Merry cheerfully.

"I must weally wemonstwate—"

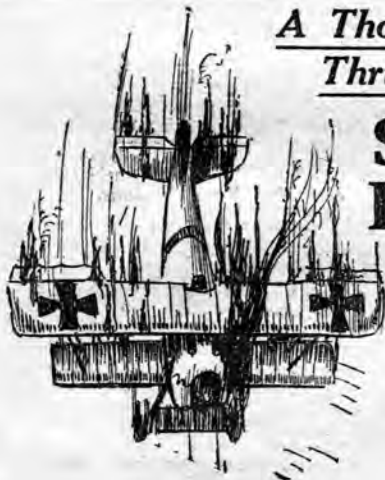
"Oh, shut up!" said Fatty Wynn. "When I think of goose and roast beef and Christmas pudding and mince pies kept waiting by you, Gussy, I could slay you with my own hands."

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"But, weally—"

The swell of St. Jim's had no time for more. He was rushed downstairs in the midst of the juniors and swept into the dining-room. Mr. Dodds was there, and Miss Fawcett and another lady—younger—well known to the chums. It was D'Arcy's Cousin Ethel, who was staying with Miss Fawcett. Glad were the chums of St. Jim's to see Cousin Ethel, as they all called her. D'Arcy was crimson to the ears.

"Weally, Ethel, you must not smile at my absurd appearance," he exclaimed. "These howwid boundahs have insisted upon bwingin' me down without my beastlay necktie, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the girl. "That is very painful to you, I know, Gussy. But, do you know, I hadn't noticed it till you drew my attention to it."

"Oh, weally, I am an ass, you know!" said D'Arcy.

"Yes, I think you are," said Ethel. "At all events, I will take your word for it."

Ethel's place was between Figgins and Marmaduke. Figgins reminded her of the famous day out, and her run home in the sidecar of his motor-bike. The girl remembered perfectly, and she laughed gaily over the reminiscence. D'Arcy looked across at Figgins once or twice, with his eyeglass screwed into his eye. He thought that Figgins was getting on awfully well with Cousin Ethel, and he didn't quite know whether to like it or not.

The dinner was a very merry one. The juniors were so happy at being together, and Miss Priscilla and Ethel were in such spirits, and Mr. Dodds came out so strong, that it could not fail to be happy. Fatty Wynn did full justice to the dinner, and every course was welcomed by him with open arms, as it were, and he was specially destructive in his attack upon the early Christmas pudding.

It was a jolly evening, but after their day's travel the chums had to go to bed early, and when ten o'clock struck they were all asleep in their beds, dreaming pleasant dreams.

CHAPTER 10.

Fatty Gets Too Near the Turkey!

TOM MERRY sat up in bed. The morning sun was shining in at the windows and glistening on the frost that covered the panes with its delicate traceries. It was a cold but fine, hard morning, and no snow was falling, though the ground was thick with what had fallen during the night.

"Hallo, eight o'clock!" exclaimed Tom Merry, looking at his watch. "This won't do, lazybones! You're getting into bad habits already, sticking in bed like this. Wake up!"

"I'm sleepy," murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Never mind," said Tom Merry, jumping out of bed. "You'll be wakeful enough when I squeeze this sponge over you."

"D-d-don't! I'm getting up!"

And the fat boy of the New House bounced out of bed. Figgins and Monty Lowther were in the same room, and they jumped up, too. Tom Merry kicked open the door intervening between that room and the next.

"Wake up, Blake!"

Blake yawned and sat up. A pillow hurled by Figgins caught him in the act, so to speak, and he rolled off the bed. He went sprawling on the floor with most of the bedclothes, and Figgins burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! How do you like that, Blake?"

"You horrid bounder!" exclaimed Blake, scrambling up and seizing his bolster. "I'll give you fearful beans!"

And he rushed at Figgins. The other door opened, and Kerr looked into the middle room. He was in time to see Figgins bowled over by Blake's bolster.

The Scottish partner in the New House Co. was not likely to stand that. He went for Blake with the nearest pillow, and the chief of Study No. 6 sprawled under a mighty swipe.

"Buck up, School House!" shouted Herries, and he went for Kerr.

In a moment Study No. 6 and Figgins & Co. were engaged in deadly strife with pillow and bolster. The Terrible Three stood by laughing. Monty Lowther received a terrific swipe from D'Arcy which was intended for Figgins, and was bowled over like a ninepin. He jumped up and went for the swell of St. Jim's. Tom Merry and Manners could not resist the temptation to join in, and they seized pillows and rushed into the fray. They hit out right and left, distributing their blows with great impartiality. Marmaduke had sided with Figgins & Co., as of old, and Digby joined in with Study No. 6. The Terrible Three were on their own, and they acted the part of freelancers.

A terrific combat was soon raging. Juniors were bowled over, but they jumped up again and renewed the combat gallantly. A rush of the Co. bore their opponents back-

wards, but they rallied again, while the Terrible Three tackled the victorious New House fellows. The fun waxed fast and furious.

Blake's party and Figgins & Co. were too busy to attend to the Terrible Three for a time, and Tom Merry had it all his own way. Then, by a tacit understanding, the two parties of Fourth-Formers suddenly ceased their mutual attack and combined against the chums of the Shell.

This rather changed matters. Eight youngsters attacked the Terrible Three, and Tom Merry, Manners, and Lowther were driven into a corner, where they valiantly defended themselves with their pillows.

"Go for 'em!" shouted Figgins. "We'll teach 'em to biff both sides of us! Snatch 'em bald-headed!"

"Give 'em socks!" yelled Digby. "Down with the Shell!"

"Yaas, wathah! Give the boundahs beastlay socks!" shouted D'Arcy, brandishing his pillow excitedly, and sending Herries and Marmaduke flying with accidental swipes.

"Give the—Ow!"

Marmaduke had jumped up and seized the swell of St. Jim's, and plumped him on a bed, and was proceeding to sit on his chest.

"Marmaduke, pway welease me! I insist—"

"Sit on him!" gasped Herries. "Keep him down! He's more dangerous to us than to these rotters! Pin him down!"

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"I've got him!" said Marmaduke cheerfully. "He won't get up in a hurry."

Certainly the Fourth-Formers seemed to get on better without D'Arcy's aid. They cornered the Terrible Three, and Manners dropped under Blake's pillow; but the next moment Tom Merry floored Digby, who sprawled over Manners.

"Rush 'em!" shouted Figgins.

The Fourth-Formers rushed. Tom Merry hurled his pillow at Figgins, who ducked and let it whiz over his head.

At the same moment the door opened, and the smiling countenance of Mr. Dodds looked in.

"Boys, it is time—"

Biff!

Right into Mr. Dodds' face went the flying pillow, and it bowled him over like a cannon-ball. He disappeared from the doorway, and a thud was heard in the passage.

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "Pax, you fellows!"

The pillow fight ceased at once. The juniors rushed to the door. Tom Merry and Blake lent helping hands, and the curate, gasping, was set upon his feet.

"I say, we're awfully sorry, sir!" said Tom Merry penitently, though his eyes were gleaming with fun. "It was quite an accident, of course."

"Of course," said Monty Lowther. "The pillow was intended for that bounder Figgins. I vote that we scrag him for dodging the enemy's fire!"

"Yaas, wathah! Let's scrag Figgins—"

"Never mind," said Mr. Dodds, laughing, as he smoothed his rumpled hair. "I am sure it was an accident. But you will be late for breakfast. I heard the fearful din you were making, and so I looked in to tell you."

"Thank you, sir! We'll be down in two ticks!"

The curate passed on. The juniors grinned over the occurrence, and voted Mr. Dodds a jolly good fellow for his good temper. When they went down they found breakfast ready, and Miss Priscilla beaming over the teacups.

Breakfast over, the glorious winter morning invited them out of doors. Laurel Villa stood in extensive grounds, part of which was cultivated, while there were extensive gardens, and conservatories, and special hothouses, where bloomed the flowers that were the pride of Miss Priscilla's heart. Down at the end of the grounds ran the Huckle River, where there was boating and bathing in the summer. But now the stream, which bubbled and sang through the rushes in the summer-time, was frozen hard in a broad sheet of glistening ice.

"Who's for skating?" Tom Merry asked. "I warned you all to bring your skates, but I have a good many here, in case you've forgotten. Where are you going, Fatty?"

"Oh, just to have a look at the farmyard!" said Fatty Wynn.

Figgins burst into a chuckle.

"Miss Fawcett was telling him about the big turkey, and Fatty wants to see it!" he exclaimed. "Mind it doesn't go for you, Fatty! You look a tempting morsel for a turkey. He might take you for an extra-sized oyster, you know!"

"Yaas, wathah! If I were you, Fatty, I'd wait till Christmas to see the turkey!"

"Oh rats!" said Fatty. "He won't go for me. I'll stroke him—"

(Continued at foot of next page.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,242.

THIS CORNER IS OUR OWN.



HALLO, Chums! Once again the great Christmas festival is upon us! Once again I have the real pleasure of wishing you all, wherever you happen to be, "A RIGHT ROYAL AND MERRY CHRISTMAS!" May the fun be fast and furious! May your Christmas Gifts roll in by every post! May the turkey and the pudding be done to a turn! May you escape the awful pangs of indigestion, etc.!

More than one reader writes to ask me whether we shall have snow upon the ground this coming Christmastide. I'm not much of a weather prophet, but here in London it hardly looks as if we shall get the crisp, white snow this side of December 25th. Still, one can never tell. Personally, I am prepared to enjoy Christmas with or without snow. One thing I can venture to say we shall have, no matter the state of the weather, and that's carol-singing.

This reminds me of a funny incident I witnessed last year about this time. The strains of a band—three instrumentalists there were, going "all out"—made me stop. Around the band were at least six youngsters singing at the top of their voices the familiar lines of "Noel."

I was somewhat astonished to see the nature of the building in front of which this carol serenade was going on. You'll never believe me, but the building was an institute for the deaf. I couldn't help laughing. The band and the singers kept it up for quite a long

time, until they realised what a waste of lung power was theirs. Then they moved on to another spot, and received a good measure of consolation in the form of pennies and pieces of silver.

It was for a good cause these enthusiasts were giving up their time, and quite a respectable sum of money eventually went to help the inmates of a certain hospital to enjoy their Christmas.

Referring again to readers' letters, I have been asked several times to advise in the matter of Christmas Gifts to mothers and fathers, uncles, and the brothers. There is quite an art in selecting the RIGHT gift. For instance, it's no good giving a pipe to the uncle who abhors smoking; it's certainly inadvisable to give auntie your pet white mice, and father won't be too grateful if you hand him some extra special hair oil if he is bald.

Many Christmases have been spoilt through donors of gifts selecting the wrong thing. I remember once a dotting aunt of mine presenting me with a safety-razor set complete. As there was, at that time, no sign of any hair on my chin or upper-lip, I was hardly as grateful as she doubtless expected me to be. Another relation of mine once gave me a bicycle for a Christmas present. As I was only six years old at the time, my parents decided that it would not be safe for me to use such a "dangerous thing" until I was at least nine or ten years of age. Yet I had to

thank the donor and look frightfully bucked.

* If my memory is not at fault, I never rode that particular bicycle—like many things in life it mysteriously disappeared.

The ideal way of selecting a gift is to let the person select it himself. That may sound a bit strange, but I'm sure you will gather my meaning. A hint dropped here and there, and the rest of the job is easy.

I've had to break off here as a certain gentleman who is well known to you all has hopped into the office. His name is

MARTIN CLIFFORD,

and he insists that he should take over a space in this chat. Stand by for him, chums!

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" It's Martin Clifford speaking. I just want to wish all of you loyal GEM readers the very best Christmas yet! I see that the Editor has made certain remarks about the turkey and the Christmas-pudding, so I'll just content myself with saying that I hope you all get an extra helping of each. On the great day (the 25th), I'm going to drink your health in a bumper glass. You won't hear me, of course, but the time will be one o'clock p.m., and, although you won't be present, my toast will be just as sincere and as hearty as if you were. Good luck, boys and girls, and once more a Merry Christmas!"

Mr. Clifford has not left me a great deal of space, and I had heaps of things to say to you. But one matter is important, and that is next week's grand issue of the GEM. As announced elsewhere in these pages, Jimmy Silver & Co., "Wings," and the laughable Potts will return to the GEM next week in extra-special form. See to it, then, chums, that you order your copy in good time. If you miss this glorious number of your favourite paper, it will be as bad as missing your Christmas dinner. Once more to every man jack of you—that includes my girl readers—A BUMPER MERRY CHRISTMAS!

ST. JIM'S FOR MERRIE CHRISTMAS!

(Continued from previous page.)

"Don't you be an ass!" said Tom Merry. "You don't know turkeys."

But Fatty Wynn, sniffing the sniff of one who condemns advice, was gone. Tom Merry went into the house to fetch his skates. It was a glorious day for skating. Mr. Dodds, who had his parochial duties to attend to, could not join them, but Cousin Ethel came up in what D'Arcy described to Marmaduke as a "weally wippin' get-up!" The girl's sweet face looked out from the white furs with a merry smile. Mr. Dodds' face was rather grave as he left the boys, and Tom Merry, coming out with his skates in his hand, noticed it.

"I hope nothing is wrong, Mr. Dodds," he said, looking up at the tall curate.

Mr. Dodds smiled.

"No, not at all, Tom. I am going to see Grandfer George who is in a rather bad way, that's all," he replied.

"I remember him, Mr. Dodds. I hope he's not ill."

"No," said Mr. Dodds. "Only financial difficulties, Tom. His landlord—Mr. Squires—is very hard on him, but I hope to make it all right. Good-bye, Tom!"

"Hallo! What's that?" exclaimed Digby.

It was a terrific uproar from the direction of the farmyard. The loud clucking of fowls was mingled with the

squealing of started pigs and the yelling of a human voice.

"It's Fatty Wynn!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "He's been looking for trouble, I expect—"

"And found it!" grinned Digby.

The boys rushed into the farmyard. A startling sight met their gaze.

"Help!" It was Fatty Wynn who was yelling. "Help, help!"

Fatty had evidently been approaching the big turkey too familiarly, and the haughty bird had resented it by seizing the fat boy of the New House by the ear!

The beak was firmly fixed on Fatty Wynn's ear, and he was struggling desperately to escape. He fought gallantly, and the turkey flapped its wings as it was whirled about by the frantic junior, but it did not let go.

"Here, lend a hand!" gasped Tom Merry. "Take the beast by the neck, Figgy! Thump it, Dig!"

Figgins gripped the turkey's fat neck, and Marmaduke thumped, and Digby thumped. With a wild flopping and a screech the turkey at last released Fatty Wynn, and scuttled off. The juniors closed round Fatty and bore him away.

"Ow!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "O-o-o-o-h! Ow!"

"Serve you right!" said Figgins unfeelingly.

"The brute snipped hold of my beastly ear! Gr-r-r! It's bleeding! Never mind," said Fatty Wynn, a smile breaking over his plump face. "I'll take it out of him at Christmas dinner-time!"

"My dear child!" It was the anxious voice of Miss Priscilla. "Blood! Dear me! You are—are wounded! Hannah! Lint! Bandages! Hannah!"

"It's all right, Miss Fawcett," said Fatty Wynn, who had no desire to be made an invalid of, and who knew Miss Priscilla's little ways. "It's only—"

"My dear child, come up to the house at once! Take his other arm, Hannah!"

"But I—I—I—"

"How fortunate that I heard the noise and came down at once. Quick, Hannah! Run on ahead and get the lint prepared! Hurry!"

"I—I—I—"

Fatty Wynn's protests were not even listened to by the anxious Miss Priscilla. He was simply rushed off willy-nilly. He disappeared into the house with Miss Priscilla and Hannah. The juniors burst into a roar of laughter.

"Well," said Tom Merry, "by the time Fatty escapes he will have learned to let live turkeys alone, I think. It's safer to wait till they're cooked. Come on, kids, and let's get that skate!" You are skating, Cousin Ethel!"

"Certainly," said the girl, with a bright smile.

The stream was wide and the ice firm. A couple of hundred yards down the stream was a board warning skaters that the ice was thin. But there was little danger even there, for Tom Merry knew every foot of it, and he remarked that in the thin spot the water was shallow.

Tom Merry was a master of the art of skating, and most of the others skated well. Cousin Ethel was a marvel. D'Arcy was the weakest of the party on skates, but he did not like to own up before the girl's laughing eyes that he was a poor skater. D'Arcy always had a lurking suspicion that Cousin Ethel was laughing at him.

"You'll hold me at first, won't you, Blake?" he whispered. "Dig, old man, I should be extremely obliged if you would take the othah side—just for a while. I'm not weally a bad skatah, you know, but one gets out of pwactice so beastlay soon."

"Exactly," assented Blake, winking at Digby. "We'll help you. Got the skates on all right?"

"Yaas, wathah! I—er—think so. Careful now, deah boys!"

"Digby, old man, are you being sufficiently careful?"

"Yes, Blake, I think I am being sufficiently careful. If I am not sufficiently careful, you must tell me whenever Gussy falls over—"

"Weally, Digby—"

"Come along, Gus. Mind you're sufficiently careful, Dig."

"Certainly. I will be sufficiently—"

"Oh, don't wot, you fellows! Take care! I can feel my feet slipping away—Ow!"

D'Arcy was on the ice at last. His right leg went one way and his left another, and he threw his arms wildly round the necks of Blake and Digby.

"Hold on!" gasped Blake.

"I am holdin' on, deah boy! I weally do not feel quite secure. The ice is unusually slippewy, I think."

"Ha, ha, ha! Keep your feet together!"

"I—I will twy, but they seem to go away fwom one anothah of their own accord. It is more difficult than I thought at first."

"Why, I thought you could skate, Gus," said Cousin Ethel mischievously.

"I—I weally can, you know; but I am considewably out of pwactice!" gasped D'Arcy. "Dig, old man, you needn't hold me by the collar. You are wumplin' it. Hold me by my beastly arm!"

"That's all right! Come along, Gussy!"

Gussy was fairly going now. Blake and Digby could do anything on their skates, and they supported the swell of St. Jim's between them, and ran him along.

Gussy gradually got into the way of it, and, like all beginners, as soon as he felt he could go he wanted to go without assistance.

"I think I am all wight now, Blake," he said. "You can let go, Dig, old man."

Figgins was cutting figures on the ice, and the other juniors were flying round, with scarves trailing in the wind.

D'Arcy felt that he was keeping Blake and Digby out of the fun, and, besides, he didn't want to appear helpless before Cousin Ethel.

"Let me go now, Blake. I was only a little out of pwactice, and I am quite capable of takin' care of myself now, I do assuah you."

"Cut off, Blake," said Dig. "I'll stick to him."

"Right you are," said Blake, who was anxious to get some skating, and he spun away with a whizz, and was soon competing with Figgins in cutting capers.

Dig good-naturedly stuck to the swell of St. Jim's, but D'Arcy would not have it.

He insisted that he was quite well able to take care of himself.

"My dear Dig!" he exclaimed. "I'm spoiling your fun, and you are spoiling mine. I am going to skate alone. Pwaw welease me!"

"Oh, all right, if you put it like that!" said Digby resignedly. "You're a silly ass, though, and you'll come a cropper."

"I shall not come a ewopper!"

Dig obediently released the swell of St. Jim's, and D'Arcy stood alone. Figgins came by, with Cousin Ethel on his arm—that is to say, her hand on his arm, of course, and the two appeared to be enjoying themselves hugely.

D'Arcy's emulation was aroused. He was standing with some difficulty, but he knew it was easier to keep moving than to stand still on slippery ice. And that ice was very slippery!

"I suppose I had bettah begin with a figuah eight," D'Arcy murmured. "Figgins does them easily enough, and it's wot to suppose that I can't do what a New House wotah does. I will show Ethel that I can skate, bai Jove!"

And Arthur Augustus started off with a run.

Then, somehow, he never exactly knew how, his right leg travelled away from his left and went up into the air, and at the same time he gathered speed, and, much to his own astonishment and terror, he went along like lightning on one leg.

"My hat!" exclaimed Digby. "I never thought Gussy could do that. We needn't have wasted our time holding him up, Blake."

Blake roared. He caught sight of the agonised expression on D'Arcy's face as he shot by, and he knew that that wonderful exhibition was quite involuntary on D'Arcy's part.

Right on went D'Arcy with a wild rush. He couldn't think. His wits seemed to be scattered. His right leg remained stuck out like a semaphore, his left bent under him. But he still skated along in a half-sitting position. The look of him, and especially his face, with its bewildered expression, was so ludicrous that the juniors roared again.

"Help!" gasped D'Arcy faintly.

"Look out!" yelled Figgins suddenly. "Look out, D'Arcy! You're making for the thin ice!"

D'Arcy was indeed rushing right down on the warning-board, but he could not have stopped himself to save his life.

"Look out!"

"Stop!"

"Danger!"

D'Arcy, with a wild effort, brought his right leg down upon the ice once more, but with disastrous results, for the skate smashed through the thin surface, and there was a gush of black water from beneath.

All round the swell of St. Jim's came an ominous cracking and creaking. Water gushed out. D'Arcy realised his danger, but he could not help himself.

Crash!

A cry of horror rose from the boys as the ice parted in a wide gap, and the swell of St. Jim's went through!

CHAPTER 11.

D'Arcy In Danger!

COUSIN ETHEL gave a cry of alarm.

"Arthur! He will be drowned! Save him!"

"What-ho!" said Figgins reassuringly, and he left the girl's side and sped on towards the thin ice.

"Look out!" shouted Tom Merry. "You'll be in, too! Look out!"

"Yaas, wathah!" came a voice from a gap in the ice.

Arthur Augustus had gone right through, but his feet had found the bottom of the shallow water, and he stood with the ice on a level with his chest. He was in no danger of drowning, unless his lower limbs should freeze and refuse to support him. He made frantic efforts to get hold of the ice, but it chipped and broke in his grasp.

"Look out, Figgins! You—"

It was too late.

The bold Figgins was already on the spot. The ice, already weakened, cracked under him, and he went through, and bumped right against Gussy.

The swell of St. Jim's clutched hold of him to save himself.

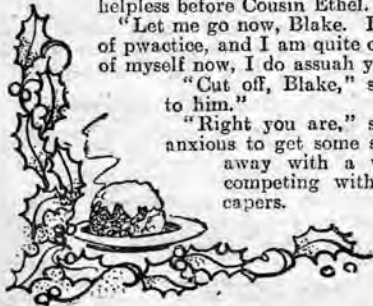
"Weally, Figgins—"

"Hold on, Gussy! I'm going to save you!"

"Weally, this is howwibly wotten!" gasped D'Arcy, as he held himself steady by gripping Figgins. "You've neahly drownded me! Help, deah boys! I am simply fweezin' and my twousahs are completely spoiled!"

The juniors gathered round the gap in the ice.

A creaking under their feet warned them not to go too



near, yet it was necessary to get Figgins and D'Arcy out at once if they were not to freeze.

"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What's to be done?"

"Is there a ladder?" asked Cousin Ethel quickly.

"By Jove! That's the idea! Come and help me to carry it, some of you! Keep your pecker up, Figgy! We'll be back in a jiffy!"

"Right-ho!" sang out Figgins, as cheerfully as he could.

"Weally, this is howwibly wotten!" gasped D'Arcy, as Tom Merry and three or four others tore off. "I'm fweezing!"

"Buck up!" said Figgins. "I'm freezing, too!"

"I say," called out Marmaduke, "why not smash the ice and come along? The water's shallow enough there for you to get to the bank."

Figgins hesitated. He knew there might be hollows in the river-bed. Still, it was worth trying.

"Chuck us a skate, then," he said, and Marmaduke, having thrown him a skate, and Figgins having caught it, he commenced to smash a passage through the thin ice towards the bank.

All of a sudden he disappeared up to his neck, and the juniors gave a cry.

Figgins scrambled back, gasping.

"It's all right," he spluttered. "I stepped into a hole, that's all. They forgot to pave the bottom of the river, Marmaduke, so your idea won't work."

"Where's my skate?"

"Your skate? At the bottom of the river somewhere, I think. I haven't got it. You'd better wait till the season, and start fishing for skate," said Figgins.

"Oh deah, I am howwibly cold! My tuousahs are fweez-in' to my beastlay legs!"

"What the dickens did you want to get on thin ice for, you duffer?" said Figgins.

"I couldn't help it, Figgins. I weally couldn't. I wonder how long Tom Mewwy is goin' to be with that laddah? I say, look out, Marmaduke!"

Figgins' vigorous blows on the ice had weakened it. A crack had extended under Marmaduke's feet, but the heir of millions had not noticed it. He noticed it now, however. The ice gave a creak and a groan and went through, and Marmaduke dropped into the water.

"Ow!" shivered Marmaduke Smythe, as the freezing water swirled round him.

The other juniors crowded back. Digby heroically tried to lend a helping hand to Marmaduke Smythe, and went in himself.

"Here comes Tom Merry!"

Tom Merry, Herries, Lowther, and Manners were rushing down to the stream with a long ladder borne in their arms. They ran it down to the water, and laid it across the ice. It reached from the bank to a spot where the frozen surface was thick and solid, and formed a bridge across the dangerous section.

"Catch hold, Figgy!"

"Right-ho!" said Figgins, and he was on the ladder in a twinkling. D'Arcy caught hold of it, too, but he was too fatigued and cold to draw himself out. Figgins gripped him by the shoulders and dragged him upon the level ladder by main force.

"Thank you, Figgins!" gasped D'Arcy. "But you weally needn't be so beastlay wuff, you know. You have quite shaken me out of bweath."

"Oh, rats! Come along, kid, and dry up!"

Figgins hauled D'Arcy along the ladder. Tom Merry seized him and bore him to the shore. Digby and Marmaduke soon climbed out, and the four wet and dripping juniors came safe to the bank.

"Don't stand still a moment!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You'll freeze as sure as a gun. You want bed and blankets and hot-water bottles. Run—hard as you can go!"

Figgins, Digby, and Marmaduke needed no second bidding. Each, with a helping hand on his arm, tore off towards the house. But Arthur Augustus was slower; he had his personal dignity to consider.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Run, you silly beggar—run!"

"I wefuse to wun! I wefuse to act in such an extremely undig mannah. I will walk with pleasuah, but I wefuse to teah about like—"

"Collar his other arm, Kerr!"

Tom Merry and Kerr gripped an arm each of the swell of St. Jim's, and they ran him off, whether he would or not. He had to run or be dragged, and he decided to run. His feeble protests passed unheeded, and Tom Merry and Kerr made such good speed that they reached the house soon after the others.

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Miss Fawcett was already alarmed. She had finished attending to the unfortunate Fatty Wynn, who was lying on a sofa with his head bandaged up. She was in her element now, with four drenched and half-frozen juniors to look after. Hannah came to her call, and the four drenched ones were bundled off to bed, with hot-water bottles at their feet and blankets piled on them till they were nearly suffocated. The Huckleberry Heath medico was sent for at once.

"Five of us laid up," said Tom Merry ruefully, when they sat down to lunch. "They'll be all right to-morrow, though. And Cousin Ethel's engaged this afternoon, too. That makes six. But, I say, you fellows, I've got an idea."

"Get it off your chest, then," said Blake. "I don't suppose it's any good, but we may as well hear it."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Did you hear what Mr. Dodds said to me before he went away this morning? There's something up with old Granfer George in the village. Now, why shouldn't we all pay him a visit, and see what the trouble is, and get him out of it, if possible?"

There was a chorus of approval.

"Very well," said Tom Merry. "Wire in, and we'll go after lunch."

And after lunch they went. Leaving the invalids, the six juniors set off in the December dusk to walk into the village. Tom Merry knew Granfer George's cottage well. It was a neat little structure, with a large garden, which was the pride of Granfer George's heart, but which was now hidden under a sheeting of snow. Tom Merry knocked at the door, and it was opened by granny, the partner of Granfer George's weal and woe—mostly woe now, to judge by the looks of the old couple.

"It's Master Merry!"

Their pleasure at seeing him was unfeigned. Tom Merry shook hands with granfer, who was sitting over the fire, and presented his chums. They sat down on oaken settles in the red-brick-floored kitchen, which, homely as it was, presented an appearance of cleanliness and comfort grateful to the eye.

"We're glad to see you, Master Tom," said granfer, with a wheeze. "But you find us in sad, low spirits, I'm afear'd."

"Exactly," said Tom Merry. "You see, we heard that you are in trouble, and we've come to see what it is, and to help you out of it if we can. Haven't we, chaps?"

"Just so," said five voices together.

"That's very kind of you, young gentlemen," said granfer, with a moisture in his old eyes. "But I'm afear'd you can't help me. It's that Mr. Squires, you know."

"Your landlord? I know he's a hard case," said Tom Merry. "I remember tying a jumping cracker to his coat-tails when I was a little 'un, and when it went off he was startled, and he got into an awful temper. He couldn't take a joke. But what has he been doing now, granfer?"

"He wants us to leave the old cottage," said Granfer George, with a groan, "where we've lived for forty year come Michaelmas. We've got to turn out at Christmas, Master Merry, unless—"

Tom Merry's brow contracted.

"Unless what?"

"Unless we pay up arrears by Christmas. You see, the cottage belonged to Mr. Squire's feyther, who was a kind gentleman, if ever there was one, and he let the rent run. You see, he never meant us to pay it; it was his way of helping us out in these hard times. But he died suddenly, and the cottage belongs to Mr. William now, and his agent has come down on us sudden loike. Whur are we to get fifteen pounds from come Christmas?" Granfer gave a dismal wheeze. "We've got to leave the old place. Mr. Dodds is very kind, but, bless you, he hasn't got any money; he gives away all he can spare already to the poor in the village. We shall have to turn out."

"You shan't!" exclaimed Tom Merry abruptly. "I'll take the matter in hand, granfer. I'll talk to the bounder. You shan't be turned out. I'll find a way!"

But old Granfer George only shook his head dolefully.

"I tell you I'll find a way, granfer," said Tom Merry, shaking hands with the old fellow. "Don't worry, now. Good-bye, and leave it to us!"

And Tom Merry and his comrades quitted the cottage.

"What the dickens are you going to do, Tom?" asked Monty Lowther curiously. "It's hard cheese on the old gentleman, but you can't raise fifteen pounds."

"It's a big sum," remarked Kerr. "We could have a whip round; but even with Gussy and Marmaduke doing their best, I don't imagine we could raise that figure."

"I'm not thinking of a whip round," said Tom Merry.

"Why shouldn't we earn the money?"

"How the deuce are we going to earn it?"

"There's lots of money earned at Christmas-time by carol

singers," said Tom Merry, into whose brain a brilliant idea had flashed while he was talking to Granfer George. "Why shouldn't we start in that line?"

"Bravo!" cried Manners. "Ripping!"
"We've got some musical instruments, and we've all got decent voices. We know the giddy carols by heart. What do you think of the idea? We can make up a party of eleven, and eleven sweet voices in the still night ought to have some effect."

"It's a go!" was the general verdict.
And a "go" it was.

CHAPTER 12.

Miss Priscilla Attends to Her Guests!

THE next day was a busy one at Laurel Villa. The amateur carol-singers were preparing for their venture, and they had plenty to do. The invalids were all well, fortunately—only D'Arcy had taken a slight cold. Fatty Wynn had recovered, too, from the attack of the enraged turkey, and, in spite of Miss Fawcett's



D'Arcy was on the ice at last—and he certainly cut a startling figure. His right leg went one way, his left another, and then he flung his arms round the necks of Blake and Digby!

anxiety, he had insisted upon having the absurd bandages taken off his head.

All the juniors joined heartily in Tom Merry's new project. There was likely to be some fun in the carol-singing, at all events. And all wished to help Granfer George. An appeal to Miss Fawcett would probably have had that result; but Tom Merry, who knew that the kind old lady already gave more to charity than she could conveniently spare, felt a natural delicacy about enlisting her assistance. Mr. Dodds felt the same, undoubtedly, for he had not mentioned Granfer George's difficulties to Miss Priscilla.

Some of the juniors had musical instruments, some hadn't; but, as Tom Merry said, the instrumental music was not indispensable—the singing was the thing. If they sang beautifully there was no doubt that they would get a rain of coins.

"Coppers, I expect," said Monty Lowther.

"My dear fellow," said Tom Merry, "if we're going to turn up our noses at coppers we may as well give up the idea at once."

"I know. But how many coppers do we want to make up fifteen pounds, I wonder?"

"I can tell you," said Kerr, who had a head for figures, and was the champion mathematician of the Lower Forms at St Jim's. "Hundred pence are eight-and-fourpence, so four thousand and—"

"Oh, don't!" said Monty. "If we gather in four thousand-odd pennies it will be a giddy harvest, that's all."

"They won't all give coppers," said Tom Merry. "We shall very likely get shillings and half-crowns and—"

"And brickbats, more likely still," said the sarcastic Lowther.

"Oh, don't raise difficulties!" said Figgins. "What instruments are you going to play?"

"Paper-and-comb."

"I've got my mouth-organ," said Manners.

"And I've a cornet," Herries remarked. "You've heard me play that cornet, chaps?"

Blake shuddered.

"Yes, old fellow, we have," he said with feeling. "If we're going to try to make money, perhaps the cornet had better be left at home."

"Yaas, wathah! The wov Hewwies makes with that cornet is somethin' feahful."

"Rats!" said Herries cheerfully. "It will drown your singing—and that's something."

"I wegard that as a wude wemark, Hewwies. I think—"

"Cornet and mouth-organ and paper-and-comb will do nicely for the orchestra," said Tom Merry, the peacemaker.

"The rest of us will sing. Let's rehearse."

"Good! I'll sing seconds," said Blake. "Just listen!" He started.

Lowther listened with his head cocked thoughtfully on one side.

"I say, Blake, if you sing like that seconds will be

too long, and if you keep it up for minutes there may be homicide done."

"Order!" said Tom Merry. "What about your own beastly squeak, Monty? You know it sounds like a stiff hinge creaking when you get on the top notes."

"Oh, does it?" said Monty Lowther. "Never mind! It can't be worse than the rest—that's one comfort."

"Yaas, wathah! I say, you fellahs, considewin' what a weally wotten lot of singers you chaps really are, I've thought of a wippin' ideah!"

"Order!"

"I've got a splendid ideah," said D'Arcy obstinately. "Suppose all you fellows stand wound in a wing—"

"Stand wound in a wing! What does he mean?"

"I mean what I say. Suppose all you fellahs stand wound in a wing—"

"What kind of a wing—a turkey's?"

"He means stand round in a ring," giggled Lowther. "Go on, Gussy. When we're standin' wound in a wing, what's to happen?"

"Suppose all you fellows stand wound in a wing when we go cawol-singin', and let me do a nice solo," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "As you know, I'm not a conceited fellah in any way, but I weally think—"

"Rats! Shut up! Order!"

"I refuse to wats—I mean to shut up—till I have finished my wemarks. I could give the Bwedish public a good solo in weally good style, and I think it would bwing the coppahs—"

"It would," said Monty Lowther. "It would bring the nearest copper, to run you in as a public nuisance, I think."

"Lowthah, I object to such wemarks as that. Gentlemen, I think my ideah is a wippin' good one. If you appwove of it—"

"We don't!" came a howl from ten voices in unison.

"Vewy well," said Arthur Augustus. "I've done my best. Don't blame me if the whole thing turns out a ghastly fwost now."

"We won't," said Tom Merry reassuringly. "The singing ought to be a success if you keep your head quiet. Now let's go and rehearse, kids."

They crowded round Miss Fawcett's piano. Lowther, who was really musical, played well, and he could accompany anybody, though some of the singers tried his powers hard.

When Marmaduke sang he seemed to be racing the accompanist, and usually got there first; while Manners, on the other hand, got in a bad second at the finish. Arthur Augustus was generally a bar or two before or after the music, but he blamed the pianist.

The coming expedition was not confided to Miss Fawcett. She would probably have objected on the score that Tom Merry might catch cold. Besides, the object of the plan was a secret. At nightfall that evening—the day before Christmas Eve—the juniors were in a state of suppressed excitement. It was impossible to get out after dinner without giving the secret away, so the chums pleaded fatigue and went to bed very early. They went to their rooms, but they had no intention of going to bed.

"You see, kids," exclaimed Tom Merry, "this window opens on an outhouse, and we can easily get to the ground from the roof. Then we can march off without anybody being the wiser. We'll raise the tin and save Granfer George from his Shylock of a landlord, and hide our light under a bushel."

"We shan't want to take a light," said Herries, who was very dense sometimes. "Carol-singers never do. Besides, what's the good of taking a light if you're going to hide it?"

"You don't compwehend, Hewwies. When Tom Mewwy says hide our light undah a bushel he doesn't mean hide our light undah a bushel. He means—"

"Blessed if I know why he can't say what he means," said Herries.

"My deah Hewwies, he speaks in a metaphowical way. You see—"

"I mean, ass, that we're going to keep it dark, duffer, and not gas about it, image!" said Tom Merry. "Savvy? Hallo, who's that?"

There was a knock at the door.

"Are you in bed, dear boys?" came a gentle voice from without.

"N-n-n-no, Miss Fawcett," said Lowther.

Tom Merry went to the door.

"Anything wanted?"

"Yes, I have a little medicine to give you all when you are in bed. You were all so fatigued so early in the evening that I am anxious about you."

The juniors exchanged sickly grins.

"We—we're all right, dear," called out Tom Merry—"right as rain!"

(Continued on the next page.)

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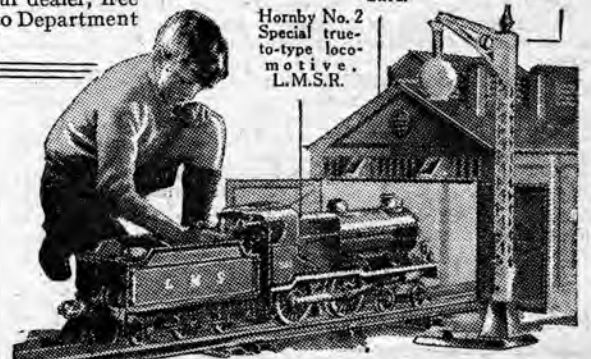
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"My dearest Tommy, I am too anxious to rest until you have all taken your medicine!"

"We—we can't," muttered Lowther—"not if it's anything like the horrid stuff she sent you at St. Jim's, Tom."

"Oh, come," said Digby, "we can't say no. It's all meant in a way of kindness, you know. I say, Miss Fawcett, that's jolly good of you!" he called out.

"Right-ho!" grinned Marmaduke. "Let's have the giddy medicine! We may get a chance of spilling it, you know. We won't drink it if it can be helped."

"You're awfully good," said Tom Merry. "Bundle into bed and let her come in. All of you who don't like the stuff pretend to be asleep."

The juniors bundled in. Five minutes later came another tap on the door.

"Come in!" sang out Tom Merry.

Miss Priscilla entered, followed by Hannah bearing a tray with bottles and wineglasses on it. There was a lurking smile in Hannah's face, but Miss Priscilla's countenance was solemn and concerned.

The doors were open between the three rooms. Miss Priscilla glanced at the white beds and the worried faces looking out of them. She came to Tom Merry's first of all.

"Don't sit up, Tommy dear! Just turn on your elbow. You must not exhaust yourself."

There was a chuckle somewhere. Miss Fawcett did not notice. She was too busy. She uncorked a blue bottle and half-filled a wineglass with its contents, and then opened a brown bottle and filled the glass up to the brim. The concoction looked deadly, and an anticipatory shiver went through Tom Merry.

"I—I say, dear, I'm all right!" he said weakly. "I—I'd rather not take any of that stuff."

"My dear boy, I know you don't want to make me anxious."

"Oh, very well, then!" groaned Tom.

He shuddered as he took down the wineglassful. It was a weird concoction of Dr. Bones, a medical man in whom Miss Priscilla had a great faith.

"That is right, Tommy darling!" said Miss Priscilla encouragingly. "Now, will you have some of the pink pilules, the green globules, or the specials?"

"I'll have some of the specials," said Tom Merry.

"Here they are! Now—"

"I haven't finished the box you sent me to St. Jim's," said Tom Merry. "It was a very big box, you know."

"My dear child, it contained only a hundred pills, and it is quite three weeks since I sent it to you!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett, in distress. "You cannot have taken six before and after every meal, according to the instructions."

"N-n-no, I don't think I could have," said Tom. "I'll have a couple now, please."

"Here are—"

"No, not those. I'd rather have those I have brought from St. Jim's, or the box may not get finished up, and that would be wasteful."

"My dear, thoughtful darling!" said Miss Priscilla.

Tom's conscience smote him a little. As a matter of fact, the box of specials had been emptied into the fire at St. Jim's, and with an eye to the future Tom Merry had manufactured sixty or seventy of harmless bread, exactly similar in appearance. These were all the box contained now, and Tom Merry did not mind taking them. As his friends were in the joke they did not mind either, and the worried looks disappeared from their faces.

Tom's conscience, as we said, smote him a little. It seemed like deception; but he felt that he could not let his innocent chums be poisoned by Dr. Bones' fearful and wonderful concoctions. Miss Priscilla found the box on Tom's dressing-table and brought it to his bedside.

"Two will be enough with the medicine, Tommy dear."

Tom took the two pills like a hero. Then Miss Fawcett passed on to the next bed, followed by Hannah, with the tray.

"I—I'd rather have pills than medicine, please, Miss Fawcett," said Lowther meekly. "I've more faith in the pills."

"But, my dear child, the medicine is really marvellous, and it has cured people of such terrible scourges as rheumatism, lumbago, appendicitis, and consumption, as you will see by Dr. Bones' special testimonials."

"Still, the pills are a greater triumph of genius, in my opinion," said Lowther. "I suppose if I take six or eight that will be as good as the medicine."

"I—I suppose so," said Miss Priscilla doubtfully.

"I wouldn't mind taking ten," said Lowther, "or twelve, if you think it advisable."

"I say, don't you get scoffing all the pills, Lowther!" sang out Figgins. "Leave some for us, you greedy boulder!"

"I have plenty more, Figgins," said Miss Fawcett reassuringly. "I always keep a large box containing five hundred in the house, in case of accidents."

Figgins grunted. He didn't want to be helped from the large box containing five hundred, but from Tom Merry's box containing the bread pills.

Lowther finally took eight, and then Miss Priscilla went from bed to bed, like a ministering angel. At every bedside she found the same preference shown for the pills, so that the box was nearly empty by the time she had finished her round, and the medicine, save for the dose Tom Merry had taken, was untouched.

"Good boys!" said Miss Priscilla. "You are really good to take the pills so nicely, and when I write to your parents I shall mention it. I regard you as being specially under my care as far as your health is concerned, and I shall see that you do not want for medicine while you stay at Laurel Villa."

And with that kind promise Miss Priscilla withdrew, and Hannah carried away the terrible tray. Monty Lowther sat up in bed.

"Well, Tommy, old son, you're the only one that scoffed the medicine. How do you like it?"

Tom Merry groaned.

"Don't ask me!"

"Tell us what it's like."

"Like ink and carbide of calcium and—and bitter almonds," said Tom. "I think that about describes it."

"Ha, ha, ha! It must be nice, then. Do you feel inclined for carol-singing after it, or shall we leave you at home to recover from the dose?"

"Oh, I'm all right!" said Tom Merry, jumping out of bed. "I shall soon get the taste out of my mouth. Get ready!"

The juniors were soon ready for the excursion. Tom Merry opened the window and looked out. Gardens and roofs were hidden under the snow sheeting, and the thin, feathery flakes were falling through the gloom without a sound.

"Lovely night!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Christ-mas, at all events! Come on, follow your leader, and don't lose your footing."

"Lead on, Macduff," said Monty Lowther. "We're after you."

Tom stepped through the window, over the low sill, upon the roof of the outhouse. His foot sank deep in the six inches of snow on the roof. Stooping down, he made his way carefully down the slope to the edge, which gave upon a flower-bed, now deep under its mantle of winter white.

"Careful!" said Tom Merry, turning his head. "If you slip you'll come down like a shot and you won't be able to stop yourself."

"Right-ho!" said Lowther, crawling down the roof gingerly.

Arthur Augustus came next. Figgins helped him out of the window, and then the swell of St. Jim's crawled down the snowy slope. He had screwed his eyeglass into his eye, but as he felt the cold contact of the snow he shivered, and the eyeglass was jerked from its place. He made a wild clutch at it and slipped on the slope.

"Look out! Help! Ow-woow!"

D'Arcy went down the snowy slope like a skater. He dropped into a sitting position, and shot down upon Monty Lowther, who vainly tried to dodge him.

"Look out!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's faintly.

But there was no time to look out. Monty Lowther was swept away, and he crashed into Tom Merry. The three of them were swept off the sloping roof in a twinkling and landed in the snow beneath.

Fortunately, the snow was thick and soft. They bumped into it and sat up, gasping for breath, and considerably shaken, but not much hurt.

"You—you ass!" gasped Lowther. "What did you do that for?"

"I assuah you it wasn't my beastlay fault, deah boy!" said D'Arcy. "I dwopped my eyeglass, and that was the weason."

Lowther seized the swell of St. Jim's and plunged his face into the snow. D'Arcy wriggled vainly in his iron grip.

"There!" gasped Lowther. "That'll teach you to drop your beastly eyeglass and then drop on me, you fathead!"

D'Arcy struggled into a sitting position.

"Lowthah, you howwid boundah, apologise immediately, or I will administah a feahful thwashin' to you upon the spot!"

"Rats!" said Lowther. "You asked for that and you got it."

The other juniors were dropping from the roof, one by one. Arthur Augustus was indignant. He fully intended to avenge the insult that had been put upon him. He squared up to Lowther, but Blake put his foot out, D'Arcy fell over it, and then Blake proceeded to sit upon him.

"Release me!" gasped D'Arcy. "I insist upon being immediately released, and treated with pwpah respect."

"It's got to be pax," said Tom Merry, "or else we'll bury you in the snow. Now, then, which is it to be?"

"If Lowthah will apologise—"

"Oh, I apologise!" said Lowther, grinning. "Will that do, Gussy?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy. "I am quite satisfied, deah boy. Let us pwoceed, deah fellahs. We are weally wastin' time heah!"

"Has that only just occurred to you?" said Tom Merry. "Come on, chaps! We'll try Mr. Squires first with the songs. They may soften his heart, and make him nicer to Granfer George."

The carol-singers had their doubts about it. Still, it was worth trying. Tom Merry knew the way, and he led them first to the house of the hard-hearted landlord, to see whether music would have charms to soothe his savage breast.

CHAPTER 13.

The Adventures of the Carol-Singers!

"NOW, then!"

"We're ready," said Digby. "Careful with that cornet, Herries."

"I know how to play the cornet, Dig," said Herries icily. "I don't want any advice on the subject, thank you!"

And he blew. A peculiar sort of yelp proceeded from the cornet. Digby watched him with interest.

"Well, if you know how to play it, why don't you?" he inquired.

Herries only gave him a look of withering scorn.

"Now then," said Tom Merry again, "I'm the giddy conductor, and you've got to keep an eye on me. Are you all ready? Start, then!"

They started. There was a great deal of variety in the eight voices—especially on the subject of time. They had chosen an old stager, as they all knew it well.

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night—"

"You're a couple of octaves out, I think, Blake," said Monty Lowther, stopping short.

"Don't interrupt," said the conductor. "Shut up, or sing!"

"But I say—"

"Oh, get on!"

They started again. They were standing under the window of the room in Mr. Squires' house in the High Street of Huckleberry Heath, which was tenanted by the great man himself. As yet he had given no sign of life. As the lower part of the house was in darkness they concluded that Mr. Squires had gone to bed; but, sleeping or awake, there was no reason why he shouldn't enjoy some really good music.

"While shepherds watched their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground—"

The window above them was sharply opened. A night-capped head came into view, with an ugly face under it, and a fist was shaken at the startled carol-singers.

"Go away!"

"Hallo! What's that?" called out Tom Merry. "We are carol-singers, if you please."

"Get off!"

"Glad you like it," said Tom Merry, as if he hadn't heard Mr. Squires' excited remarks. "We'll give you our whole repertoire, sir. Start, you kids! What are you stopping for?"

"While shepherds watched their—"

"Go away!" roared Mr. Squires, brandishing his fists in helpless rage. "How dare you disturb me at this time of night! Go away!"

"Rats—I mean, I'm glad you like the music! Keep it up, kids! And if you stop again without permission, you'll hear from me!"

"Yes, keep it

going, chaps!" said Monty Lowther. "You may—Gooogh!"

Mr. Squires had left the window for a moment, and reappeared with a water-jug in his hands. He interrupted Lowther by splashing the contents down on the enterprising carol-singers. Lowther got the most of it, but the others all received splashes. There was a general shout of exasperation.

"Go away, or I'll give you some more!" shouted Mr. Squires. "You young villains! Go away!"

Lowther rubbed his wet head.

"Better clear," he murmured. "This chap doesn't like music. We should find it healthier somewhere else, I fancy."

The others thought so, too. They moved off, and Mr. Squires slammed down the window in triumph. The carol-singers tramped off through the snow, feeling rather disconsolate.

"No coppers there," said Blake, "nor any of the half-crowns Tom Merry was thinking about. Nothing but nasty, cold water."

"Oh, keep your pecker up!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "We may have better luck next time. We'll try Mr. Parsons' house."

The carol-singers halted before another building. There was a light in the window, and the tinkle of a piano from within.

"Now, then, try to keep in tune this time, if possible. I don't want to ask you to exert yourselves beyond your strength, but—"

"Oh, cut the cackle, and get on!"

The singers started again. They were perhaps a little more tuneful this time. A shadow appeared on the blind of the lighted window. The inmates of the house were evidently listening. The tinkle of the piano ceased. The carol swelled louder. There was a sound of an opening door.

Tom Merry, signing to the others to keep on, ceased to sing himself, and took off his cap. He was ready for contributions, large or small. He was not ready for what followed.

"Go for 'em, Pongo! Seize 'em!"

"Look out!" yelled Lowther. "He's setting a beastly dog on us! Hook it!"

The carol-singers stood not upon the order of their going, but went at once. They ceased singing all of a sudden, and bolted. Right off they went through the snow at top speed, but the dog was after them. Barking furiously, Pongo chased the unhappy musicians through the night, while the unfeeling owner of the house stood in his doorway laughing heartlessly.

"Bow-wow! Wow! Gr-r-r-r!"

"Wun, deah boys!" gasped D'Arcy. "Wun for your beastlay lives!"

They ran for their lives; but Pongo ran faster. He made a jump, and fastened his teeth upon D'Arcy. His teeth, fortunately, only penetrated the thick clothing of the swell of St. Jim's; but D'Arcy felt him hanging on behind, and was frantic with terror.

"Help! Help, deah boys! Wescue!"

Tom Merry turned back at once. So did the others. Nobody liked the idea of getting to too close quarters with Pongo, but they could not desert a comrade in distress. Herries was near the swell of St. Jim's, and he rushed to his aid with his cornet brandished. At the same moment the door of the house opened again, and a boy appeared. He hurled a snowball at the singers, and it broke with a crunch on Herries' cornet.

Pongo released D'Arcy, and retreated with a yelp as Herries biffed him with the cornet. The juniors rushed at him, waving their arms, and he put his tail between his legs and scuttled off. He and the boy disappeared into the house again.

"Thanx, you, Hewvies!" said Arthur Augustus breathlessly. "You have saved my life!"

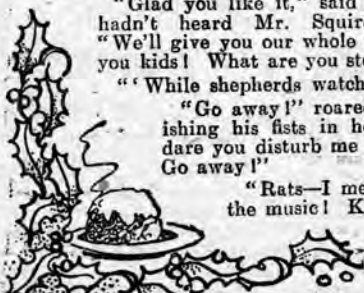
"Did he bite you?" demanded half a dozen voices.

"Yaas, wathah! I can't quite feel where, but he was hanging on to me like anythin'. I think weally he could only have bitten my jacket and twousahs, after all. But it was a feahfully urr-wow escape."

"I've busted my cornet!" growled Herries, in vain trying to extract some music from the instrument. "I felt I had damaged it at once. I—"

"Never mind that, Hewvies. You have saved me—"

"Which, of course, was awfully important," said Monty Lowther. "As Gussy isn't killed, let's get on with the carol-singing. We shall have to dispense with the cornet,



It looks to me very much as if the public could dispense with us."

"They don't like music," said Digby. "They want educating up to it—especially the kind we are providing."

"Well, let's go on educating them."

The adventurers, to tell the truth, were somewhat daunted by the failure of their second attempt. But they would not give in. They found a new pitch and started again. This time a threepenny-piece was the reward, and it came before they had finished the first line.

"Thanks, sir!" said Tom Merry, glad to have made a beginning. "Glad you like the music, sir. We'll finish the carol."

"That you won't!" was the prompt reply. "I've given you that threepenny-bit to move on!"

"But—"

"Get along, before I let loose the bulldog!"

They got along. They were growing discouraged. But they tried again and again. Some kind-hearted people rewarded them with coppers. At one house they received a shilling. At several they received dire threats as to what would happen if they did not immediately shut up and clear off. Carol-singing apparently was not popular in Huckleberry Heath. They came at last to a farmhouse just outside the village. The church clock was striking eleven, and they felt that it was about time to get home. The takings

amounted to one-and-tence. They gave the farmhouse a last chance.

But no sooner had the sound of the carol floated through the frosty air than a window opened and a night-capped head looked out over the barrel of a blunderbuss.

"I'll give you one minute to get clear before I fire!" roared a voice.

It did not take the carol-singers a minute to get clear. They bolted for the lane, and halted there breathlessly for a minute. They looked at each other, and then, without a word, set their faces towards Laurel Villa. Ten minutes later they were climbing back into their bed-room.

Tom Merry laid the proceeds of the night's work on the table.

"One-and-tence!" he said lugubriously. "Chaps, I'm afraid that there isn't a fortune to be made at carol-singing in Huckleberry Heath."

There was a tap at the door, and Mr. Dodds came in. He did not seem surprised to find the gas alight and the juniors all up and dressed. He had a pipe in his mouth, and had evidently been sitting up, smoking. Tom Merry remembered that the curate's room looked out over the outhouse also.

"Good-evening!" said Mr. Dodds cheerfully. "I saw you

(Continued on the next page.)

EASTWOOD SHIELD LEAGUE.

STERN STRUGGLE AT ST. FRANK'S!

FRIARS STRIKE TRUE FORM!

LEAGUE LEADERS UNDISMAYED!

By "OLD BOY."

St. Frank's,
Wed.

I TRAVELLED over with the St. Jim's eleven, and we were accompanied by a large contingent sporting the Saints' red and white. Although St. Frank's is a good distance from St. Jim's, it was clear that enthusiasm was at its height, and St. Jim's were not likely to lose for lack of familiar voices cheering round the ropes!

Tom Merry was quietly confident, as usual. It would be difficult to find a skipper who sets a better example to his men. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy scrambled into my compartment, shoved rather violently by Blake, Herries, and Digby, his study-mates, and for some time he did little but gasp and cast reproachful glances at Blake who grinned cheerfully. Finally it transpired that Gussy had felt the need for keeping up the tone of the team by wearing a "toppah"—and Blake and his chums had had a brief argument with him, with the result that the topper had been left at home—slightly crushed—and Gussy had just caught the train—slightly breathless.

At St. Frank's, Nipper & Co. appeared fit and eager for the fray. I asked Nipper how his men were shaping, and he reminded me that they had already beaten St. Jude's and Bagshot without having a goal scored against them—whereat Edward Oswald Handforth suddenly chimed in to remark that as he kept goal, that was only to be expected. He offered to bet me anything in doughnuts that he would keep a clean sheet against St. Jim's—a bet which I closed with immediately!

"Phee-cep!"

The ball was rolling.

Tom Merry dribbled a few yards, then swung the leather out to D'Arcy on the wing. The swell of St. Jim's went away like a streak, and the St. Frank's defenders saw nothing but his heels.

D'Arcy, his eye on goal, swerved in, and feinted as though to shoot. Handforth shaped to save, and at that moment D'Arcy flicked the ball smoothly across the sward, a slightly backward pass—and Tom Merry took it in his stride. Handforth had the impression of something

flashing low down to his left—and he spun round to observe the ball bulging the back of the net!

"Goal!"

"What about that bet, Handy?"

It was Walter Church who heartlessly reminded Handy of his doughnut bet with me! Handforth was looking amazed—and Tom Merry and Gussy were grinning. There was no back-thumping and excitement among the St. Jim's men—Tom Merry has a strict rule against that until the game is well in hand. His motto is, save yourselves for the enemy—and a wise one.

St. Frank's were off the mark this time like tigers, and Fatty Wynn in the visitors' goal had a busy period. He saved in succession from Tregellis-West, from Nipper, and from Bob Christine. Then play swept to the other end, but

Tom Merry's testing shot was safely handled by Handforth on this occasion! So far exchanges had been in favour of St. Jim's, but near the interval St. Frank's put on pressure, and Reggie Pitt, finding himself momentarily unmarked, flashed across a shot that Fatty Wynn never saw. Level! And a few seconds later, with the ball bobbing once more in front of Wynn's citadel, Nipper ran in to steer it well out of the Falstaff's reach and give his side the lead.

During half time, Tom Merry & Co. took counsel. With St. Frank's slowly gaining the upper hand, it was time for decisive measures, and when St. Jim's took the field again, they adopted the "W" formation, in which the centre-half drops behind as a third back, and the inside forwards try to do the work of auxiliary halves as well as their own. The plan keeps out the other side, but throws a big strain on the forwards. For a while it worked, and St. Frank's were kept at bay. Then, bringing up their men in a concerted push, St. Frank's let defence take care of itself—and the visitors' chance came. A long punt from Figgins found Talbot unmarked. Talbot gathered the ball on the run and made for goal with defenders trailing after him—but none to stay him, excepting Handforth. Handy hesitated, and then came galloping out to meet Talbot. He dived—and Talbot, with a dazzling swerve, went past him to place the ball into an empty net!

A minute later the whistle shrilled with honours even between two gallant sides. There are differing opinions on the advisability of changing the method of attack during a match, but certainly Tom Merry's experiment worked. Changing tactics is, in my opinion, a much more sensible move than shuffling the team in a panic and bringing up a back to play at centre-forward.

By the way, Handy paid me in full—in doughnuts. I passed them on to some fags, who celebrated the division of the points with a division of the doughnuts!

By phone came the news that Greyfriars, after being two down at half time, beat Rookwood by 5-2—Harry Wharton having an afternoon out and scoring four times. St. Jim's are still top, with a one-point lead over Highcliffe and Rylcombe Grammar School, but if Greyfriars find their best form, I should not be surprised to see them putting up a strong challenge!

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RESULTS.	
ST. FRANK'S .. 2	ST. JIM'S .. 2
Pitt, Nipper.	Merry, Talbot.
Teams.—ST. FRANK'S: Handforth; Burton, Talmadge; Yorke, Watson, McClure; Christine, Pitt, Nipper, Grey, Tregellis-West.	
ST. JIM'S: Wynn; Figgins, Kerr; Redfern, Noble, Lowther; Talbot, Levison, Merry, Blake, D'Arcy.	

ABBOTSFORD .. 1	CLAREMONT .. 1
Williams.	Kennedy.
GREYFRIARS 5	ROOKWOOD .. 2
Wharton(4), Vernon-Smith.	Lovell, Dodd.
HIGHCLIFFE .. 3	REDCLIFFE .. 0
Courtenay, Derwent, Yates.	
RYLCOMBE	BANNINGTON
GRAM. SCHOOL 2	GRAM. SCHOOL 0
Monk, Wootton ml.	
ST. JUDE'S .. 3	BAGSHOT .. 3
Raleigh(2), Lane.	Pankley(2), Dickson.

LEAGUE TABLE TO DATE.

		Goals				
		P.	W.	D.	L.	F. A. Ps.
St. Jim's ..	..	4	3	1	0	15 7 7
Highcliffe ..	..	3	3	0	0	10 4 6
Rylcombe ..	..	4	3	0	1	10 5 6
St. Frank's ..	..	3	2	1	0	9 2 5
Rookwood ..	..	4	2	0	2	8 10 4
Bagshot ..	..	4	1	1	2	7 10 3
Bannington ..	..	4	1	1	2	4 6 3
Redcliffe ..	..	4	1	1	2	4 7 3
Greyfriars ..	..	3	1	0	2	7 7 2
Claremont ..	..	4	0	2	2	7 10 2
Abbotsford ..	..	4	0	2	2	6 12 2
St. Jude's ..	..	3	0	1	2	3 10 1

Tom Merry and Frank Courtenay are bracketed as leading goal-scorers with six each, while Harry Wharton runs them close with five.

ST. JIM'S FOR MERRIE CHRISTMAS!

(Continued from previous page.)

coming in, and thought it was burglars at first. May I ask where you have been?"

"Carol-singing, sir," said Tom Merry dismally. "Trying to raise the wind, sir."

"And what is the result?"

"That's it, Mr. Dodds. One-and-tenpence."

"But why did you do it? You are not in want of money."

"Oh, it wasn't for ourselves, sir!" said Tom eagerly. And then he stopped.

The curate looked at him curiously.

"Then what was it for, Tom?" He smiled slightly. "I saw Granfer George to-day, and he told me of your visit. Have you been trying to raise funds for him?"

"That's it, sir," said Tom, turning red. "And—and we've got one-and-tenpence towards fifteen pounds! Rotten, isn't it?"

"Yes. It cannot be called a brilliant success," said Mr. Dodds, laughing. "Still, Granfer George must take the will for the deed. By the way, there is a subscription being raised to help him out of difficulty, and if you want to help you can all contribute, and I have no doubt that Granfer George will be left safe in his cottage."

"Good!" exclaimed the juniors, all at once. "Good business!"

"Good-night, Mr. Dodds!"

The curate left the room. The juniors began to undress for bed. It was a disappointment, but, after all, there had been fun in the expedition. The subscription for Granfer George would effect the object Tom Merry had in view, and each of them meant to contribute liberally.

They were fatigued with the tramp through the snow and glad enough to get to bed.

"Good-night, deah boys!" said D'Arcy, as he drew the clothes about his ears. "It has been fun. But as for Tom Mewwy's ideahs, they are simply wotten. He had bettah put the one-and-tenpence in the poor-box at church. I vote that we don't allow Tom Mewwy to have any more ideahs duwin' the vac. It makes a holiday too much like work to have to cawwy out Tom Mewwy's wotten ideahs."

"Hear, hear!" came in a chorus of approval.

"Yaas, wathah!" went on D'Arcy. "You heah, Tom Wewwy?"

There was no reply from Tom Merry.

"Tom Mewwy! You heah?"

Snore!

"The boundah's asleep," said D'Arcy. "Under the circs, the best thing we can do is to go to sleep also, deah boys." And they did.

CHAPTER 14.

High Jinks at Laurel Villa!

CHRISTMAS EVE!

When the boys looked out of the window they saw the flakes falling white and thick.

Christmas was being ushered in by a fresh fall of snow. Woods and fields for miles glistened white. Bushes and hedges had disappeared under a spotless sheeting.

"Good old Christmas!" said Tom Merry, as he looked out into the waste of white. "This is jolly! We'll get some snowballing this morning."

And after breakfast the juniors sallied forth, careless of wind and snow, and enjoyed a rough-and-tumble game. And Mr. Dodds joined in it, too, and proved that he was as good a marksman as anybody there, and so did Cousin Ethel. Cousin Ethel, indeed, had the best of it, for she hurled her snowballs at all and sundry, and received none in return. Figgins had constituted himself her chief of the ammunition department, and he kept her well supplied with snowballs. The boys, in return, always missed her, so that Cousin Ethel had a really victorious time of it.

Then there were Christmas decorations to be finished, and the juniors set to work with a will.

Cousin Ethel again came out strong. She had an eye to artistic effect, and she had eleven devoted assistants.

Holly and mistletoe were in abundance. The juniors were inclined, if anything, to overdo it. Tom Merry had an idea of illuminating the drawing-room with Chinese lanterns, and Miss Priscilla Fawcett, though she felt an inward

tremor, would not say nay, but agreed smilingly to the proposal.

And the idea was carried out, and the effect was really very charming.

Then, in the afternoon there were guests to meet at the station, a number of Cousin Ethel's girl friends coming down for Christmas, as well as a sister of Digby's and a couple of charming cousins of Manners', and several relations of the other juniors.

Monty Lowther declared that a sprinkling of the feminine gender always improved a party, and, moreover, that when there isn't a girl about you do feel lonely. There were a good many girls about now, and none of the juniors felt lonely.

They were all very jolly, as a matter of fact. It was intended to "keep it up" that evening in the good old-fashioned way, and they were all anticipating a good time.

Miss Priscilla excelled herself just now. She was all hospitality and kindness and good-humour, and her kind old face shone with pleasure at seeing so many happy young faces round her. She was even observed to pinch Mr. Dodds' cheek, and the curate laughed.

But the happiest person there was probably Fatty Wynn.

Fatty was thinking of the dinner. It was fixed for an early hour, so as to leave a long evening, which was an advantage in Fatty's eyes.

And that dinner! Fatty kept a surreptitious eye on the preparations, and he was in ecstasies at the thought of it.

The dusk of the early evening fell upon happy faces. Lights gleamed in Laurel Villa on Christmas decorations and glistening holly, on bright smiles and happy faces.

When Fatty Wynn sat down at the dinner-table he sighed. Tom Merry, who sat opposite him, looked across in alarm.

"Anything wrong, Fatty?"

The Falstaff of St. Jim's shook his head.

"No, Tommy, old son! Everything in the garden is simply ripping!"

"Then what were you wheezing about like an old bellows?"

"Happiness, old kid," said Fatty Wynn. "I sigh when I'm happy. D'Arcy sighs when he's in love—"

"Dwy up, Wynn! I wegard that we mark as—"

"Sorry! That was a slip. Tom Merry, this is the crowning moment of my life. To sit at the festive board with so many familiar faces round me, and such a dinner—"

Fatty Wynn was growing quiet poetical. He finished with a sigh. At the thought of the dinner words failed him.

The dinner really merited Fatty Wynn's heartfelt eulogiums. It was a triumph. The table, which had been under Cousin Ethel's anxious eyes, was a triumph, too, of decorations and effect.

But the smiling faces round it were its greatest adornment.

The dinner was a success, especially from the view of Fatty Wynn. Needless to say, Fatty excelled himself upon this auspicious occasion. It would take too much space to relate how he enjoyed himself, but he fairly let himself go; how he accepted two helpings of everything, and sometimes three or four.

All things end at last, and there came a time when Fatty Wynn could not find room for one more mince-pie, not even for one more walnut. He was observed to walk very slowly when he went into the drawing-room. He would have found it difficult to move quickly after that dinner. He did not find it easy to move at all.

Winter darkness lay outside Laurel Villa, with snow falling in even thicker and thicker flakes; but inside all was light and warmth and gaiety.

Monty Lowther naturally gravitated to the music-stool. Monty came out on the occasion with really unsuspected powers.

Monty could accompany anybody when he chose, and he was in his best and most obliging humour now. When Marmaduke sang too fast, Monty gallantly put on speed and kept pace with him. When Herries sang too slow, Monty slackened down to the time of a dead march, and they came to the finish together—a dead heat, as Blake remarked.

They almost all sang. Some sang well, some didn't; but everybody was in a good humour, and inclined to look upon the bright side of things.

Manners' song probably afforded most amusement, if not pleasure. Manners' voice was in the process of transformation, and he wasn't quite sure whether it would turn out to be a very high tenor or a very low bass. Tom Merry remarked that he would be either a Caruso or a Plancon, and it was even betting which.

When Manners sang the high tenor came out alternately with the low bass, mingled with some baritone, and the general effect was curious, not to say weird.

D'Arcy, by general request, was induced to sing his famous song: "Give Me Back My Eightpence," which he had sung on a famous occasion at St. Jim's.

Either the song, or the way D'Arcy sang it, sent the audience into convulsions.

"Good old Gussy!" said Blake, tapping him on the shoulder, when he dropped into his seat after making his bow. "The more often I hear you sing the more I think that you would have made a fortune on the stage."

D'Arcy smiled modestly.

"Yaas, wathah! I have often thought so myself," he remarked. "I am not what you'd call a conceited fellow, you know, but a chap can't help knowin' when he's got a beastly good voice, you know."

"Exactly! You would have made a success on the stage—"

"At Covent Garden, you mean, Blake?"

"No; I mean at the Coliseum, as a funny man," said Blake.

"Weally, Blake, you—"

"I say, Fatty," said Blake, turning to the Falstaff of St. Jim's. "What price that recitation you were going to give us?"

Fatty Wynn shook his head.

"Not a word, Blake," he murmured mysteriously.

Blake looked at him in astonishment.

"Why, what's the matter, Fatty?"

"I'm not up to reciting anything now. I'm not up to moving at all. I—I think I really shouldn't have eaten those last half-dozen mince-pies," said Fatty Wynn. "I feel that I am not in form for any exertion at present."

"Ha, ha, ha! Never mind. Cousin Ethel is going to sing the 'Star of Bethlehem.'" And Blake cocked his head upon one side to listen with all his ears.

Cousin Ethel sang sweetly and clearly.

After that Mr. Dodds was prevailed upon to sing. He had a fine baritone voice, and he gave a good song. And then persuasion to the same effect was showered upon Miss Priscilla.

"Dear me!" said the good old soul, extremely flustered. "You must not ask me to sing. I really—really—well, if you insist!"

There was a buzz of applause when Miss Priscilla consented to sing.

Miss Priscilla had been growing younger and younger as the evening progressed, and more than once she had shown kittenishness, much to the delight of the young people.

She sang an old song of her childhood, in a weak but very sweet voice, and it was received with rapture.

And Miss Priscilla sank into her seat, blushing and smiling.

And now Monty Lowther crashed out a pianoforte solo as a wind-up to the music, and then musical chairs were the order of the day—or, rather, the evening.

And now the fun waxed merrier.

The chairs were ranged in an almost endless row down the centre of the big room, and the company took up their positions. Monty Lowther played. With much laughter and fun the game proceeded, in the glimmering light of the Chinese lanterns, strung to every available object in the room.

Monty Lowther had an instinct, as it seemed to every-

body, for stopping at the moment most inconvenient to everybody, and accidents resulted. Fatty Wynn, in his hurry not to be left out, plumped down upon the lap of Arthur Augustus.

There was a general shriek of laughter. But D'Arcy did not laugh. The Falstaff of St. Jim's was no light weight.

"Oh, weally, Wynn!" gasped the swell of School House. "Oh, weally, you had almost cwushed me!"

"What did you want to get under me for, then?" inquired Fatty Wynn.

"Weally, Wynn—"

But D'Arcy's remarks were lost in the laughter.

The game went on, and Arthur Augustus, in his anxiety to avoid a similar catastrophe, was left out himself in the next round.

But if D'Arcy's misadventure had caused laughter, there was still more when Miss Fawcett, who entered into the game with youthful ardour, sat down by mistake upon the knees of Mr. Dodds.



D'Arcy realised his danger, but he could not help himself. All round him the ice was cracking and black water was oozing out. With a crash the ice gave way!

The boys and girls simply screamed.

"Dear me!" gasped Miss Priscilla, jumping up like a jack-in-the-box.

Crash! went the piano again. The game went on, till came the time for forfeits. Tom Merry awarded the pains and penalties. And some of his awards caused convulsions.

Fatty Wynn had to recite the "Charge of the Light Brigade." His plea that he did not know it was disregarded, but he was allowed as a favour to substitute the lines of his own for those he did not remember.

The effect was curious, and caused shrieks of merriment. Monty Lowther was condemned to dance a waltz, with a chair as a partner, and he went through the ordeal with a crimson face, to the strains of the "Merry Widow" waltz, crashed out by Mr. Dodds.

And other merry games followed, till, as the evening was growing old, the room was cleared for dancing. And although everybody wanted to dance with Cousin Ethel, still the other girls were all charming; and as the numbers were equally balanced, and the boys were all nice, there were no wallflowers.

Monty Lowther, who was tireless, again distinguished himself at the piano. Mr. Dodds led off with Miss Priscilla, who, although she declared that her dancing days were over, enjoyed herself as much as anyone present.

And Fatty Wynn—who, like most plump lads, was a good dancer—came out quite strong. Only Fatty Wynn was afflicted with a slight shortness of breath, probably owing to the extreme justice he had done to the dinner. It was due to Fatty that the only accident came about that might have marred the joyousness of the evening—to Fatty and Tom Merry's ingenious idea of Chinese lanterns.

Fatty had claimed a dance with Miss Priscilla. The mistress of Laurel Villa had been, as we have said, growing younger all the evening, and she was now about sixteen. She danced with Fatty Wynn, but here Fatty's fatal want of breath assailed him. He blundered into another couple, and exactly what happened nobody knew—except that one of the Chinese lanterns were upset, and Miss Priscilla's dress was in a flare of flame.

There was a cry of wild horror through the room. Miss Priscilla shrieked.

The dance stopped instantly. Monty Lowther sprang up.

There was a general rush towards the old lady. Tom Merry was quick, but Mr. Dodds was quicker.

The curate reached Miss Fawcett's side in a twinkling. In a flash his coat was off and wrapped round her, and before the flames had time to take a firm hold they were extinguished.

Save for the fright, and the spoiling of the dress, Miss Fawcett was little the worse. The curate suffered more than she did, as a matter of fact, for his hands were scorched, and some of his hair was frizzed.

It was all over in a moment or two. Miss Priscilla sank into Mr. Dodds' arms. Many ladies would have taken the opportunity of fainting, but Miss Priscilla had too much tact. She really felt inclined to faint, but she fought it back.

"Dear Miss Fawcett, are you hurt?"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"It is quite out now."

"Dear Miss Fawcett—"

"I am quite all right, my dears," said the old lady bravely. "My dress is burnt, that is all, and if Mr. Dodds

will help me away, I will return soon; and, meanwhile continue the dance. I am not at all hurt."

"It was my fault," said Fatty. "I—"

"Not at all, my dear lad."

Miss Priscilla retired from the room. The dance did not continue, even when Mr. Dodds had delivered the old lady into the hands of Hannah, and returned to say that she was not hurt. But ere many minutes had passed, Miss Priscilla returned herself.

She had changed her dress for a still more gorgeous and wonderful robe; and though her face was a little pale, it was very cheerful and smiling.

The young people crowded round her affectionately.

"I am perfectly recovered, my dears," said Miss Priscilla. "I will remain in my easy-chair and watch you, that is all. Mr. Dodds was more hurt than I."

But Mr. Dodds made light of his scorched hands.

Miss Priscilla was ensconced in the deep easy-chair, and there she sat while the dancing was resumed.

And a merry dance it was. Very seldom had any of the boys—or the girls, either, for that matter—enjoyed themselves so much. The kind old face of Miss Priscilla beamed upon them from the easy-chair, showing that she was as happy and pleased as anybody.

And if D'Arcy felt a little envious at first for the preference Cousin Ethel showed for Figgins, he soon found consolation in the smiles of Digby's sister.

But all things must end, and midnight was approaching. A crash of bells from the village church warned the dancers that Christmas Eve was giving place to Christmas morning.

Mr. Dodds threw open a window, and the joyous sound of the bells floated in. Then came a nearer sound—the sound of voices in song. From the dim, snowy night came the carol, and it sank into the hearts of those who heard:

"Peace on earth, good will to men."

THE END.

(Next week's GEM contains a ripping long complete story of Tom Merry & Co., called: "THE BIG NINE OF ST. JIM'S!" Potts, the Office Boy, "Wings," and Jimmy Silver & Co., are also featured.)

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