

GRAND ENLARGED CHRISTMAS NUMBER

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**TAGGLES
SEES A
"GHOST"!**

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PRESENT OF THE LOT! NOW ON SALE!

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According to legend, the ghost of the blind monk walks at St. Jim's at Christmas-time! . . . Tap, tap, tap! It is the tapping of the blind monk's stick! But when they hear it, Tom Merry & Co. are not so sure that it is a ghostly tapping, and they set out to lay the ghost!

CHAPTER 1.

Taggles Sees a Ghost!

"CHRISTMAS weather, and no mistake!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

The mist was thick in the quadrangle at St. Jim's. Tom Merry stood at the door of the School House, and he sniffed expressively as he looked out into the quad.

In the dim grey mist he could hardly make out the outline of the old stone steps of the School House. The old elm which stood near the door was completely swallowed up in the mist, though Tom Merry could hear its leafless branches sagging in the wind.

"Whew! It's thick!"

Tom Merry sniffed and looked doubtfully into the mist. He had his hat and scarf on, and had come down from his study to go over to the New House. But the thick vapour in the quadrangle was not inviting.

Lowther joined him, and the two stood together for a moment.

"Oh, let's get on!" said Tom Merry. "This stuff is getting into my chest. Blessed if I feel inclined to go and see Figgins after the trouble he's given us! Better go, though."

And the chums of the Shell groped forward in the mist. Exactly where they were they could not tell. The lights of THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,296.

the School House had disappeared behind them, and the lights of the New House had not come into sight. They were surrounded by a thick and almost impenetrable mist.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Tom Merry at last. "I wish I'd thought of bringing a torch. The worst of it is that you can't tell one path from another in this beastly mist. Hallo, there's something! Is that the New House?"

"It's an elm, fathead!"

"By Jove, so it is! Where's the New House?"

"Blessed if I know! Sunk into the earth, I suppose."

"Hallo, there's a light!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Good—right on, then!"

Tom Merry had caught a dim glimmer in the mist. The chums of the Shell marched on, keeping it carefully in sight, and it grew stronger as they advanced. Tom Merry uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Rats! It's only Taggles!"

Taggles it was. The school porter was coming from the direction of the woodshed towards the lodge, and he was carrying a big hurricane lamp to light his way. Taggles' gaze was fixed straight ahead, and he had no idea of the proximity of the chums of the Shell.

Tom Merry squeezed Lowther's arm.

"Quiet, Monty—look at Taggy's nose!"

"What's the matter with it?" asked Lowther, staring at the features of the school porter, which were quite

—YOUR OLD FAVOURITES—TOM MERRY & CO. OF ST. JIM'S!

ST JIM'S!

By
Martin Clifford.

plainly visible in the light of the lantern, though the mist swallowed up the juniors from the sight of the porter.

"Look at the colour scheme of it!"
"Ha, ha, ha! It's red—a study in scarlet!"
"Exactly! Taggy has been paying an evening call to the bottle lately. See how he's carrying that lantern—zigzag!"
"Horrid beast!"
"Now, Monty, you know what Shakespeare says—"

"Eh? What has Shakespeare to do with a giddy school porter?"
"Philistine!" said Tom Merry severely. "Shut up and listen to your uncle! Shakespeare says: 'Tis now the very witching time of night, when churchyards yawn—'"
"I shall yawn, too, if you don't shut up!"
"When churchyards yawn—"

"Oh, come on!"
"When churchyards yawn, and—' and something about ghosts. Now, there's a ghost at St. Jim's, as you know—if there's any truth in the old legend of the school, as we are bound to believe, as loyal Saints. Why shouldn't Taggles see a ghost, and be cured of his foolish ways?"
"Oh, I see!" murmured Lowther. "Good wheeze!"
"Come on, then!"

Taggles had gone on his way, but the light was still in sight. The chums of the Shell hurried after him, their light footsteps making no sound on the powdery carpet of snow. Tom Merry hastily whispered to Lowther, who chuckled assent. They separated as they came near the school porter. Taggles was murmuring aloud to himself, and Tom Merry caught some of the words.

"Which I ain't goin' to stand it," murmured Taggles. "When it comes to goin' down to the post office in the fog, I says it's young Binks' dooty, not mine. That's what I says. Why can't they send young Binks? What's he for, I'd like to know? Don't I 'ave enough trouble already? Don't I 'ave to get a drink in the woodshed now, 'cause Maria won't stand it in the 'ouse? Ain't that enough to turn a man's 'air grey? Why can't they send young Binks? That's wot I say!"
Taggles broke off suddenly.

From the misty gloom to the left came a deep, hair-raising groan. The school porter stopped abruptly, and held the lantern higher, glaring into the mist by its light. He had turned paler—excepting his nose.
"Wh-wh-wot was that?" he muttered. "My 'evings, wot was that?"
Groan!
"Oh, 'evings above!"
A deeper groan than before, from a different direction. Taggles' hair stood on end. He blinked round him like a frightened rabbit.
"E'vings!"
Then a deep voice came from the mist. Taggles' knecs were knocking together.

"Wretched man! Repent!"
"I—I— Oh! Ow! Who are yer?" gasped Taggles.
"I says, who are yer?"
"Aha! I am the ghost of St. Jim's! Tremble!"
The word "Tremble!" came in a blood-curdling hiss. Crash! went the lantern to the ground, and Taggles bolted. The light went out, and the tearing footsteps of the porter died away in the mist. There was the distant slam of a door.
"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry.
"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Monty Lowther.
And the chums of the Shell hugged each other in an ecstasy of merriment. Taggles, inside his lodge, was locking and chaining the door, heedless of the amazed questions of Dame Taggles.
"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "I am the ghost of St. Jim's! Ha, ha, ha!"
"Tremble!" gasped Monty Lowther. "Oh, my ribs!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER 2. A Mystery.

MANNERS was waiting for the chums of the Shell at the door of the School House. He looked relieved when he saw them.
"You've got back, then?" was his greeting.
"Blessed if I hadn't begun to think that you were lost in the fog. I had a lot of trouble getting back myself. It's getting thicker!"
"Yes, by Jove!"
"Anything up?" asked Manners, looking at them. "You look as if something has happened. A row with Figgins & Co.?"

Tom Merry shook his head.
"No; but something has happened." And he explained the jape they had played on Taggles.
They went upstairs, leaving Manners still cackling. The ghost story seemed to amuse him very much. Tom Merry knocked at the door of Study No. 6, and there was a sound within. He opened the door and went in with Lowther. The study was quite dark.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What the deuce are you fellows sitting here in the dark for?"
There was no reply. A faint sound came indistinctly through the darkness, and that was all. Dead silence followed.

"Look out!" muttered Lowther. "This means a jape, I suppose!"
The two Shell fellows drew closer together and put up their fists. Between the chums of the Shell and the Fourth-Formers of Study No. 6 combat was frequent.

"Look here," exclaimed Tom Merry, peering into the darkness round him, "we know you're there, because we heard you move. Show a light. It's pax, you asses! We've come about the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.'"

There was no reply.
"You duffers!" roared Tom Merry, growing exasperated. "If you want a row, come on, and we'll give you a jolly licking to start with!"

But there was still dead silence in Study No. 6—not even a sound of breathing coming to the ears of the listening chums of the Shell.

"Switch on the light!" muttered Tom Merry.
Lowther hesitated a moment. He guessed that the chums of Study No. 6 were waiting for the visitors to switch on the light in order to rush them out of the study, or perhaps to drench them with ink, or some little pleasantry of that sort. With his eyes on the alert for an attack he switched on the light. To the chums' amazement the study was empty, excepting for themselves.

"They're—they're not here!" gasped Lowther, in blank amazement.

Tom Merry's face was a study. He looked behind the screen and under the table, but there was no sign to be seen of Blake, Digby, Herries, or D'Arcy—the chums of Study No. 6.

Lowther gave his leader a startled look.
"Where are they, Tom?"
"They can't have been in here."
"But somebody was in here. We heard 'em before we came in, and then—"

"It might have been a rat."
Lowther shook his head.

"It was more noise than a rat could make."
"I don't know. This is the oldest part of the School House, and this oak panelling has been up here for hundreds of years," said Tom Merry.
"This place is very likely full of rats. Though, as a matter of fact, I'd almost swear that I heard a footstep."
"It's queer. I say, Tom—" Lowther paused.
"Well, Monty?"

"I—I—I suppose it's not the—the—"

Tom Merry laughed rather constrainedly.

"The ghost! I suppose not."

Tom Merry realised that Lowther was thinking of the ghost that was said to haunt St. Jim's at Christmas-time. The ghost was supposed to be that of a blind monk, who went about tapping with his stick.

"I—I suppose not; but it's queer. I don't like it."

"The place seems to be getting full of mysteries," said Tom Merry. "Let's go and look for Blake."

They left the study, leaving the light on. Jack Blake and his chums were soon run to earth. Blake and Herries were talking football in the Common-room, and Digby and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy were playing chess near them. Arthur Augustus was looking at Blake with an injured expression as the chums of the Shell came in.

"Weally, Blake, I wish you would go farthah off to talk all that wot," said the swell of the School House. "You are puttin' me off my stwoke—I mean my game."

"Your move," said Digby.

"Yaas; but Blake is intewwuptin' the thewad of my thoughts."

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Jack Blake. "Can't you take your chess somewhere else? As I was saying, Herries, when we were playing Greyfriars—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"That chap Wharton was very good indeed. He was almost up to my own form—"

"Blake, deah boy—"

"And a long way ahead of Tom Merry or Figgins."

"Your move, Gussy," said Digby. "If you're not going to move, I'll have a nap, and you can wake me up presently."

"I am goin' to move, Dig. But these wotten boundahs are intewwuptin' the thewad of my thoughts, you know, by talkin' footah in my yah. I weally cannot concentrate on the game while these uttah asses are chattewin' their sillay football close to me. Howevah, I will make an effort. Yaas, wathah! I will shove my wook along."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy moved his rook. Digby grinned gleefully, and as soon as the swell of St. Jim's had let the piece go, he jammed down his knight.

"Mate!"

"I weally do not see that, Dig, deah boy."

"You did it yourself by moving your rook," grinned Digby. "If you had left it on that file, I couldn't have put my knight there. You'd have had it."

"Bai Jove, I think you're wight! I will move my wook back."

"No, you won't," said Digby.

"Yaas, I will, Dig, with your permish. Take your knight away, and I'll move my wook back where it was, and we can go on again."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Dig—"

"We'll have another game, if you like."

"I would wathah continue this game."

"But this game's finished."

"Not at all, deah boy. If I weplace your knight, and I

move my wook back, I am convinced that I shall win this game if we continue."

"Yes, I dare say you will, if you take back every faulty move," grunted Digby. "That's the worst of you beginners; you want moves back, and when you've badgered your victim into losing, you think you've won the game."

"I am convinced that I shall win this game if we keep on long enough, Dig. Besides, I weally made that faulty move by bein' bothahed by Blake and Hewwies. How am I to mate you when those silly duffahs are chattewin' football bosh in my yah all the beastlay time?"

"Hullo! Has Gussy lost?" asked Blake, glancing over the board. "I expected as much. How a chap like Gussy hopes to be able to play chess is a puzzle to me."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Hullo!" said Herries. "Look at the time! I've got to go and feed my bulldog."

"Don't get lost in the mist, kid."

"Weally, I wish Hewwies had gone to feed his beastlay bulldog before, and I should not have moved my wook. I can see now that I should have brought up the queen to bishop's fifth."

"And I should have wiped it off with my bishop," shrieked Digby.

"Bai Jove, so you would! This is a game that wequiahs thinkin' out! I will now weplace my wook—"

"Rats!"

"Weally, Dig, I do not considah that the wules of a game are a weason for lackin' politeness."

"More rats!" said Digby. "I'll begin a new game, if you like. I've won this."

"I wefuse to begin a new game."

"Well, it's about time we did some prep," yawned Digby, sweeping the pieces off the chessboard into the box.

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"Bai Jove, now you wuined the game!"

"The game was finished."

"Not if I had weplaced my wook—"

"Oh, blow you rook!" said Digby, getting up.

"Oh, vewy well!" said D'Arcy, with dignity. "As I had pwactically won the game—"

"Kh? You had what?"

"Pwactically won the game."

"Why, you ass, and I mated you with—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

Tom Merry laughed as he joined the chums of the Fourth. "It's rough on Gussy," he said. "If he was allowed to retract every move, and move the pieces as often as he liked, he could win every time."

"Yaas, wathah!" said D'Arcy unsuspiciously. "But Dig is wathah an obstinate bwute, you know. He thinks he won that game."

"So I did!" said Digby warmly.

"Yaas; but if I had weplaced my wook—"

"Oh, let it drop!" said Blake. "What do you want, Merry? A toboggan down the School House steps?"

"No," said Tom Merry, laughing. "I want to consult you about the grand Christmas double number of 'Tom Merry's Weekly.'"

"Good!" said Blake. "Let's get up to the study. Can't talk hero with all this chatter going on."

And the juniors adjourned to Study No. 6.

"Hullo! Somebody's switched on the light!" exclaimed Blake, as the juniors entered the Fourth Form passage, and came in sight of the door of Study No. 6, which Tom Merry had left ajar.

"Yes, we did," said Tom Merry. "We went up to the study for you before we looked into the Common-room. And the curious thing is—"

He paused, half doubtful whether to speak about the matter. He knew how absurd it would sound to Blake.

"Well, what's a curious thing?" Blake asked. "There were two curious things in our study when you and Lowther went there."

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Arthur Augustus. "I wegard that as wathah funny!"

"Do you?" said Lowther. "Then I can only say you're very easily pleased!"

"We thought we heard somebody in your study," said Tom Merry. "We went in in the dark, you know, and heard somebody move—or thought we did—"

"Well, was there anybody there?" asked Blake.

"No, the room was empty."

"Then you must have imagined it, I suppose. Have you been reading any ghost stories lately, or borrowing Binks' thrilling American novels about Deadwood Bill and Gore-Stained Dick?"

"No, I haven't!" said Tom Merry indignantly. "And I didn't imagine it. There certainly was a sound in the study, and— My hat! There it is again!"

As the juniors came up the passage a sound was unmistakably heard in Study No. 6. As Blake, Digby, and D'Arcy were there, and Herries had gone to feed his bulldog, no one had any business in Study No. 6, and Blake looked wrathful.

"Some bounder nosing about our quarters!" he said. "Perhaps it's Skimpole up to some of his amateur detective wheezes again. I'll jolly soon see!"

And Jack Blake cut along the passage and pushed open the door of Study No. 6 and rushed in. The others followed him quickly. There was a startled exclamation in the study.

"Binks!" exclaimed Blake.

"Binks!" repeated Tom Merry.

It was Binks, the buttons of the School House. He stood in the middle of the study, looking very startled, his face very red.

Jack Blake advanced towards him with a grim look on his face.

"Binks!" he repeated. "Now, Binks, will you kindly explain what you are doing in my study?"

Binks had made a sudden bolt for the door. Two or three pairs of hands grasped him, and he was bumped over on the carpet. He struggled frantically, and in the struggle a number of papers came out from under his tunic and out of his pockets. He shed papers on all sides, most of them with lurid, coloured pictures. With a final effort he broke loose and bolted from the study, rushing right into Skimpole, who was about to enter.

The freak of the Shell went rolling over, with a gasp, and Binks rolled over him. He picked himself up in a moment and scudded along the passage and disappeared.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole, rubbing his head, which had come into rather rough contact with the floor. "Dear me! I am quite breathless! I regard this conduct of Blake's as almost rude—in fact, quite rude! Dear me!"

"He's gone!" growled Blake. "He ought to have had a licking. What did you let him get away for, Tom Merry!"

"I was just going to ask you that question."
 "I regard you as a pair of duffahs!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, fixing his eyeglass disparagingly upon the two. "You both let the young wascal get away!"
 "Well, you didn't stop him, ass!"
 "I wufuse to be called an ass! I—"
 "What's all this stuff he's left here?" exclaimed Blake, collecting up some of the books on the floor. "My hat! What a collection!"

The papers Binks had involuntarily shed over the study floor in the struggle for freedom were indeed a curious collection. Blake spread them over the table, and the juniors looked at them, grinning. The pictures were mostly in colours, and the titles were enough to give any boy a dozen nightmares.

"Deadwood Bill, the bronco buster!" grinned Blake. "My hat! And here's 'The Dead-shot Desperado, or the Trail of Guilty Gore'!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Red-handed Dick, or the Road Agents of the Rocky Mountains!"

"Bai Jove! The young ass ought to be stopped from weadin' all that wot!" said Arthur Augustus. "It must make him dream howwid dreams, I should think!"

"Hallo! What's this? 'The Spotted Spectre, or the Ghastly Ghost of Golden Gulch'! Ha, ha, ha! I think this about takes the cake!"

"My only hat! What are we going to do with the ghastly stuff?"

"It ought to be burned," said Tom Merry; "but you can't burn another fellow's property. Roll the rubbish up and sling it to Binks when you see him again!"

"It ought to be disinfected!" said Blake, with a sniff. "There's enough blood in that heap of rubbish for any ordinary battlefield! The young duffer! This sort of stuff gets into his head, you know, and makes him a silly ass. Tie the rubbish up with string, Dig, and he can have it back. It would serve him right to burn it!"

The precious parcel was tied up with string and put aside. Then the juniors came to business.

"We're thinking of a Christmas double number of the 'Weekly,'" said Tom Merry. "Figgins has subscribed to the idea."

"Good!" said Blake. "You ought to have asked us before you asked Figgins, of course!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "But it's a good wheeze. I can turn out a double instalment of my poetic serial!"

"And I will do a double fashion column, deah boy!"
 "I can make up as many conundrums as you like!" offered Digby.

Tom Merry grinned.
 "Many thanks! Not taking any just at present. My idea is to have a double number all of Christmas stuff, leaving over the piffle—I mean, the usual contributions."

"Yaas, that's not a bad ideah! I wathah fancy myself as a writah of weally good Chwistmas stowies, you know!"

"I am going to work up the legend of St. Jim's into a ghost story," said Tom Merry. "You can leave that to me. All contributions will be carefully considered—"

"Oh, rats!"
 "And if unsuitable, will be returned, provided that a stamped and addressed envelope is enclosed with the piffle!"

"Cheese it! You seem to forget that you are addressing the sub-editors of the paper! I'd like to see any of my stuff returned, that's all!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Of course, an editor is bound to use the blue pencil sometimes! Otherwise, what's the good of being an editor?"

"Bosh! Your job is to put in our contributions, and space the things out and get it ready for the printer, and

to cut the editorial remarks as short as possible!" said Blake. "That's my idea of an editor!"

"Then I can only say that your idea is simply rotten!"

"If you know more about running a paper than I do—"

"Well, I should hope so!"

"Look here, you duffer!"

"Look here, you dummy!"

The door of the study reopened, interrupting an argument that was growing decidedly warm. Skimpole's big head and big spectacles came into view again.

"I say, please listen to me!" he said patiently. "As a sincere Determinist, I am opposed to violence, especially when directed towards myself. As you are bringing out a special Christmas number of the 'Weekly' it occurred to me that you might like an article on Determinism, in order to rescue the paper from being wholly filled with bosh. I have written an article—"

"Then the next step is to burn it," said Tom Merry. "No controversial matter can be admitted to the Christmas number of the 'Weekly.'"

"But this is not controversial matter, Merry. I make the thing so clear that it is not possible for anybody to think of controverting it."

"Bai Jove!"

"It is clear even to an intellect like D'Arcy's."

"If you intended that we mark to be taken in a dispaingin' sense, Skimpole—"

"Not at all, D'Arcy! As a Determinist I cannot disparage anybody. You are a creature of hereditament and environy—I mean—"

"Nevah mind what you mean, deah boy! I expect it is only some piffle!"

"Therefore I do not blame you for being a brainless ass!"

"Eh?"

"It would be wrong to blame you for being an ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "We've all been unjust to Gussy, then! We've always blamed him for it!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy!"

"It would be as unjust to blame D'Arcy for being an ass as to blame Tom Merry for being a duffer—"

"Eh? What's that?"

"Or Blake for being a noodle—"

"What?" roared Blake.

"Or Lowther for making rotten jokes—"

"Hand me over that ruler," said Monty Lowther.

"Pray do not become violent, Lowther. Surely you prefer me to tell you the truth! You will thus be able to learn your true character, and to improve yourself as the result of self-knowledge. I have here an article made up of extracts from the two hundred and twenty-fourth chapter of my unpublished book on Determinism—"

"Then you'd better put it back where it came from," said Tom Merry, "and take yourself away at the same time. We don't want to slay you."

"But we shall be undah the painful necessity of doin' so, Skimpole, if you do not immediately buzz off," said D'Arcy.

"I nevah heard such feahful cheek in my life, you know! Fancy that object chawactewisin' me as an ass! Bai Jove!"

"The article deals with the subject of Determinism," went on Skimpole, unheeding. "I explain the position of Determinists. By tracing everything to heredity and environment, I prove that nobody is to blame for anything. There is no right, and there is no wrong. Nothing is either right or wrong, or both. Therefore—"

"Is that a real 'ism'?" asked Blake, with interest.

"I assure you that there are thousands of Determinists in the country, Blake, and—"

"Outside lunatic asylums, I mean!"



Monty Lowther took a grip on the ruler. "Now, Skimmy, it can't be right for you to talk that piffle," he said argumentatively.

"On the contrary, it is quite right——"

"Not at all. There is no right, and no wrong. It is not right for you to jabber to us like a parrot or a gramophone, and it's not wrong for me to jab you in the ribs with the end of this ruler."

"Oh—oh! Really, Lowther—— Oh!"

"You can't regard it as wrong. If anything is to blame you can shove it on to my heredity, or my environment, which you like," said Lowther.

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

"Oh—oh! Really, Lowther, you are hurting—— Oh—my—oh—ribs! Oh!"

"I'm afraid I shall go on hurting them until you are on the other side of that door," said Monty Lowther blandly.

"Oh—oh! Help! Whooh! I'm going! Leave off, you beast!"

Skimpole fairly ran from a final lunge of the ruler, and dashed down the passage, and the editorial staff of "Tom Merry's Weekly" sent a ringing yell of laughter after the indignant Determinist.

CHAPTER 3.

A Master Is Puzzled!

CLANG, clang! Tom Merry yawned, and sat up in bed. The rising-bell was ringing through the misty, wintry air.

"Another beastly misty morning," remarked Tom Merry, as he got out of bed. "Wake up, Manners! Time to get up, Lowther!"

The hero of the Shell plunged his face cheerily into the icy water in his basin. It was cold, but it was refreshing.

He looked round as the dormitory door opened. Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, looked into the dormitory.

"Good-morning, sir!" said Tom Merry, somewhat surprised by the visit.

"Good-morning, Merry!" said Mr. Linton. "Are you all awake, boys? I wish to speak to all of you."

The Shell sat up in bed. The Form master's words made them wakeful enough. Mr. Linton glanced along the row of interested and surprised faces.

"Was any boy in this dormitory out of bed after lights out last night?" he asked.

There was no reply. The juniors looked at one another in surprise.

"I have a particular reason for asking," said Mr. Linton. "Was any boy here out of bed after the light was put out in this dormitory?"

"I do not know, sir," said Tom Merry, as Mr. Linton's glance seemed to rest upon him. "I was not, for one, sir, and I don't think anyone else was."

"I think not, sir," said Lowther.

"I didn't hear anybody, sir," said Gore.

Mr. Linton glanced along the array of surprised faces with his keen eyes, and then nodded as if satisfied.

"Very well, my boys," he said. "I have another question to ask. Can any of you tell me whether you know any person who is playing tricks in the School House? Playing ghost, or anything of that sort?"

The juniors could only stare.

Tom Merry turned red. The Form master's eyes were fixed upon him instantly like a gimlet.

"Merry, do you know anything about this?"

"If you please, sir——"

"Come, speak out!" said Mr. Linton sternly. "I need not tell you to tell the truth, Merry. I am sure you will do that."

"If you are referring to Taggles, sir——"

"Taggles? I don't understand!"

"Oh!"

"You had better go on, Merry. What is this about Taggles?"

"We japed him. I—I mean, we played a little joke on him in the mist last night, sir, in the quadrangle. I pretended to be the ghost of St. Jim's."

He didn't see me in the mist, and I spoke in a deep voice. It was only a lark, sir."

"I cannot approve of that kind of joke, Merry; but I was not referring to that, which I had not heard of. Taggles has not complained. The incident I am speaking of occurred in the School House after lights-out last night."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, looking relieved. "Then I don't know anything about it, sir."

"Very good! I accept your assurance. I hope that no boy in my Form is guilty of this absurd trick."

And Mr. Linton went out and shut the door. There was a buzz of voices immediately in the Shell dormitory. The boys were amazed.

"He didn't say what had happened," Manners remarked wonderingly. "Has old Linton been seeing ghosts?"

Tom Merry started.

"By Jove, I wonder whether he has heard that tapping—the same that we heard over in Piggins' study in the New House?"

"Thought you heard," corrected Manners.

"Oh, rats to you!"

"Eh? What's that about tapping?" asked Gore.

Tom Merry explained. Gore burst into a laugh, in which many of the Shell joined, as they tumbled out of bed.

"My hat!" said Gore. "Fancy Tom Merry seeing spooks in his old age! I suppose it's a case of nerves. Ha, ha, ha!"

"This comes of fagging over editorial duties, and getting in a low state," said Macdonald. "I've been going to offer to take over the editorship of the 'Weekly' for some time, Merry——"

"You needn't trouble," said Tom Merry.

"But if you're getting into this shocking state of nerves, I——"

"Oh, cheese it!"

And Tom Merry dressed himself, regardless of the cackles of the Shell fellows, though there was a flush in his cheeks. Nobody believed in the mysterious tapping, and it was very hard for a healthy, clear-minded junior like Tom Merry to be accused of having "nerves."

Meanwhile, Mr. Linton had gone on towards the Fourth Form dormitory, with a thoughtful frown upon his face. He opened the door of the Fourth Form Room in time to hear the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy raised in remonstrance.

"I utterly refuse to move, Blake! It is useless for you to weep that the wisin'-bell has gone. It is now a question of dig with me, and I refuse. If you bring that sponge near me, I shall no longer regard you as a friend!"

"Get up, ass!"

"I refuse to be called an ass. I——"

"Boys!"

"Bai Jove, is that Linton? Yaas, sir, I am wisin' immediately!" And Arthur Augustus hopped out of bed.

"Boys," said Mr. Linton, "I wish to ask you a question. Were any of you out of the dormitory after lights-out last night?"

The Fourth-Formers stared. They were surprised enough to receive a visit from the master of the Shell, and his question surprised them still more. If any of them had been out after lights-out, it was the business of Mr. Lathorn, the master of the Fourth, or of the Housemaster.

"Come, answer me!" said Mr. Linton testily.

"No, sir," said Jack Blake; "I wasn't, and I don't think anybody else was."

"Yaas, wathah!"

No one else spoke. Mr. Linton looked searchingly at the boys, and then nodded and left the dormitory. But he had not completed his morning's walk yet.

He went up to the Third Form sleeping-quarters, and looked in. Some of the Third were up and some were still in bed. Three youths—Jamson, Jimson, and D'Arcy minor—were warming themselves with a pillow-fight, and they stopped in dismay as the grim face of the Shell master looked in.

"Was any boy absent from this dormitory after lights-out last night?" asked the master of the Shell.

The Third-Formers stared at the question with as much astonishment as the Fourth Form or the Shell had shown.

"No, sir," said Wally D'Arcy, the younger brother of the great Arthur Augustus. "Not that I know of, sir."

"Too jolly cold now for larks outside the dormitory, sir," said Curly Gibson.

"Very good!" said Mr. Linton, and he withdrew and closed the door.

He walked thoughtfully along the passage, and met Lefevre of the Fifth, who was just coming from his dormitory.

"Stop a minute, Lefevre," said Mr. Linton.

"Yes, sir."



"Someone was playing a foolish trick last night," said Mr. Linton—"playing ghost. Are you aware whether any boy left your dormitory after lights-out?"

"I'm pretty certain not, sir," said Lefevre, turning rather red. "I don't think a Fifth Form fellow would be likely to play a kid's trick like that, sir. That's what I say. A Fifth-Former would have more sense."

"I hope so," said Mr. Linton. "I have questioned the Lower Forms, and they all disclaim any knowledge of the matter. It is very curious!"

Mr. Linton nodded and walked on. He went downstairs slowly and thoughtfully. Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, was standing in the Hall, polishing his glasses. Mr. Lathom was a little, short-sighted gentleman, extremely good-natured, and very much liked by his Form, though the latter were very much given to "pulling his leg." His one little weakness was a curious faith he had in Spiritualism, and he was deeply read in spiritualistic lore. He nodded to Mr. Linton as he replaced the glasses upon his nose.

Mr. Linton stared at the Fourth Form master in astonishment.

"I do not understand you, Mr. Lathom."

"I will explain," said Mr. Lathom exultantly. "This means undoubtedly that I have succeeded at last!"

"You have succeeded? How—in what?"

"I have succeeded in establishing communication with the unseen world," said Mr. Lathom solemnly. "Last night I was holding seance—if I can call it a seance when I was alone. No manifestation came to me, I am sorry to say, and I was once more disappointed. I am convinced that I am a medium, Mr. Linton, yet I must say that I have had to endure continual disappointments."

Mr. Linton looked slightly impatient. He remembered Mr. Lathom's spiritualistic theories, and he wondered how an otherwise sensible man could waste his time on such absurdities.

"My efforts were, however, rewarded," said Mr. Lathom. "Although I received no communication myself, it is clear



Binks made a sudden bolt for the door. "Collar him!" yelled Blake. Two or three pairs of hands grasped Binks, and he was bumped over on the floor. He struggled frantically, and a number of papers came out of his uniform and scattered over the floor.

"Good-morning, Mr. Linton! Very misty again!"

"Yes, indeed!" said Mr. Linton. "I suppose, sir"—he hesitated a moment—"I suppose you did not hear anything curious in the night?"

Mr. Lathom looked at him through his pince-nez.

"No, Mr. Linton. I—I do not quite understand. Has anything happened?"

"I was startled at a late hour last night," said the master of the Shell slowly, "by a mysterious tapping—"

Mr. Lathom gave a start.

"Pray go on!" he said eagerly.

"It was very strange," said Mr. Linton. "The sound appeared to come from the wall of my room where the paneling is placed before solid stone, and where there is no room on the other side. I may have been mistaken, of course, and the sound may have been produced from another quarter by means of a trick. I have questioned the boys, and they all disclaim having been out of the dormitories during the night. I was sitting up late, you understand, when I heard the tapping. It was repeated several times, and seemed to die away in the distance."

"Good!" ejaculated Mr. Lathom.

that a spirit was brought into the neighbourhood of my room. Unfortunately, the tapping was heard by you instead of me. Doubtless if I had heard it I could have interpreted the message of the unseen."

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"

"Pray tell me all, my dear sir! Was this manifestation accompanied by an icy chill in the room?"

"It was not!"

"Was there a sense of the mysterious and the awesome, which pervaded the room and caused you to feel yourself in the presence of the unearthly?"

"Nothing of the sort!"

Mr. Lathom looked a little disconcerted.

"Ah, you are a sceptic!" he said. "Naturally, the manifestation would be less clear to you than to a believer like myself. Yet it is curious that you should be honoured by this communication from the unseen, while I remained neglected."

"I have not the slightest doubt that it was some mischievous person playing a trick."

"I cannot admit that for a moment. It was evidently a

manifestation of the invisible, and I am encouraged—very much encouraged!”

And Mr. Lathom rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he walked away.

The master of the Shell shrugged his shoulders.

CHAPTER 4.

Taggies' Terrible Experience!

TOM MERRY tapped Jack Blake on the shoulder as he came downstairs.

"I suppose it was you?" he remarked.

"Eh? You suppose what was me?" asked Blake.

"Playing tricks last night," said Tom Merry severely. "What do you mean by pulling the august leg of our respected Form master?"

Blake grinned.

"Only I didn't," he said. "Linton came along asking questions this morning, but the Fourth Form Room had a clear conscience for once. It wasn't anybody in the Fourth—in the School House part of the Fourth, anyway!"

"Linton looked serious. Somebody has been up to something!"

"Yes, it looks like it. But he didn't go into particulars. If he had let us know what happened, I'd have looked into the matter. It's a giddy mystery!"

"Mysteries seem to be rather piling on us lately," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "I fancy the practical jokist is abroad, and wants sitting on."

"Yes, if we could find out—"

"Excuse me!" said Skimpole, who was coming by, stopping and blinking at the juniors through his big spectacles. "Did I hear you refer to a mystery? Anything of that sort could be quite safely placed in my hands. I think I have given you fellows pretty clear proof of what I can do as an amateur detective."

"You have!" Blake agreed cordially. "You have shown us clearly enough—"

"That you can make a howling ass of yourself!" said Tom Merry.

"In the most unequalled style!" assented Blake.

"Really, Blake, I flatter myself that my methods will compare favourably with those of Sexton Blake, Sherlock Holmes, or Ferrera Locke. What is the mystery you were speaking of? I will elucidate it!"

"My dear ass—"

"Give me the details," said Skimpole, pulling out a huge notebook and wetting the end of a pencil. "The details, please! Don't leave out anything; any trifle which may appear unimportant in your eyes, may assume a very different aspect to the trained eyes of a detective."

"My only hat!"

"What is the case? Have you lost something, Blake?"

"No; I am losing something now."

"That is very curious. What are you losing?"

"Patience."

"Really, Blake, I wish you would be serious. I am ready to elucidate the mystery, without any charge or expense to yourself."

"You know as much about it as we do," said Tom Merry, laughing. "It was what Linton was saying this morning in the dorm. Somebody seems to have been playing ghost."

"Oh, I see," said Skimpole. "It was no one in the Shell, so it was probably Blake—"

"Ass! It wasn't anybody in the Fourth, either."

"If it was no one in the Shell or the Fourth, it must have been someone else, that is, of course, assuming that the occurrence actually happened," said Skimpole, with a wise shake of the head.

Tom Merry and Blake exchanged glances of admiration.

"Isn't it wonderful how he does these things?" said Blake.

"He worked that out in his head, you know."

"Without the aid of a net, too," said Tom Merry.

"That is nothing to what I can do," said Skimpole, who was never known to see a joke. "That is merely a beginning. I think it very probable that the trick was played by a youngster in the Third Form—young D'Arcy, very probably."

"Why Wally more than anybody else?"

"Well, he is a young rascal, full of mischief. I have heard that he has alluded to me in a most disrespectful way, and so it is perfectly clear that he has no respect for anything, and would be very likely to pull the leg of a Form master."

"Then you'd better follow up that clue," said Blake gravely. "Get on Wally's track, and if you bring the crime home to him, you shall have a reward. What do you say to a prize thick ear as a reward?"

"Or a particularly blooming black eye?" suggested Tom Merry.

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"Or a bumpy nose?"

"Well, he will very likely get all three if he begins tracking down young Wally," said Tom Merry, as Skimpole shut up his notebook and walked away. "Joking apart, though, it's a curious matter, and I should like to know exactly what happened last night."

The juniors went into breakfast, and the Shell boys noticed that Mr. Linton's face was a little grimmer than usual.

All the juniors were curious to know exactly what had happened during the night.

It was Mellish of the Fourth, the Paul Pry of the School House, who first enlightened them. The Terrible Three were talking it over with Blake in the quad, just before morning chapel, when Mellish came up with a knowing expression on his face.

"I dare say you chaps would like to know what happened to Linton last night?" he remarked.

"What do you know about it, Peeping Tom?" asked Blake.

Mellish sniffed.

"I know what I know. Perhaps I shan't tell you, after all."

"Don't, then. Cut!"

"Oh, I don't mind telling you! Linton was sitting up late in his room, and he heard a tapping on the wall."

"Phew!" said Tom Merry.

"It was a mysterious, ghostly tapping. Linton doesn't believe that it was a ghost, though. He thinks it was some practical joker."

"How do you know anythin' about it, dear boy?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I presume that the respected mastah of the Shell hasn't taken you into his confidence o'ah the mattah."

"I happened to hear him telling Mr. Railton."

"You happened to have your ear to a keyhole at the time, I suppose," said Tom Merry, with a contemptuous sniff.

"I didn't! I was in the Hall, and they didn't happen to see me."

"Or they would have happened to cuff you, I expect," said Blake. "What do you mean by listening to a private conversation, and then coming and reporting it to us?"

"Makin' us beastly accomplices in a way," said D'Arcy.

"Well, you rotters," said Mellish, "how did you think I found out? You let me tell you."

"Don't begin to argue about it," said Blake loftily; "you only make matters worse. The best thing you can do is to cut."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Mellish, looking far from amiable, cut.

Figgins & Co. were coming over to morning chapel, and the great Figgins stopped to speak to Tom Merry.

"Such a lark!" he said, with a grin.

"Anything happened on your side?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yes, rather; somebody's been pulling old Ratty's leg."

This was Figgins' disrespectful way of alluding to Mr. Horace Ratcliff, his Housemaster. Mr. Ratcliff was not popular in the New House—nor out of it, for that matter.

"You remember that tapping we heard in my study last night, Merry?" went on Figgins. "We couldn't make head or tail of it. Of course, it wasn't a ghost?"

"Of course it wasn't!" agreed Tom Merry. "Blessed if I know what it was, though."

"Well, Ratty has been hearing some tapping in the night."

"My Aunt Maria! Has he really?"

"Yes, rather! He's raising Cain about it in the New House. He says somebody has been playing ghost, you know, to startle him, but everybody denies having the least knowledge of it. Blessed if I know what to make of it."

"Bai Jove! I regard this as a weally wemarkable occuwnence."

"The same thing's happened on our side," explained Tom Merry to Figgins. "Mr. Linton has been hearing the spirit-tapping."

Figgins whistled.

"It's curious," he said. "Looks as if there might be something in the ghost story, doesn't it? The old monk is always supposed to come tapping along at Christmas-time."

"Yes, but that's all rot, you know."

"Yes, in the daylight," grinned Figgins. "It won't seem such rot to-night when we go to bed, I'm thinking."

"More imagination, my sons," said Jack Blake, with an air of superior knowledge. "This is what comes of reading the 'Spotted Spectre, or the Ghostly Ghost of Golden Gulch.'"

"You ass!" growled Figgins. "Do you think I would read piffle like that?"

"Or do you think I would?" demanded Tom Merry warmly.

"What have you done with all that literature belonging to Binks, then?" grinned Blake. "I gave it to you to take away yesterday evening. My idea is—"

"I'm going to give it to the young fathead as soon as I see him. I've a good mind to give him a thick ear along with it. As for that tapping, we've really heard it."

"My dear chap, it was a lively imagination, that's all."

"Yaas, wathah! I quite agree with Blake in this mattah. deah boys Tom Mewwy is the victim of an excited imagination, pwoably due to weadin' luwid litewature—"

"Oh, cheeze it!" said Tom Merry. "Hallo, here's Taggles! Let's ask him his opinion on the subject of ghosts. I have an idea that he saw one in the mist last night."

Monty Lowther chuckled, and so did the others, who had been told the story of Taggles and the spectre in the mist.

"That it did, Master Merry. It gave a kind of blood-curdling shriek, and then began to speak in a 'orrid, raspin' voice—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake.

"Which if you don't believe me, Master Blake—"

"But I do," said Blake, becoming grave all of a sudden. "I haven't the slightest doubt that the ghost spoke in a kind of voice to set your teeth on edge."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, don't be funny, Blake! Go on, Taggy!"

"Which it spoke in a raspin', orrid voice, and it says 'Tremble,' it says, 'I'm the ghost of St. Jim's!' it says. Then it gave another 'orrid-shriek, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke."



Figgin'ed off with a huge snowball that caught D'Arcy behind the ear and broke over him. Arthur Augustus sat down suddenly in the snow. "Bai Jove!" The next moment he had disappeared among the legs of the New House Juniors as they rushed forward.

"Hallo, Taggles! Good-morning!" said Tom Merry affably. "I hear that the ghost of St. Jim's has been walking lately. Have you seen anything of it?"

"That I have, Master Merry," said Taggles impressively. "I see 'im last night."

"What was he like?"

"A 'orrid-lookin' figger!" said the school porter, with a shudder. "'E suddenly come on to me out of the mist, Master Merry. Jest figger to yourself a nawful form, in throwin' black robes, with his 'and raised and pointin' at a feller, Master Merry."

"Great Scott! Did you see that?"

"Which I see it with my hown heyes," said Taggles. "I tells Mr. Railton this mornin', and 'e says, says 'e, 'Pooh-poo!' I tells Mr. Ratcliff, and 'e says, says 'e, 'Pish-pish!' But I suppose I ought to know what I sees with my hown heyes."

"Certainly," said Tom Merry gravely. "A man ought to be able to trust the evidence of his hown heyes. Did the ghost speak, Taggles?"

"Phew! It must have shaken you up a bit, Taggy?"

"I don't deny that I was a bit shook up," said the porter. "But I didn't run from it, Master Merry. I jest walked away quietly."

"That's because you are so brave, Taggles."

Taggles looked suspiciously at the hero of the Shell, and walked on his way. The juniors grinned gleefully as they moved on towards the chapel.

"Taggles believes all that," grinned Blake. "That shows how ghost stories get started."

"I'm afraid he had been sampling the gin in the woodshed," said Tom Merry, laughing. "But I like his spectre in flowing, black robes, with upraised hand. That shows that Taggles has an imagination. He might have been an epic poet, if Fate hadn't made him a school porter."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

(Continued on page 11.)

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Extracts From

Tom Merry's Weekly

Christmas Greetings From the Staff

By the Chief Reporter.

A MEETING was held at the Editorial Offices of "Tom Merry's Weekly," in order that the Editor and sub-editors might write a suitable letter of Christmas wishes to the readers of the GEM.

The Editor took the chair, and asked each of the sub-editors to say a few words of Christmas greeting, which the chief reporter would take down. The chief reporter, being a good man at his job, took a note of the whole proceedings, and the following is his report:

Editor: Now, Figgy, you New House freak, what have you got to say?

Figgins: Are you looking for a thick ear?

Blake: That's a strange idea of a Christmas greeting, Figgins. But, of course, the New House never did have any manners.

Lowther: Of course they didn't. Manners is a School House chap. Ha, ha!

Chorus: Bump that silly ass!
(Sound of Lowther being bumped.)

Editor: Well, Figgy, I am waiting.

Figgins: Tell them that I wish them a merry Christmas and all that, and that I hope to be Editor of the "Weekly" next term.

Editor: What a hope! Now then, Blake, let's hear from you.

Blake: Wish 'em all the very best from me, and tell them that I will see that no long-legged New House waster ever becomes editor of—

Figgins: Look here, Blake, are you looking for a thick ear?

Lowther: Don't get annoyed, Blake. That's Figgy's idea of Christmas greetings. Just say "Merry Christmas!" and it'll be all right.

Blake: You shut up, Lowther! Now, look here, Figgy—

Editor: Peace, my infants. This is no time for quarrelling. Now, then, Herries, what have you got to say?

Herries: Wish them a very merry Christmas, and all that. I'm not much good at making speeches.

Lowther: Hear, hear!

Editor: Now, you, Digby.

Digby: Wish 'em the usual from me, and you might say that if any of them hear any new jokes in the holidays they might send them on to Lowther, as we are rather tired of his old ones.

Chorus: Ha, ha, ha!

Lowther: Look here, young Dig. if you want a thick ear—

Digby (sweetly): Merry Christmas, Monty!

(Lowther subsides, wrathfully.)

Editor: What about you, Kerr?

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Woosh! Bang! (Noise caused by a squib suddenly exploding in the ink-well.)

Lowther: Ha, ha, ha!

Editor: You silly owl, you've covered me with ink!

Lowther: Ha, ha, ha!

Chorus: Bump the rotter!

Lowther: Ow, ow, ow!

Crash! Bang! Wallop! (Noise of Lowther landing on his ear in the passage.)

Editor (mopping ink off his chivvy): Oh, let's get on with it! Come on, Kerr.

Kerr: I wish our readers all the best, and I'm sorry for all those who will not have a hagg's at Christmas. In Scotland—

Editor: 'Nough said! You next, Manners.

Manners: I should like to take this opportunity of saying a few words about photography. Now—

Editor (to chief reporter): Manners wishes all "Gemites" a merry Christmas. Your turn, Algernon.

D'Arcy: If you are wewefin' to me, Tom Mewwy—

Editor: I am.

D'Arcy: My name is not Algernon. But, nevertheless, I wish all our readers a very happy Chwistmas, and I should like to point out to them the importance of being pwoperly dwessed for dinner at Chwistmas. The corwect attiah—

Editor: That'll be all to-day, Algernon.

D'Arcy: Weall'y, Tom Mewwy, I must pwotest—

Chorus: Put a sock in it, Gussy!

Editor: You next, Fatty Wynn.

Wynn: I wosh—woosh—pffllllaaa—chugchug—groombph—oommmp—

Editor: Sorry, Fatty, I can't understand Welsh, and I don't suppose our readers can, either!

Wynn: Groommmp—gommppffllll—

Chorus: Ha, ha, ha! His mouth's so full of pie that he can't speak!

Editor (to chief reporter): Put him down for the usual greetings. For my own part, I wish to express my most sincere good wishes to all our readers for a very happy Christmas and New Year. During the past year I have often thought—

(At this point the chief reporter and other members of the staff adjourned to the tuckshop.)

CHRISTMAS

by

FATTY WYNN

Hurrah for dear old Christmas!

Hurrah! At last it's here!

For all that's wrong with Christmas is it comes but once a year!

Hurrah for dear old Christmas,

The puddings and the pies!

For when I've feasted all I can,

I sit and feast my eyes.

Hurrah for dear old Christmas,
The holly and the snow!
I smell the smell of turkey roast—
I'm off—so cheeri-ho!

DETERMINISM

by

HERBERT SKIMPOLE.

Before I say what I have to say I should like to say that I am indeed exceedingly grateful to Tom Merry for very kindly allowing me space in the "Weekly" for this article. In the past I have frequently asked him to publish my articles on the subject of Determinism, but he has never seen his way to accede to my requests. However, this being a time of good will among all people, he has very kindly granted my request as a special Christmas gift to me. His refusals in the past have no doubt been due entirely to the unfortunate nature of his heredity and his environment. I should be the last person to blame him for his stupidity and narrow-mindedness. The fact that he does not possess a brain like mine is no fault of his, and I can only feel sorry for him that such is the case, for it prevents him from realising many wonderful and surprising truths about this world which I am able to grasp with facile ease.

Now Determinism—

(Sorry, Skimpy, time's up. You've used all the space I could allow. Cheerio till next Christmas!)

AUTOMATIC INTERVIEWS.

TAGGLES SPEAKING:

"Wot I says is this 'ere!" said Taggles, the school porter, in response to my request for his opinion of St. Jim's fellows. "There's so many things I'd like to say about them young rips that I don't know where to make a start!"

"Is it as bad as all that?" I asked, grinning.

"Boys get worse!" answered Taggles gloomily. "Worse and worse and worse! If you asks me, all boys ought to be drowned at birth. That's what I says! If you don't drown 'em, they only grows up to be a nuisance. The tricks they plays you'd 'ardly believe. Why, only this arternoon I left a bottle of gin on the table in my lodge—I takes a nip, you know, on the doctor's suggestion. I was only gone a few minutes, but when I come back some young soundrel had poured gum into my gin. Gum, mind you! In my gin!"

And Taggles shook his head as if almost unable to realise the immensity of that outrage.

"Have you any Christmas greetings for our readers?" I asked.

"My very best wishes to all the nice young gentlemen!" said Taggles, with sudden thoughts of end-of-term tips!

The Ghost of St. Jim's!

(Continued from page 9.)

CHAPTER 5.

The Mysterious Tapping.

THE morning was very misty, and the mist thickened as the day grew older.

In the afternoon the light had to be switched on in the class-rooms, whilst against the panes of the windows glimmered the grey fog. In the Shell class-room Tom Merry noted that Mr. Linton seemed pre-occupied. The master of the Shell was perhaps still thinking of the mysterious occurrence of the night, to which he had found no clue, except the unsatisfactory one furnished by the spiritualistic Mr. Lathom.

Tom Merry, too, was thinking of the mystery which had so suddenly arisen at St. Jim's. If it was some practical joker who was tapping on the walls, it was impossible to guess how he contrived to do so; nor was it very clear why he had but just commenced his practical jokes. If the tapping was due to the ghost, of course it was clear enough—as the Monk Rufus was only supposed to appear when the snow was on the ground.

Tom Merry was not much inclined to admit the ghost theory; but any other theory it seemed impossible to form. The matter remained in his mind to the exclusion of more immediate concerns, and when Mr. Linton asked him to name one of the principal products of Cornwall, and he replied "Ghosts!" there was a general giggle in the class, and an amazed stare from Mr. Linton.

"Merry, what did you say?"

Tom Merry turned red.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir. I meant to say—"

"I am afraid you were not attending to the lesson, Merry."

"Sorry, sir, but—"

"Well, never mind," said Mr. Linton, unusually placable. "You may answer my question now."

And Tom Merry, who had expected fifty lines, was greatly relieved. As a matter of fact, the ghostly manifestations were in Mr. Linton's mind, too. The class had come to Roman history, which happened to be the last lesson that afternoon, and Mr. Linton was fairly embarked upon the decline of the empire of Augustus, when suddenly he stopped, and gave quite a jump.

For, in the silence of the class-room, broken only by Mr. Linton's quiet voice, a sudden sound had become audible.

Tap, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton gave a quick glance round.

"Boys! What boy was that?"

There was no reply.

"What boy was it tapped on his desk?" thundered Mr. Linton.

The Shell looked at one another in silence and dismay. No one answered the Form master. He laid down his book, and picked up the pointer.

"Now, my boys," said Mr. Linton, in a concentrated voice, "this is the second time that absurd trick has been played on me. Some foolish boy, knowing the legend of St. Jim's, has taken it into his head to imitate the tapping of the supposed ghost of the Monk Rufus. That boy I am determined to punish severely."

There was grim silence in the class-room for some moments. It was broken by the eerie sound again, coming no one knew whence.

Tap, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton's face was almost crimson with anger.

"Who was that?" he thundered.

The boys looked at one another. Tom Merry's face was very startled. Manners was looking astounded. Up till now he had steadily ridiculed the story of the tapping his chums had heard in Figgins' study in the New House. He could hardly doubt it now.

"My hat!" murmured Manners.

"I suppose you believe it now, you sceptical ass?" muttered Lowther.

"Bless if I know what to think!"

Tap, tap, tap!

For the third time the mysterious tapping was repeated. Faint as it was, it sounded with weird distinction through the class-room.

Mr. Linton drew a deep breath.

"Boys, I call upon you to tell me which member of this class is playing that childish trick?"

"If you please, sir," said Tom Merry, "I don't think it was anyone in the class."

Mr. Linton looked at him frowningly.

"Nonsense, Merry! Whom else could it be?"

"The sound did not seem to come from among the desks."

"It might have been someone in the corridor, sir," suggested Lowther.

"Look in the corridor, Gore."

Gore crossed to the door and opened it. He looked up and down the passage.

"Is there anyone there, Gore?"

"No, sir."

"Then it was undoubtedly someone in the class who tapped on the desk," said Mr. Linton. "I demand to know the name of the culprit!"

The class was silent.

"Very well," said Mr. Linton, with a glint in his eyes. "If the foolish boy will not own up to his fault, and the others will not speak out, I shall have no alternative but to punish the whole class."

Tap, tap, tap!

As if in defiance of the Form master's words, the sound was repeated when he had barely finished speaking.

The master of the Shell stood petrified.

If the tapping was done by a practical joker, he was a joker with an unusual amount of nerve and impudence—that was certain.

"Boys!" gasped Mr. Linton. "Boys, really—"

"If you please, sir," said Tom Merry eagerly, "that sounded as if it came from the direction of the Fourth Form Room, sir."

Mr. Linton knitted his brows.

"It is impossible that anyone could be tapping on the wall there, Merry. The Fourth Form are now in class there with Mr. Lathom."

"It sounded like it, sir."

"I will go in and speak to Mr. Lathom," said the Fourth Form master, after a pause. "I leave you in charge of the class for a few moments, Merry."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Linton walked down the passage to the door of the next class-room, which was occupied by the Fourth. He looked in, and found the Fourth Form at their lessons, following Mr. Lathom's lead upon a thrilling excursion among deponent verbs.

Mr. Lathom looked round, and came towards the Shell master.

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Mr. Lathom—"

"Not at all," said the master of the Fourth politely.

"But—someone has been annoying me by tapping—a curious tapping on the wall, or else on a desk," explained the Shell master. "As all my class refuse to admit having done so, it is possible that some mischievous lad in this room may have tapped on the wall without your noticing it. I thought I would inquire."

Mr. Lathom shook his head.

"It is hardly possible," he said. "You see that the nearest boy to the wall on that side is quite separated from it, and I should certainly have observed any boy leave his seat. Besides, I should have heard the tapping."

"And you heard nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then I am sorry I interrupted you. I was sure that the sound did not proceed from this direction, but I thought it only just to make certain before punishing my class. As you have not heard the—"

Tap, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton broke off suddenly.

The mysterious sound was audible again, and this time it was in the Fourth Form class-room.

CHAPTER 6.

Blake's Idea.

TAP, tap, tap!

Mr. Linton's face was a study. The repetition of the sound in the Fourth Form Room showed that it had not been made in the first place by anybody in the Shell.

The Fourth-Formers looked round in amazement.

Blake & Co. had been as sceptical as Manners about the manifestation in Figgins' study the previous evening. Now they heard the mysterious tapping themselves.

Tap, tap, tap!

The sound certainly did not come from the wall separating the Fourth Form from the Shell class-room. It appeared, so far as the direction could be ascertained at all, to proceed from the wall at the end of the room; but on that side, as everyone knew, the oak panels were backed by a solid wall of stone. Yet the sound was distinct enough.

Tap, tap, tap!

The final taps were diminuendo—gradually dying away.

Tap, tap, tap!

The final taps died completely away.

Silence followed.

Mr. Linton looked at Mr. Lathom, and Mr. Lathom looked at Mr. Linton. The master of the Shell was amazed, but there was a very visible satisfaction dawning in Mr. Lathom's face.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Linton. "What can it be?"

"There is no further doubt," murmured Mr. Lathom.

"Eh? What did you remark, Mr. Lathom?"

"I remarked that there is no further doubt."

"I do not understand. No further doubt of what?"

"That my efforts to establish communication with the unseen world have been crowned with success at last."

Mr. Linton was very much inclined to say: "Pooh, nonsense!" But considerations of politeness restrained him. "I am assured that the sound is due to a trick," he said.

The Fourth Form master shook his head decidedly.

"Impossible! The tapping certainly came from that wall, and that wall is of solid stone, and on the other side is the open quadrangle. A tap from the outer side would not be audible here, through a thickness of eight feet. You must remember that this was not built as a class-room, but is part of the oldest portion of St. Jim's, and the walls are of immense thickness."

"That is true, but—"

"And as the tapping came from that wall—"

"I rather thought it might have come from the ceiling," said Mr. Linton obstinately, "or perhaps from the cellars below. I certainly feel quite assured that this is due to a human agency—that of some reckless, practical joker."

"I am assured not."

"I wish," said Mr. Linton, with glinting eyes—"I wish that I could find the person concerned. I would answer for it that he would play no more jokes of this kind."

"My dear sir—"

"I am certain it is a trick!"

"I am assured that it is not!"

"Really, Mr. Linton—"

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"

"I assure you—"

"Ahem! The noise seems to have ceased for good now," said the master of the Shell. "I think I must return to my class."

And Mr. Linton went back to the Shell-room looking very puzzled and angry. The Shell, for once, had been quiet during the master's absence. Mr. Linton said no more about punishing the class. It was clear enough that no one in the Shell had had a hand in producing the mysterious tapping, though he was not quite so certain about the Fourth Form.

Classes were dismissed very shortly afterwards, and the boys crowded out into the corridor, discussing the strange occurrence. The Terrible Three compared notes at once with the chums of the Fourth Form Room.

"And we weally heard the tappin'," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "There is no ewwor about it, deah boys, for I weally heard it myself, you know. I have no doubt that what Tom Mewwy heard in Figgins' study was due to his imagination."

"Ass!"

"I wufuse to be called an ass, Tom Mewwy."

"I wish you'd wufuse to be one!"

"Weally, Mewwy—"

"I'm beginning to believe in the tapping now," remarked Jack Blake. "We certainly heard it in the class-room."

"That was what I was wemarkin'. I have no doubt that the tappin' in Figgy's study was due to Tom Mewwy's imagination, but in this case it was weal enough. I am not likely to make an ewwor."

"Rats!" said Digby. "It was real enough in both cases. 'I can't make it out, but I won't swallow the ghost. That's flat.'"

"Ghosts are out of date," agreed Tom Merry. "Ghosts are barred—"

"Why are ghosts like football boots?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Oh, don't, Lowther! We've had that before, under many shapes and forms," said Blake. "I don't like rotten jokes at all; but if I must have rotten jokes, I must say I like 'em new. That is a very old, rotten joke."

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Lowthah—"

"St. Jim's ghost is barred," said Tom Merry. "But I don't see how anybody could be playing the trick. It's a giddy mystery."

Herries had been looking very thoughtful. Herries was a slow and steady fellow, and he always thought things out before he spoke, though the opinions he then delivered did not always seem to his chums worth the trouble he had taken.

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"I say," said Herries, coming out of his brown study, "it would be a good idea to track down the japist—"

"Yes, if we could do it."

"I was thinking of my bulldog."

"Rats!" said Lowther. "I couldn't have that bulldog doing the tapping—"

Herries gave the humourist of the Shell a withering glare. The juniors chuckled.

"I don't mean that, ass!" said Herries. "I mean that my bulldog might be able to track down the japer. You know what a terror he is at tracking things down."

"Kippers, for instance," remarked Manners.

"Oh, don't be funny, Manners! We have to stand enough of that from Lowther," said Herries crossly. "You know how my dog Towser tracked down the burglars in the chapel, and I don't see why he shouldn't track down this joker."

"How are you going to get on the track?"

"That will want thinking out, of course."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It will want a lot of thinking out, in my opinion," he remarked. "By the way, I haven't returned those lurid papers to Binks yet. I ought to get it done, or he will think he has lost the Spotted Spook for ever."

And Tom Merry walked away in quest of the School House buttons.

"Wherefore that worried brow?" asked Jack Blake, meeting the hero of the Shell in the School House passage some little time later. "Have you found Binks?"

"Yes. The young idiot is half off his dot, I believe," said Tom Merry. "It would be a good thing to clear that rubbish out of his mind, if it could be worked."

Jack Blake grinned.

"I've been thinking of a wheeze," he remarked. "It would be a service to Binks, and would give us a chance of squeezing some fun out of the matter, too."

"Go ahead!" said Tom Merry tersely.

"Why, suppose one of those giddy criminals he's always reading about was to call on him one night," grinned Blake. "Red-handed Dick, for instance, or Captain Crack-shot, or Black-hearted Bill, or somebody. It would be rather a joke on Binks, and would open his eyes to what it would really be like to meet one of those gentry. And we could easily rig up the character from the costumes we've got for the private theatricals."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Jolly good wheeze! It's a go!"

"Bai Jove, deah boys—"

"Hallo, Gussy! Have you found a threepenny-bit?" asked Tom Merry, as the swell of the School House came towards them, beaming.

"No, Tom Mewwy, I have not found a threepenny-bit!"

"Then wherefore those beaming smiles on your aristocratic countenance?"

"Oh, pway don't wot, deah boy! I have had a lettah frow Cousin Ethel," said D'Arcy.

Tom Merry and Blake were all interest at once. They were always glad to hear from their girl chum; gladder when she came on a visit to Mrs. Holmes at St. Jim's.

"Any news?" asked Tom Merry eagerly.

"Is Cousin Ethel coming down?" demanded Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good!" said both the juniors together.

"Yaas, she's coming down to the coll, you know!" said D'Arcy, with a smile of great satisfaction. "She has written that she is going to stay for a few days with Mrs. Holmes, you know, and I wathah expect she will awwive this evenin'." I wegard it as wathah wippin'!"

"Ripping? My dear kid, it's stunning!"

"Yaas, powwaps it would not be an exaggeration to describe it as stunnin'," assented Arthur Augustus. "I am wathah anxious in my mind—"

"About Cousin Ethel? Oh, that's all right! We'll look after her."

"I should certainly wufuse to allow you to look aftah my cousin!" said Arthur Augustus frigidly. "I was not thinkin' of that. I am quite capable of lookin' aftah my own cousin!"

"That's your mistake! You see—"

"Yaas, I see a pair of feahfully cheeky boundahs!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, fixing his monocle disdainfully upon Tom Merry and Jack Blake. "What I am feelin' wovvied about is my young bwothah Wally."

"What's the matter with Wally?"

"He's such a feahfully untidy young scallawag, you know!" said D'Arcy. "He nevah will keep ink off his fingahs, or have a clean collah, and his hair is always feahfully untidy, and he has pwactically no ewcease in his twousahs. Then he's always covvashed with gwey hairs fwom that howwid mongwel of a dog of his. I am weally ashamed for my Cousin Ethel to see him in such a waggad state as he is bound to be in."

“Why not give him a few tips?” asked Tom Merry gravely.

“Yaas, wathah! But he does not weccire advice vewy respectfully fwom me,” said Arthur Augustus, with a doubtful shake of the head.

“But upon such an important occasion——”

“Yaas, pewwaps a few words fwom his eldah bwothah might have some weight with him at this cwitical junctuah,” said D’Arcy thoughtfully. “I think I will go along to the Third Form Woom and speak to the young wottah!”

And D’Arcy walked off. He left Tom Merry grinning at Blake, and Jack Blake grinning at Tom Merry. They could both imagine what was likely to result from the visit of Arthur Augustus D’Arcy to his young brother in the den of the Third Form fags.

be much of your chivvy to be seen. I fancy Binks will think he’s got the real Daredevil Bill——”

“Daredevil Dick!”

“Oh, Daredevil Dick, then! It’s all one. I—— Hallo! Who’s there?”

There was a tap at the study door. Blake looked cross. He did not want anybody to see him in that curious get-up. The whole plot would be spoiled if Binks should get wind of it. The junior darted behind the screen that stood in one corner of the study, and the next second the door opened.

A pair of glimmering spectacles came into view with the bumpy forehead and large head of Herbert Skimpole behind them.

“Ah, I thought I should find you here!” remarked the freak of the Shell. “I’m glad to be able to tell you, Merry,



Binks gazed at the awesome visitor, his jaw dropping, his glance fixed, his eyes almost starting from his head. The masked highwayman returned his gaze grimly. “Aha!” he said, in a deep bass voice. “Aha! Are you ready?”

“I—I—I—Who—How—Oh!” stuttered the wretched Binks.

CHAPTER 7.

Skimpole Makes a Discovery!

“GOT the mask?”

“Yes.”

“And the whiskers?”

“Yes.”

“And the pistol?”

“Here they are.”

Jack Blake chuckled. The “properties,” used by the amateur theatrical club among the School House juniors were all ready. The Terrible Three had brought them into Study No. 6, and Blake and his chums looked over them with great satisfaction.

“Ripping!” said Blake, picking up the huge old-fashioned horse-pistol. “This looks businesslike. Let’s try on the things!”

All the juniors lent a hand, and Jack Blake was soon arrayed in the garb of Daredevil Dick, the highwayman. He wore a three-cornered hat, a black cloak, a mask, and a belt under the cloak, with the huge butt of the pistol sticking out of it. In the study the get-up was not, perhaps, convincing, but in a dusky light there was no doubt that he would pass for a very good representation of the highwayman who was Binks’ favourite hero.

Tom Merry chuckled gleefully.

“Good!” he exclaimed. “There should be whiskers, too, somewhere. Between the mask and the whiskers there won’t

that I have worked up this case to a satisfactory conclusion.”

“What case?” asked Tom Merry.

“The case of the mysterious tapping. Surely you have not forgotten that I took up the case with the intention of elucidating the mystery?”

“Did you? And you have finished?”

“Yes, the case is now complete.”

“Then buzz off, old chap!”

“But surely you wish to know the conclusions I have come to, Merry? I have proved that young Wally D’Arcy is the guilty party!”

“Bai Jove!” said Arthur Augustus.

“Yes, it is undoubtedly the fact!”

“You uttah ass!”

“I am sorry to have to condemn your younger brother, D’Arcy, but the evidence is overwhelming. I have examined the Fourth and the Shell with great keenness, and am certain that the guilty party is in neither Form. This ghost tapping is just one of the tricks a junior in the Third Form would play. I proceeded to the Third Form Room in pursuit of my investigations, and was hurled out by the fags with what I can only characterise as brutal violence.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“You ass!” said Digby. “We’ve just ragged them bald-headed, and they would be bound to go for any Upper Form fellow now!”

Skimpole shook his head.

"Nonsense, Digby! Young Wally was evidently actuated by a guilty conscience, knowing that I was on the track. He was the leader in the attack, and, as a matter of fact, directly I looked into the Third Form Room he uttered the words: 'Look there! Look there! Did you ever see anything like that?'"

"Bai Jove! That was a natuwal question, deah boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The remark was a proof of guilt."

"Blessed if I see how you make that out," said Tom Merry.

Skimpole smiled the smile of a superior knowledge.

"You have not studied detective work upon the methods of Sexton Blake," he replied. "To the trained mind of a detective, D'Arcy minor's words contained an involuntary confession of guilt. 'Look there! That was the startled exclamation of one conscious of guilt, on finding the shadow on his track. 'Did you ever see anything like that?' That remark, of course, referred to the wonderful way in which I had tracked him down, apparently without the aid of clues."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I cannot allow your ribald laughter to influence me against the weight of solid evidence. Young Wally is evidently the guilty party who has been playing ghost. Having established his guilt—"

"Skimmy, old man, you're too funny to live! Somebody lend me a chopper."

"Really, Lowther!"

"Hark!" exclaimed Manners suddenly.

Tap, tap, tap!

The sound came eerily through the study.

"My hat!" muttered Tom Merry. "There it is again!"

Skimpole gave a jump.

"Dear me! There—there must be something wrong with my theory, after all! I have just left young Wally downstairs in the Third Form Room, and here is the tapping again!"

But the juniors did not laugh.

The mysterious sound made them serious enough. They looked at one another in deep and breathless silence. Whence came that mysterious tapping?

"It can't be the g-g-g-ghost!" muttered Herries.

"It's doocid mysterious!" muttered D'Arcy. "I weally considah—"

"Really," said Skimpole, "I am surprised to see you all so impressed by this evident trick! There is someone concealed in the study!"

Tom Merry could not help grinning.

There certainly was someone concealed in the study—Jack Blake, in the guise of Daredevil Dick, the highwayman. But it was not Blake who tapped.

"Oh, cheese it, Skimmy, and get out!"

"There is someone concealed in the study," said Skimpole firmly. "I appear to have been misled in the case of young Wally by an imperfect clue; but now there is an opportunity of discovering the real culprit."

"I tell you—"

"It would be advisable to search the study—"

"Travel, old chap!"

"Perhaps behind the screen in the corner—"

"Get along!"

"I think it is my duty to clear up this matter," said Skimpole, and he made a sudden rush at the screen. "Here, great Scott!"

He dragged the screen aside, and Daredevil Dick, the highwayman, was revealed.

Blake, though surprised, was equal to the occasion.

He raised his huge horse-pistol to a level, and his eyes glared through the holes in the mask at the astounded Determinist of St. Jim's.

"Die!" he roared.

"Dear me! Ow! Mercy! Help!"

"Die the death of a dog!"

"Ow! Hellup!"

Skimpole evidently took Daredevil Dick for the genuine article.

The highwayman came forward, and flourished his pistol. "Silence!" he said, in a deep bass voice. "Silence! Close that door!"

Tom Merry, apparently trembling in every limb, closed the door. The juniors were all trembling, but in the excitement of the moment Skimpole could not see that they were shaking with suppressed laughter.

Daredevil Dick glared round ferociously.

"Swear," he exclaimed impressively—"swear to keep this secret, or this study shall be drenched in gore!"

"I—I can't swear," murmured Lowther. "I promised my Aunt Sempronia never, never to say a naughty word!"

There was a suppressed chuckle in the study. But Skimpole was too terrified to notice it, or to notice anything but the black mask and the huge pistol.

"Swear!" repeated the highwayman sternly. "Down on your knees!"

The juniors dropped on their knees. Skimpole's knees were knocking together with fright, and he was glad to kneel down. He fixed his spectacles upon the masked man, as if fascinated by the dreadful sight.

"Now," said the deep bass voice, "swear never to reveal the dread secret of my presence in this study! Swear!"

"I—I swear!" murmured Tom Merry.

"I swear!" gasped Skimpole. "I shall certainly have great pleasure in keeping the secret, my dear sir. I—"

"Silence!"

"Ye-es, certainly!"

"Remain as you are!" said the highwayman sternly. "I am going. A few minutes, and this ancient hall will know Daredevil Dick, the highwayman, no more. But keep the secret, or I'll give you a licking—I mean, these floors shall run red with crimson gore!"

"I—I—"

"Silence!"

The highwayman flourished his pistol again, so close to Skimpole that the amateur detective jumped, and then the highwayman switched out the light.

The juniors did not move. There were vague sounds in the darkness, which Tom Merry knew to be made by Jack Blake, stripping off his disguise. But Skimpole was far from suspecting anything of the sort. Then there was the sound of a door opening and closing, and receding footsteps in the passage.

"He is gone!" said Tom Merry, in a low voice.

The juniors rose to their feet. Lowther switched on the lights again. Skimpole was trembling in every limb.

"Is he—er—really gone?" he gasped.

"Yaas, wathah! What an extwemely fowocious-lookin' wascal he was!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am not surprised that you were in a blue funk, Skimmy."

"You—you are mistaken, D'Arcy. I was not in a blue funk. I—I was assuming this aspect of terror for the purpose of—of—of—"

"Then you assumed it jolly well," said Tom Merry.

The door opened, and Jack Blake came into the study.

Potts, the Office Boy!



He looked round at the juniors with an expression of surprise.

"Hullo! Anything the matter?" he asked.

"It's a dread secret," said Monty Lowther. "Something has happened, but we have sworn to keep it dark."

"Oh, rats!"

"I—I assure you that it is the case, Blake," stammered Skimpole. "We have now discovered the dreadful author of the mysterious tapping, but we have sworn to keep the secret."

"You have sworn?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Then you can jolly well get out of my study! I'm not going to have fellows who swear in here," said Blake severely. "I'm surprised and shocked at you, Skimpole setting such a bad example to these tender youths."

"Really, Blake—"

"Oh, travel along, before I kick you!"

"You don't understand!"

"I don't want to understand! Get out!"

"When I say I swore, I don't mean to say I swore."

I mean to say that I swore—

"Yes, that's quite lucid," assented Blake. "Get out!"

"But really—"

Blake picked up the inkpot.

"I give you one second, Skimmy!"

The second was enough for Herbert Skimpole. He skipped out of the study, and slammed the door. As he went down the passage he heard a wild yell of laughter from the study, and he wondered what Tom Merry & Co. were laughing at.

CHAPTER 8.

Daredevil Dick!

WHEN the Fourth Form went up to the dormitory, however, Blake cut into the study to get the parcel containing the disguise of Daredevil Dick. The Skimpole affair had not made any alteration in his plan. The lesson to Binks was still to be given. He had arranged to meet Tom Merry and his chums in the corridor at half-past ten.

The Fourth Form went to bed, but Blake did not go to sleep.

When half-past ten chimed out from the clock tower Blake slipped out of bed. He shivered; the night was cold. The mist had cleared off, and the moon was glimmering upon the white carpet of snow in the quadrangle, and on the strange figures of the frost on the dormitory windows. Blake hurriedly dressed himself.

"Are you coming, Herries?" he asked, shaking his chum.

Herries started out of a dream.

"Eh—what? 'Tain't rising-bell!"

"Are you coming for that jape on Binks?"

"If you don't mind, Blake, I'd rather you told me about it in the morning."

Blake grunted.

"Are you coming, Dig?"

"Eh—what? Well, if you'll excuse me, old chap, I'd rather hear about it in the morning," said Digby sleepily.

"You coming, Gus?"

"Bai Jove! Is that someone shakin' me? I wefuse to be shaken wuffy! I wish you to undahstand that it is a question of dig with me, and I wefuse—"

"Oh, wake up! Are you coming with me to jape Buttons?"

"Upon the whole, Blake, I think I had bettah not come,

unless you wish me to play the pwincipal part in the pwogwamme. I will come and assume the disguise of Daredevil Dick, if you like, as I could probably do it much bettah."

"Rats!"

"Othahwise, I think my pwesence will pwobably be superfluous."

"You're quite right there, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Lasy rotters!" said Blake. "Stop in bed, then!"

"If you wish me to come, deah boy—"

"I don't!"

"Then, if you are not watty about it, I will go to sleep again."

"Go to sleep, Gussy. You're nicest when you're asleep. You don't talk then."

But D'Arcy was already dozing off again. Jack Blake donned the startling garb of Daredevil Dick, the highwayman, and quietly left the dormitory. Outside the door of the Shell dormitory Tom Merry was waiting for him. There was a glimmer of moonlight in the passage from the high window at the end, and Tom Merry gave quite a start as the curious figure of the highwayman came along.

"That you, Blake?" he whispered.

"Yes. Where are the others?"

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Manners and Lowther think they'd rather hear about it in the morning. Where are your lot?"

"Same with them," grinned Blake. "Come on!"

"I say, you'd give anybody a start who saw you like that."

"Very likely. We shall have to take jolly good care not to be seen by anybody but Binks. Let's get along. Hallo, who's that?"

There was the sound of a cautious footstep behind Blake in the shadowy corridor. The juniors started and stared in the direction of the sound.

"It—it's somebody coming!"

"Confound him!"

"It's— My hat, it's Gussy!"

The juniors breathed more freely. The figure of the swell of St. Jim's came into view in the glimmering moonlight. He had his trousers and slippers and a coat on, and a scarf round his neck. The corridor was very cold that winter night. An eyeglass glimmered in the moonlight.

"Bai Jove! Are you there, deah boys?"

"Yes, ass!" growled Blake. "You startled us."

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"What have you come along for, after all?"

"I thought you would vewy pwobably get into some mischief if I wasn't with you," explained D'Arcy. "Upon the whole, I considah it bettah to come."

"Well, now you've come, don't make a row."

"I am not makin' a row."

"Shut up, then. Come on!"

Blake led the way, and the other two followed in silence. Outside the door of the room occupied by Binks, Blake halted.

There was a light glimmering under the door.

"The young ass hasn't gone to bed yet," muttered Blake.

"Staying up to read some of those lurid shockers, I suppose."

"We shall catch him in the act."

"I say, upon the whole, don't you think it rather rough on him?" murmured Tom Merry.

Blake snorted.

"Well, this is a nice time of day to start thinking that," he said. "Hallo! Listen!"

Not His Lucky Star!



The sound of Binks' voice was audible from the room.
 "Ha, ha, ha! They little know!"
 "Silly young ass, talking to himself!" muttered Blake.
 "I think he wants curing, if ever any howling idiot did!"
 "Yeas, wathah!"
 "You two chaps stop here while I go in."
 "Good!"

Blake turned the handle of the door and strode into the room. As he came into the flickering light of Binks' candle, he certainly looked an awesome figure in a cloak and mask, whiskers and pistol. The School House page was fully dressed, but he did not seem to have been reading. He had his hand on a panel in the wall of the room, and he turned round instantly as Blake came in. His gaze fell upon the terrible figure of Daredevil Dick, and he stood petrified.

CHAPTER 9.

Binks the Terrible!

BINKS gazed at the awesome visitor, his jaw dropping, his glance fixed, his eyes almost starting from his head. The masked highwayman returned his gaze grimly.

"Aha, aha!" said Blake in a deep bass voice. "Aha! Are you ready?"

"I—I—I— Who—how— Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Blake. "You are scared! You are frightened! Is this the spirit of a follower of Red-handed Bill?"

"Red-handed Dick, you ass!" came a whisper from outside.

"Of Red-handed Bill?" repeated Blake obstinately. "Is this the pluck of a disciple of Black-hearted Dick? Minion, tremble!"

The order was unnecessary. Binks was trembling in every limb, and his face was as white as chalk.

Blake stretched out his hand, and knocked the candle over. He did not want Binks to get a closer view. The moonlight glimmered in at the frosty window, and in the eerie dimness the figure of Daredevil Dick looked more terrible than ever.

"Mercy!" gasped Binks. "Oh, mercy!"

"Daredevil Dick never shows mercy," said the highwayman scornfully. "His path is marked in gore. His footsteps are deep in crimson stains, just as if he had dipped his boots in red ink!"

There was a faint chuckle from without.

"I have come for you, Binks."

"Oh lor! Mercy!"

"Tremble not. I shall not hurt you. Have you not been prepared for this visit?"

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"Have you not often dreamed of becoming a highwayman and stealing things for a living? Have you not visioned a wild career on the boundless main, and longed for the time when you could hoist the Jolly Roger and sail the Spanish Main and imbrue your hands in gore?"

"Oh dear! I—"

"Will you join my band?" hissed Blake.

"I—I— Oh!"

"Will you join the choice selection of daring spirits that scoff at law and fill their pockets with booty? Will you become a highwayman and sail the Spanish Main with my gallant band?" demanded Blake, getting a little mixed.

"Oh dear!"

"I have come to help you realise your dreams of a life of adventure. You shall join my band. I have long been in search of such daring spirits. You shall become known as Binks the Terrible."

There was a curious sound from the passage. It seemed as if somebody was choking there. But the terrified Binks did not notice it.

"Come!" said the highwayman sternly. "Will you join my gallant band?"

"I—I'd rather not, if you don't mind. I—"

"Is not this the opportunity you have been longing for?"

"Ye-es, but—but—"

"Ah, you are a craven! You shrink from the thought of imbruing your hands in gore! Ha, ha, base minion!" Blake plucked the old horse-pistol from under his cloak.

"You must join my band or die!"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"My men are waiting in the passage. Will you join my band?"

"I—I—I will if you wish, please."

"Then come! Have you a dagger?"

"N-n-no!"

"Or a trusty sword?"

"No-no."

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"Very well, I will lend you a pocket-knife to kill the Head."

"To-to-to wh-wh-what?" gasped Binks.

"To kill the Head. No member is allowed in my gallant band who has not paid his footing by committing at least one murder."

"Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"Besides, the gold in my cave in Epping Forest runs short. I must have more gold, and we can rob the school ere we mount our coal-black steeds and fly."

"I—I—I can't ride!"

"Base minion! You aspire to be a highwayman, and you cannot ride, you have no dagger, not even a trusty sword. Bah! You shall learn to ride. You shall learn to watch the red gore flow and say 'Ha, ha, ha!'"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!"

"Are you ready?"

"No-n-no—y-y-yes."

"Then come! Have you ever killed anyone yet?"

There was an irrepressible chuckle from the passage. This time Binks heard it, but he set it down to the highwaymen chuckling in horrid glee at the thought of a murder.



Skimpole dragged the screen aside and Daredevil Dick, the High the mask at the astounded Determinist of St. Jim's. "Die

"N-n-never!" gasped Binks. "I—I would rather not kill anyone."

"Rats! I mean, ha, ha, ha!" said Blake hastily.

"You must learn to wield a rusty sword—I mean a trusty sword. Come! I will lend you my poniard, and you shall drive it into someone's heart! Is there anybody you would specially like to murder before you leave this place for ever?"

"I—I don't think so, please!"

"What about Mrs. Binns, the cook? Has she not boxed your ears?"

"Ye-es, but—but—"

"Boxed the ears of Binks the Terrible? Think! Had you not better drive a rusty—trusty—dagger to her heart?"

"I—if you please, I—I'd rather not."

"And Mary, the housemaid. Shall she not die?"

"N-n-no, please!"

"Then come! Let me see you slay the Head, and I shall be convinced that you are worthy to be a member of my gallant band."

"Oh, please—please—"

"Come!" thundered Daredevil Dick.

Binks came. He was so paralysed with terror that he could hardly move, but he dared not disobey.

Daredevil Dick grasped him by the shoulder, and led him from the room. He paused in the passage to speak to his trusty band.

"Ha, ha, ha! My faithful blades! Spread through the House, seize the gold, and shed as much blood as possible!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

Tom Merry pinched the swell of St. Jim's too late. The cat was out of the bag now. Binks gave a jump as he recognised the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He was not a particularly bright youth, but even his denseness had its limits. He understood that he was the victim of a jape at once.

"You nter ass!" muttered Tom Merry wrathfully, as Binks uttered a gasping exclamation of relief. "You've given the show away!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"You-shrieking idiot!"

"I wefuse to be called a shwiekin' idiot! I wegard you



was revealed. He raised his pistol and his eyes glared through the door. "Dear me! Ow! Mercy! Help!" yelled Skimpole.

as havin' given the show away in the most widiculous mannah! If you had not spoken—"

"You—you beasts!" muttered Binks. "Is this a little game?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake, unable to restrain his merriment any longer. "Ha, ha, ha! What do you think of Daredevil Dick now, you young ass?"

"Master Blake!"

"Are you willing to join my band, and kill a few people to pay your footing?"

"You—you—"

"The game's up now," said Blake regretfully. "I was thinking of taking the young idiot down and ducking him under the bath-room tap. Binks, you can go to bed."

"You—you—"

"Get to bed, and remember we've done this for your own good, and I hope the lesson will not be lost on you," said Blake, with a paternal air. "If Gussy hadn't been such an ass—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"You—you didn't frighten me," said Binks surlily. "I knew it was you all along. But I could jolly well frighten you if I like!"

"Rats! Get to bed, my son, and give Daredevil Dick and Red-handed Bill a wide berth. Bring that dummy along, Tom Merry!"

"I wefuse to be addressed as a dummy!"

Binks went into his room and shut the door hard. The juniors descended the stairs chuckling, and went back to bed. As they came into the dormitory passage there was the sound of a door opening.

CHAPTER 10.

The Snow Fight!

"JOVE! Look at the snow!"

Tom Merry uttered the exclamation as he jumped out of bed the following morning.

The snow was coming down in a dazzling sheet, and drifting before the wind against the panes of the Shell dormitory.

"Cold, isn't it?" shivered Manners. "But I'm glad to see the snow so thick. What price snowballs in the quad?"

"What-ho!"

"Rats!" grunted Gore. "Too jolly cold! I'm going to look for a fire somewhere!"

"Slacker!"

"Oh, rats!"

There were very few of Gore's mind, however. Nearly all the Shell dressed themselves hurriedly, and followed the Terrible Three downstairs for a run in the snowy quad before breakfast. Snow had fallen before, but it was coming down thickly at last, and the juniors were delighted to see it.

"Come on, Skimmy!" demanded Lowther, giving the amateur Determinist a slap on the back as they went downstairs that nearly sent him headlong to the bottom.

Skimpole clutched at the banisters and blinked at Lowther. "N-no, I think not, Lowther!" he gasped. "I have to prepare my article on Determinism for the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly.' If you fellows like to stay in till breakfast, I'll read you out my notes for that article—"

"Thank you," said Lowther; "I'd rather be buried alive in snow!"

"Really, Lowther! Perhaps you would care to hear the latest views on the subject of Determinism, Manners?"

"Yes, perhaps," said Manners—"a jolly big perhaps!"

"Or you, Merry—"

"The very latest views, rather!" assented Tom Merry; "the latest possible—say very late to-night, when I'm asleep. You can read 'em out then."

"Really, Merry—"

"Come on, you chaps! I expect we shall find Figgins & Co. in the quad."

And the Shell, in coats and scarves, and thick boots, rushed out into the quad. The wintry sun was glimmering through the falling snow. The quadrangle was a sheet of white.

"Hallo, here's those Shell-fish!" exclaimed the voice of Jack Blake. The Fourth Form were already out. "Give 'em socks!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Buck up, Shell!" shouted Tom Merry.

And in a moment the snowballs were flying.

There was plenty of material for manufacturing missiles, and the juniors were adepts at the work. A terrific battle was soon raging amid the falling flakes.

The Fourth were superior in point of numbers, and they were soon driving the Shell back towards the House under a shower of missiles. But the Terrible Three were a host in themselves. They rallied the Shell, and a hot scrimmage ensued at close quarters.

The combat was at its height when a crowd of scarfed juniors loomed up through the falling flakes from the direction of the New House.

"Go for 'em!" rang out the voice of Figgins.

And the New House juniors rushed to the attack.

Figgins led off with a huge snowball, that caught D'Arcy behind the ear and broke over his cheek and neck.

Arthur Augustus sat down suddenly in the snow with a gasp.

"Bai Jove!"

The next moment he had disappeared among the legs of the New House juniors as they rushed forward.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "Pway don't tread on me, deah boys! Weally, I wegard this as wathah wuff! If you tread on my twousahs I shall wefuse to play with such a set of wuff wottahs!"

But no one heeded D'Arcy.

Figgins & Co., backed up by a crowd of New House fellows, quite gained the upper hand by their sudden attack. But the two parties of School House fellows at once united

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against the common foe, and then Figgins & Co. began to get the worst of it.

"Down with the New House!" roared Blake.

"Yass, wathah!" gasped D'Arcy, scrambling to his feet.

"Down with the beastly New House, deah boys!"

There was a wild and whirling conflict amid the wind-driven flakes.

In the height of it, a tall, lean form came crossing from the New House to the School House; but the juniors were much too busily occupied to notice Mr. Ratcliff.

The New House master looked at the scene of excitement with a sour expression, and walked on; then gave a sudden jump as a snowball caught him behind the ear.

The snowballs were flying in all directions, and it was dangerous to get near the combat. Mr. Ratcliff turned round with a glint in his eyes.

"Who threw that?" he shouted.

There was no reply. The juniors did not even hear him. But snowballs were flying fast, and a couple more squelched on Mr. Ratcliff's features as he glared.

"Boys! Desist at once!"

"Hurrah!"

"Down with the New House!"

"Give 'em socks!"

"Hurrah!"

Faster and thicker flew the missiles. Mr. Ratcliff was in the line of fire, and the snowballs plumped on him from all sides. His face was pale with anger, but it was evidently useless to shout at the excited juniors. The Housemaster fairly took to his heels and ran, and the snowballs—whether by accident or design—followed him fast, till he bolted into the doorway of the School House.

The conflict continued unabated. From the gate of the Head's garden a charming face looked into the quad. The New House fellows, driven by superior numbers, were retreating, and their retreat happened to be in this direction. A large number of them were scattered, but a thick knot held fast round Figgins & Co., and showed a brave front to the enemy.

Figgins caught sight of the pretty face over the gate, and in a moment the heap of ready snowballs dropped from under his arm, and he ran to the gate, dragging off his snow-covered cap.

"Good-morning, Cousin Ethel!"

Cousin Ethel smiled.

"Good-morning, Figgins! I see you are busy!"

Figgins grinned.

"Only a little fun!" he exclaimed. "Hallo! Those duffers can't see you! Hold on there—pax!"

The School House fellows were rushing on, sending a storm of snowballs before them. Many of the missiles flew right at the gate, and Figgins immediately planted his lengthy form in front of Cousin Ethel to shield her. Snowball after snowball biffed upon him, but Figgins did not mind.

Cousin Ethel laughed.

"That is very kind of you, Figgins!"

"I shouldn't like you to get biffed—I mean, hit—by a snowball!" said Figgins anxiously, apparently under the impression that Cousin Ethel might break if touched too roughly. "Hold on, you duffers! Pax!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Blake. "You own up you're licked, Figgy!"

"No, I don't!"

"Then—"

"Hold on! Can't you see Cousin Ethel?"

"How do you expect me to see through a great chump like you?" demanded Blake, pulling off his cap as he caught sight of Cousin Ethel. "Beautiful morning, Miss Cleveland!"

"Yes, isn't it?"

"Nice and snowy! You don't often get a morning like this before Christmas, and we're making the most of it, giving these New House kids a licking!"

"Rats!" said Kerr.

The snow-fight was mostly over now. Here and there it continued, but near the gate all was peace and polite grins.

"Bai Jove, I am not powwy, it is ovah, as a mattah of fact, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "I find this wuff play vewy exhaustin'."

"Go and sit down, then," said Figgins kindly.

"I wefuse to go and sit down, Figgins!" said D'Arcy, groping for his eyeglass, and jamming it into his eye and regarding the New House junior with great disdain. "I cannot help suspecting that you have ultewiah motives in suggesting that I should go and sit down."

Figgins turned pink. A bell rang through the falling snow.

"Bai Jove, that's bwakfast!"

The juniors began to go to their Houses. Figgins remained at the gate. He was evidently determined to speak to Cousin Ethel, and the others raised their caps and turned away, to give old Figgy a chance, as they expressed it. All except Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"You will be late for bwakfast in the New House, Figgins," he remarked.

"Really?" said Figgins.

"Yass, wathah!"

"Gussy! Come on, Gussy!" called out Blake.

"I will follow you, deah boys!"

"No you won't," said Blake, coming back and passing his arm through D'Arcy's; "you'll come now! Trot!"

"I uttably wefuse to twot—"

"Now, Gussy, old man; we can't possibly begin bwakfast without you," said Jack Blake; "it wouldn't seem like bwakfast without your chivvy at the table!"

"Oh, if you put it like that, Blake—"

"Well, I do put it like that," said Blake solemnly.

"Then I shall be vewy pleased to come. Au revoir, Ethel!"

"Au revoir, Arthur!"

And the swell of the School House walked off with Blake. Cousin Ethel made a movement to leave the gate.

"Just a minute!" said Figgins.

"You will be late for bwakfast, Figgins."

"Yes, I shouldn't wonder," said Figgins absently. "I—I say, Fatty—Wynn, I mean—speak to you last night about coming to the feed—I mean, the Christmas celebration. He says you're coming."

"I should like to come."

"I say, that's—that's ripping!" said Figgins. "That's all we want, you know, to make it absolutely ripping!"

"Then it will be absolutely—er—ripping!" said Cousin Ethel gravely.

Figgins blushed.

"We are going to make it as decent an affair as we can," he remarked. "There will be holly and Christmas chains up, and so on. I—I wonder if you would help to decorate the room?"

"Yes, certainly, Figgins! What room is it?"

"Well, we haven't settled that yet, but when it's settled—"

"I shall be glad to do anything I can," said Cousin Ethel. And, with a bright smile and a nod, she disappeared among the snowy trees.

Figgins walked back to the New House with a smile of great satisfaction upon his rugged face.

CHAPTER 11.

Great Preparations!

MR. RAILTON, Housemaster of the School House, entered the Head's study with a serious expression upon his face.

Dr. Holmes was also looking very grave.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"I wish to speak to you about a most curious occurrence," said the Head; as Mr. Railton sat down. "Mr. Ratcliff came over here before breakfast to complain of a sound that disturbed him last night—a curious tapping, like that supposed to be made by the ghost of the Monk Rufus!"

"Ah, Mr. Ratcliff has heard it, too, then?"

"Yes, at a late hour last night. It startled him very much, but he's convinced that it is due to some trick, which he attributes to a School House boy."

Mr. Railton smiled slightly. The Housemaster of the New House never failed to find as many faults as possible with School House boys.

"And his reason?" asked Mr. Railton.

"The tapping in the New House has only been audible upon one side—the wall where the New House joins buildings connected with the School House."

"I see."

"It is a very strange affair, Mr. Railton," said the Head, looking troubled. "Last night, as I was sitting up late, I heard a curious sound of tapping, and could not ascertain whence it proceeded. As it was only audible once, I



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attributed it to the imagination. I thought, also, that it was, perhaps, due to some animal—a rat behind the wainscot, or something of that sort. But now I find that the sound has been audible to others on more than one occasion."

Mr. Railton nodded.

"I am aware of that, sir. I have been going to speak to you about it."

"Mr. Ratcliff says he has questioned the boys of his House, and several of them have heard the tapping. Figgins of the Fourth, and French of the Shell have heard it, and also Monteith, his head prefect. To all of them it seemed as if the sound came from the wall adjoining the old refectory."

"But that wall is of immense thickness," said Mr. Railton. "A School House boy could certainly get there easily enough, but would a tap be audible through something like eight feet of stone?"

"It is very curious. I take it that you have heard this curious sound, too, Mr. Railton?"

"Yes, several times. And I do not know what to make of it. Kildare and Darrell have both spoken to me about it, also Lefevre of the Fifth; and I find that it is a topic of discussion among the juniors, a large number of whom have heard it."

"And are you aware what views are held regarding it?"

"Some of the younger boys attribute it to the ghost of St. Jim's—especially after dark," said Mr. Railton, with a smile. "Most of them, however, believe that it is the work of some practical joker."

"That is the only possible conclusion, I suppose?"

"I think so, sir."

The Head looked very troubled.

"The matter must be looked into," he said. "We shall have the smaller boys allowing all sorts of fancies to frighten them if it is not stopped."

"That is true."

"But how is it possible for the joker, whoever he may be, to obtain access to the places where the tapping is heard?"

Mr. Railton knitted his brows in a puzzled way.

"That is a mystery at present, sir. But I have no doubt we shall discover the culprit, if we take the matter in hand seriously."

"Then that is all we can do," said the Head. "I am really very much puzzled and annoyed."

Mr. Railton quitted the Head's study. He met the

master of the Fourth in the passage, and Mr. Lathom stopped and peered at him through his glasses.

"I wanted to speak to you, Mr. Railton—"

"Certainly," said the Housemaster, stopping.

"Have you heard a mysterious sound—a curious rapping in the dead of night?" asked the little Form master impressively.

"Yes. Then you have heard it, too?"

"Unfortunately, I have heard it only once, and that was in the class-room during afternoon classes yesterday," said the Fourth Form master regretfully, "and it was so brief that I was unable to deduce anything from it."

"I—I don't quite follow."

"Of course, the cause of it is pretty evident, Mr. Railton."

"So I believe."

"It is clearly the effort of a disembodied spirit to establish communications with beings of the earth."

Mr. Railton started.

"It is—what?"

"Perhaps you are a sceptic, like Mr. Linton," said the Fourth Form master; "but to my mind it is undoubted that this is the effort of a disembodied spirit to establish communication with beings of the earth."

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"

"Did you hear the tapping last night?"

"I certainly heard the tapping last night in my study."

"Was it accompanied by an icy chill in the room?"

"No."

"A curious, creepy feeling in the bones?"

"Not at all!"

"Dear me! I suppose you are not a medium," murmured

Mr. Lathom. "Now, I am convinced that I am a medium, Mr. Railton."

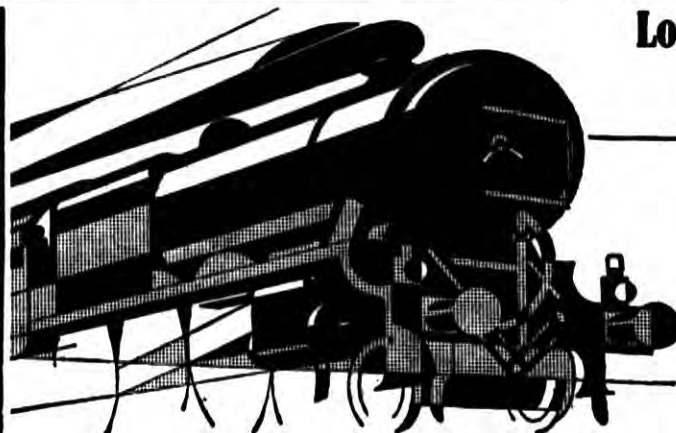
"Indeed?" said Mr. Railton dryly.

"Yes; although the manifestations I have received from the unseen world have hitherto been very meagre—very meagre indeed," said Mr. Lathom. "I am going fully to investigate this matter, and obtain as much data as possible to lay before the Disembodied Spirit Communication Society at the next meeting. I was thinking of holding a seance in my study to-night—"

"Really, Mr. Lathom—"

"And I should be very pleased if you would come."

(Continued on page 20.)



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The Ghost of St. Jim's!

(Continued from page 19.)

"I fear I shall be busy elsewhere," said Mr. Railton, and he passed on, leaving the master of the Fourth shaking his head.

Mr. Lathom was fully convinced that his spiritualistic efforts were being crowned with success at last. The other masters were equally convinced that the mysterious tapping was the work of a practical joker. The latter opinion was that of boys—during the daytime, at least.

The Upper Form fellows, many of whom had heard the spirit-rapping, attributed it to some mischievous fag, but how he contrived it they had to confess themselves unable to guess. As for the juniors, they regarded it as a jape, though when night drew on their disbelief in ghosts grew proportionately weaker. Some of them, however, had other things than ghosts to think about now.

The preparations for the Christmas celebration were going forward at a good rate.

Most of the funds were in now, and the money was placed in the hands of Fatty Wynn. The fat Fourth-Former was planning a feed which he described as simply stunning. There was, of course, an argument as to whether the feed should be held in the School House or the New House. The argument was settled by Tom Merry getting permission from Mr. Railton to use a room in the School House, which was larger than any Figgins could have secured on the other side. Size was, of course, an object, as the party was a large one.

After morning school—the room having been agreed upon—the juniors were busy with the decorations. Here, of course, Cousin Ethel was of assistance—more assistance than a dozen boys would have been.

A large supply of gaily coloured paper, having been laid in, the juniors were busy, under Miss Cleveland's directions, in making Christmas chains for the decoration of the somewhat bare walls. Others were set to work upon the holly decorations, and the room soon began to assume a Christmas-like aspect.

Afternoon school interrupted the work, but it was pretty well advanced. There was one junior who had not taken a hand in the decorations. It was Fatty Wynn. The mind of Fatty Wynn was fully occupied with the feed. All that day Fatty was going about with seraphic smiles upon his plump face.

"It will be ripping!" he confided to Arthur Augustus, as the Fourth Form went in to afternoon lessons.

"Yaas, wathah!" assented D'Arcy. "Cousin Ethel is a great hand at decorawtin' a place."

"Oh, I meant the feed!"

"Yaas, I might have guessed you meant the feed, you fearful young porpoise!" assented the swell of the School House. "I weally do not think I evah saw you at any time when you were not thinkin' about a wotten feed."

"It won't be a rotten feed!" said Wynn warmly. "It will be ripping—simply stunning! I've laid out the money carefully, and there was a good sum. I'll bet you Marmaduke will be surprised when he comes."

"Yaas, you had better awrange with Figgay and Kerr and Marmy to cawwy you back to the New House when you've finished. Or, better still, to woll you back like a bawwell."

"If it wasn't Christmas-time, I'd punch your nose!" said Fatty Wynn; and as they entered the class-room at that moment the discussion ceased.

The juniors were rather curious as to whether there would be any tapping during the lesson. But there was none.

Afternoon lessons passed off uneventfully, only Fatty Wynn receiving fifty lines for inattention in class. Fatty Wynn was thinking of the glorious Christmas spread coming off that evening, and he could not be expected to bring his mind down from such a subject to mere decimal fractions.

Mr. Lathom thought differently, hence the lines. But as the master of the Fourth seldom remembered to ask for the impositions he gave out, no harm was done.

Mr. Lathom himself was a little absent-minded that afternoon, as a matter of fact. He was thinking about the seance he intended to give in his study. In spite of the thrilling interest of a spiritualistic seance, Mr. Lathom did not find his colleagues of the School House eager to join him in establishing communication with the unseen world. In fact, they hardly concealed their opinion that it was nonsense. Mr. Lathom, of course, knew better.

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He knew that he was a medium, and that it was his own efforts that had been rewarded by the tapping in the School House. His heart beat at the thought of persuading the spirit to materialise, and show its self in bodily form to the unbelievers.

Both master and class were glad enough of the hour of dismissal. Mr. Lathom went to his study to make his preparations, and Figgins & Co. went down to the gates to wait for Marmaduke. Tom Merry & Co. hurried off to the room where Cousin Ethel was already awaiting them, and they found the girl with a letter in her hand, and a smile upon her face.

"Good news?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes," said Cousin Ethel. "Miss Fawcett is coming."

"Good!" said Tom Merry heartily.

"She says she has had your wire, Tom, and I am to tell you."

"Good!" said Tom again. "I thought she might like to come, so I wired her we were having a Christmas celebration."

"She will be here by eight o'clock, and Uncle Frank is coming with her, and Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath."

"Ripping!"

"Bwavo! I shall weally be vewy glad to see Mr. Dodds again. Do you wemembah how he played cwicket, deah boys?"

"We're not likely to forget," grinned Lowther. "By Jove, we'll all be glad to see Duddy here once more!"

"Of course, they'll come to the feed?" said Blake thoughtfully. "That means more chairs. I'll ask Railton if we can have some chairs out of the lecture hall."

Blake hurried off to ask permission. And a short time afterwards members of the School House were amazed to see a long procession of juniors proceeding from the lecture hall to Room No. 12 on the ground floor, each bearing a chair on his shoulder, or under his arm.

CHAPTER 12.

The More the Merrier!

"MARMADUKE!" Figgins & Co. shouted out the name as their old chum alighted from a taxi at the gates of St. Jim's.

Marmaduke Smythe grinned at them joyfully, and hugged Kerr round the neck with one arm, and Fatty Wynn with the other, and waltzed them round in the snow.

"Here, hold on!" gasped Fatty Wynn. "I've got some tarts in my pocket, and—"

Snow is not the easiest stuff to waltz in. It was not surprising that Marmaduke slipped, and that the three waltzers biffed into Figgins, and the four of them rolled over on the ground. Marmaduke sat up in the snow, gasping.

"My hat!" he ejaculated.

"Ow! My tarts are squashed!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"There's a fearful muck in my jacket."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we're jolly glad to see you!" said Figgins, shaking hands with Marmaduke; and dragging him up. "It's worth a few tarts, Fatty, to see Marmy's old chivvy again!"

"Yes, but—"

"Exactly! Come on, Marmy!"

Marmaduke paid the driver—a double fare, as suited the son of a millionaire—and entered the gates with Figgins and Kerr taking an arm each, and Fatty Wynn following, trying to squeeze the squashed tarts out of his pocket.

"By George! I'm glad to see you again! And I've brought a first-class appetite with me."

"Good!" said Fatty Wynn. "We're having a ripping feed to-night—soon after eight."

"Why don't you say soon after Christmas?" asked Marmaduke pleasantly.

"Oh, we'll give you a snack to go on with!" said Figgins, laughing. "Come up to the study, and we'll have tea in the old style, and then go over to the School House and help them with the decorations."

And Figgins explained what was going forward in the School House.

Figgins & Co. had tea in their study in the old style. Marmaduke had a perpetual grin of delight on his face as he sat in the old quarters.

"It's ripping to see you all again," he said. "Same old soap-dish with the jam in it. Same old black kettle. Same old Fatty, scoffing everything he can lay his hands on."

"Oh, I say!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"It's ripping! And you say Cousin Ethel's here? I

(Continued on page 23.)

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NEWS AND VIEWS FROM—



Address all letters: The Editor, The GEM, The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

HALLO, chum! This week one of my first duties—and a pleasant one it is, too—it to wish all readers of the GEM, at home and abroad, on land or at sea—yes, and those who happen to be in the air—a right, royal merry Christmas and a jolly New Year! To celebrate the festive occasion, I have enlarged this number of your favourite paper to take in the extra-long story of Tom Merry & Co., and the other Christmas "tit-bits." Yes, this week's GEM offers marvellous value, and I feel sure all readers will appreciate it. By the way, in next week's GEM you will find the first yarn in a rousing new series of "speed" stories by famous Gilbert Chester.

"LIGHTNING BRUCE BRADMAN!"

is the star turn in this quick-moving series of thrilling deeds, daring deeds, and full-blooded adventure, and I feel sure you will take to him "first time of asking." Bruce is a speedman to his finger-tips, and one of his jobs is to help a rajah put the kyboosh on a revolution. How he sets about it you will discover when you read next week's thrill-packed story.

"AMERICA BOUND!"

By Martin Clifford.

Do you like the title? Gets you guessing, what? But I won't keep you in too much suspense. Tom Merry & Co. are off to Arizona. What for? Ah, I'm leaving Martin Clifford to tell you all about that in next Wednesday's grand story of the Chums of St. Jim's! Miss your Christmas pudding, if you must miss something—but don't miss this real, first-class treat of a story, what ever you do!

HEARD THIS ONE?

Tommy: "Oh, dad—the barometer has fallen!"

Dad: "Very much?"

Tommy: "Yes, dad; about five feet—and it's broken!"

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PRESENT YOU CAN HAVE!

What's that? Why, the "Holiday Annual," of course! It's packed with school, sporting, and adventure stories—poems, pictures, colour and photogravure plates. Yes, there are tons of "St. Jim's" stories in it, too! If you haven't decided on YOUR Christmas present yet, let me make a choice for you. Make it the "Holiday Annual"—the best six-shilling Annual on the market. Any newsagent will be pleased to show you a copy. 'Nuff said!

THIS WEEK'S STRANGE STORY.

It was Christmas Day—one of those typical, old-fashioned Christmas Days—cold and snowy. But THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,296.

the snow did not frighten away all the golfers of a certain golf course. At odd intervals, four complete strangers arrived with their clubs, and in due course a foursome was in full swing. During a lull in the game, one of the players remarked that it was his birthday, whereupon the other three players jumped, and declared, practically simultaneously, that it was their birthday, too! Can you beat that—four complete strangers, and each one's birthday was December 25th!

PATIENCE, GEORGE JOHNSON!

George is a Blackpool reader. He wrote to me, asking for information concerning a book written by the celebrated John Masefield, and requested a reply in the following week's issue of the GEM. When I tell George that we have to go to press several weeks in advance, he will understand why he was disappointed when he picked up that next issue of the GEM. Still, here's the information he wants: John Masefield's publishers are Wm. Heinemann, 99, Great Russell Street, London, W.C.1. If George Johnson will write to them, he will get the particular book he is so keen about.

FIVE BOB FOR A MILLIONAIRE'S MANSION!

The auctioneer was doing his best, but the folk about him were not very keen to bid for the "lots" he had to offer. Among these was the mansion of a late millionaire, which boasted umpteen rooms, including a nursery and nursery bath-room, and stood in solemn majesty in one and a half acres of ground. "Will no one bid for this valuable property?" said the auctioneer, in effect; and a woman standing by—she had no real intention of buying the mansion—offered five shillings! Five shillings! It seemed a preposterous sum to offer, but believe it or not, nobody raised the bid. So the mansion and its one and a half acres of ground was knocked down to the good lady for the staggering price of five shillings!

GOOD-BYE SNOW!

A magic fluid has been produced by a Northumberland chemist, which can put a stop to those tricks played on us by Jack Frost. This magic fluid not only prevents the ground from freezing, but it will make the thickest "carpet" of snow look silly—melt it, in fact, in a few minutes! Kilfroast is the apt name that has been given to this chemical, and in the direction of football fields you can see at once how useful it will be. You know what the ground's like when Jack Frost has been at work—hard, and mighty uncomfortable, and not a little dangerous to fall on. By treating a

football ground with Kilfroast, the inventor claims that he can "unfreeze" it, on the day of the match, and what is more, will bargain that the turf will not freeze again for at least seven days—no matter how low is the temperature above it. This remarkable chemist claims, too, that his magic fluid will clear a thoroughfare of snow in about a quarter of an hour, and will prevent it from freezing over again for a period of three days. Kilfroast is going to be mighty useful, for it has been put to stringent tests and emerged "right side up."

HARD LUCK!

The scene was a football ground quite near a river. The two elevens had been going it hammer and tongs for some minutes, when a loose kick saw the ball fall into the river. Another ball was fetched, and the match was resumed; but, alas! this second ball went the same way as the first. Out came a third ball—the last one in stock, so to speak, and before many minutes elapsed, this, too, was booted into the river! But one of the team captains wasn't beaten. He stripped off his boots and his jersey, plunged into the icy-cold water, and retrieved the ball. Did this hero get his just reward? Did his side win the match? He did not—his team lost!

THE CENTRE-FORWARD GIRL!

She's twenty-one years of age, and her daily job is that of a shorthand typist in an architect's office. But she's mighty keen on football, so she turns out for a motor-cycling club team, and plays at centre-forward. The rest of the team are men, and, of course, the opposing team are composed of men; but that makes no difference to this girl enthusiast. She doesn't expect to be let off a vigorous shoulder-charge because she is a girl! She's used to hard knocks, she says, and doesn't expect any privileges. Up to the time of going to press, she has turned out for her side five times, but so far, she hasn't had the good fortune to score a goal.

LOST—A TICKET WORTH £15,000!

Gee! What would you feel like if you had won that amount in the Irish Hospitals Sweepstake, and then, when you went to claim your winnings, you discovered that your ticket had gone—disappeared? Such has been the experience of a girl who had travelled all the way from America to Dublin to claim her prize. But she still has hopes of "rolling in riches." The authorities have imposed a time limit of six months for any claims to be sent in. It would be rather unfortunate for the girl in question if someone else presented the ticket—and it might also be very unfortunate for the person who was bold enough to present that ticket, as the authorities are more or less satisfied that the American girl's credentials are in order. But what a blow to travel all that distance, only to bump into a big wall of disappointment at the end of the journey!

NOT FROM EGYPT!

Ted Grinstead, of Egham, wants to know why Gypsies are so called. The answer is, Ted, that they were believed to come from Egypt, and were called Gypsies, but in actual fact they came from India, on the banks of the Ganges.

YOUR EDITOR.

The Ghost of St. Jim's!

(Continued from page 20.)

wish Miss Priscilla were coming. It does me good to see your old inky chivvies again. I—"

Marmaduke broke off suddenly.

A strange sound had suddenly become audible in the study—a strange sound to Marmaduke's ear, though familiar to Figgins by this time.

Tap, tap, tap!

"My hat!" said Marmaduke. "What's that?"

Figgins & Co. smiled a sickly smile.

"The ghost of St. Jim's!"

"The—the what?"

"Either the ghost of Monk Rufus, or else some practical joker."

"It came through the wall there—from the old refectory."

"The wall's about eight feet thick."

"By George! There it is again!"

Tap, tap, tap!

The juniors fell very silent. Dark night had set in upon St. Jim's, and through the darkness the snowflakes were steadily falling. The sound was very eerie as it came faintly to their ears, muffled by the distance.

Some minutes passed, and it was not repeated. Figgins & Co. resumed their tea, but with somewhat subdued spirits.

"Blessed if I know what to make of it!" muttered Marmaduke.

And the Co. agreed with him.

They had tried to puzzle it out often enough, and they had come to the conclusion that it was beyond their powers.

Tea finished, Figgins & Co. crossed through the blinding snow to the School House.

Tom Merry & Co. had had their tea, most of them carefully taking only a light meal in view of what was to come. Marmaduke was marched in by the Co., and he received a hearty welcome from the School House juniors. They were all glad to see him.

"Miss Fawcett's coming," said Tom Merry, "and Uncle Frank, and Mr. Dodds."

"Ripping!" said Figgins. "It will be a party, and no mistake! I say, Merry—" Figgins hesitated for a moment.

"Well, go on, Figgys."

"Suppose you ask Skimpole. May as well have him in, on condition he agrees not to talk."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Right-ho! Every fellow is at liberty to bring a friend in, and I'll start with Skimmey."

And Tom Merry, having to go up to his study for more crockeryware, looked into Skimpole's room for the freak of the Shell. Skimpole was sitting at the table, his chin on his hands, in an attitude of intense reflection.

Tom Merry startled him out of his reverie with a slap on the back.

"Hallo, Skimmey! What are you doing?"

"I am putting the finishing touches to my article on Determinism for the Christmas Number of the 'Weekly,' Merry."

"But it's not going in, old chap!"

"I hope to make you see reason on that point, Merry."

"Impossible! I am absolutely incapable of seeing reason on that point."

"I do not despair. Even your sluggish intellect—"

"Eh?"

"Even your sluggish intellect may be moved by argument."

"You'll get some of your features moved, if you're not jolly careful!" said Tom Merry darkly. "But I didn't come here to argue. Would you like to come to the Christmas feed this evening?"

"Yes, I should certainly be very pleased."

"Then come about half-past eight."

"With pleasure. I will bring the articles on Determinism with me, and read it out to the assembled company—"

"If you bring any article on any 'ism,' we'll make you eat it!"

"Really, Merry—"

"Mind, you're to come muzzled—at any rate, you're not to talk. One word ending with 'ism,' and you go out on your neck, remember!"

And Tom Merry vacated the study, leaving Skimpole shaking his head solemnly. As the hero of the Shell went downstairs with crockery under his arms and clinking in his pockets, he met Mrs. Mimms, who was looking worried.

"Excuse me, Master Merry," said the House dame, "have you seen Binks?"

"Binks!" said Tom Merry. "No!"

"He can't be found," said Mrs. Mimms. "I don't know what's coming to that boy. Mrs. Binns says he's always muttering to himself like she doesn't know what when he's cleaning the knives. Sometimes he goes off to his room saying he's got a headache, and then he can't be found. Mrs. Binns has looked in his room, but he isn't there."

"I hope nothing's happened to the kid!" said Tom Merry seriously. "I believe he's a little bit off his rocker, you know. I'll ask the fellows, and if anybody's seen him, I'll come and tell you."

"Thank you, Master Merry!"

Tom Merry did ask the fellows, but no one had seen Binks. The Buttons of the School House had apparently disappeared. Most of those questioned, however, opined that he would be discovered in some corner devouring the adventures of Red-Handed Dick, or Black-Hearted Bill. Binks was soon forgotten in the hurry of preparation of the Christmas feed.

The room was looking really splendid now. With the lights gleaming on the coloured paper chains and the holly decorations, it had a very Christmasy look. The long table—formed of several tables placed end to end—was covered with a cloth of spotless whiteness, and the preparations for the feast were going forward without a hitch. The seraphic contentment of Fatty Wynn's face was almost impossible to describe.

The supplies for the feed, under the experienced management of Fatty Wynn, were large and varied. One item was lacking—a Christmas pudding. But the fat Fourth-Former had a little scheme in his mind for supplying the deficiency. More than once Fatty had repaired to the kitchen stairs with all the caution of a Boy Scout, and had returned because the coast was not clear. But his opportunity came at last. Fatty Wynn had an accurate knowledge of the supplies Mrs. Mimms was accumulating for the festive season, and he knew where to lay his hands upon them. And if Tom Merry's Christmas party lacked a Christmas pudding, it would not be Fatty Wynn's fault.

"My only Aunt Jane!" murmured Wally, as he spotted the fat Fourth-Former creeping down the stairs. "Fatty is after something."

"Grub, I expect!" grinned Jameson.

"Come on—on the track!"

And as Fatty disappeared a little crowd of juniors followed him cautiously, with suppressed chuckles. Fatty was quite unconscious of it. He was thinking of the pudding. In a couple of minutes he was in the pantry, and he paused for a moment to gaze in ecstasy at the well-filled shelves. Puddings and mince-pies, jams and preserves—a variety and quantity of good things that almost dazzled Fatty. But he realised that he had no time to waste.

The special pudding he had his eye upon was on an upper shelf. He reached for the steps, pushing out of his way a heap of holly and mistletoe prepared for the coming Christmas decorations. A crowd of grinning faces peered round the pantry door at the fat Fourth-Former. Fatty Wynn reached out for the pudding, and seized it in his greedy grasp.

There was a footstep. Wally looked round quickly and uttered an exclamation:

"Mrs. Mimms!"

Fatty Wynn heard the words, and started. But he was not in a safe position just then, and the start he gave caused the steps to jerk violently. The next moment Fatty, with the pudding in his grasp, was falling!

A loud shriek rent the silence. Fatty had plumped down heavily upon the holly, and he was hurt!

"The ghost!" yelled Wally.

"What—what are you doing here?" exclaimed Mrs. Mimms, in angry amazement.

And the juniors scattered right and left to avoid the cuffs she so liberally bestowed.

But Fatty Wynn was fairly caught.

He reposed on the holly for about the thousandth part of a second, then jumped up, still yelling.

Mrs. Mimms glared at him.

"Master Wynn! You bad boy!"

"Ow! I'm hurt!"

"Serve you right, too," said the angry dame; "trying to steal the nice pudding I was going to give Master Merry for his party!"

Fatty Wynn groaned.

"Ow! Why couldn't you say so before, then?"

Ow!"

CHAPTER 13.

Mr. Lathom on the Track!

"Oh, be off with you!" said the House dame unsympathetically. "Be off at once!"

"I'll take the pudding to Tom Merry," said Fatty.

"No, you won't, Master Wynn. It might never reach him," said the House dame emphatically. "Be off with you!"

And Fatty Wynn, wriggling all the way, beat a retreat, consoled only by the knowledge that the pudding was to grace the festive board, after all.

Arthur Augustus had been sent by Cousin Ethel in search of spoons, and he had made a collection of those useful articles, and was bringing them along from the room, when there was a sudden pattering of feet in the passage and three inky-fingered fags of the Third rushed up.

"Hallo, Gus, old cock!"

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his right eye, and stared superciliously at D'Arcy minor, Jameson, and Gibson.

"Wally, I must weally insist upon your not addressin' me in that vulgah and familiar mannah!" he said.

"Rats!" said Wally cheerfully. "What do you mean by overlooking me?"

"I fail to compwehend—"

"You're allowed to take in a friend to the Christmas feed I hear," said Wally, in an aggrieved tone, "and you've forgotten your own brother!"

"Weally, Wally—"

"Oh, of course, I know you intended to ask me," said Wally. "It's all right, I'll come!"

"I was not thinkin'—"

"And I'm going to have a wash and put on a clean collar," said Wally hurriedly. "I want to do you credit on an occasion like this, Gus."

Arthur Augustus' severe face relaxed.

"Well, undah those cires, Wally, I shall be vewy pleased to take you into the feed," he said.

"Thanks, Gus! You're an old sport. I hear that every fellow who comes is allowed to bring in a friend."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And you'll take me?"

"Yaas, on condish you have a clean face and a clean collah!"

"And as I'm coming, of course, I am at liberty to bring in a friend!"

"Of course!" said Jameson.

Arthur Augustus hesitated.

"I—I weally do not know about that, Wally. You see, I—"

"Oh, come, it's all right! I'm going to bring Jameson."

"Thanks!" said Jameson. "I'll come with pleasure. I suppose I'm at liberty to bring a friend also?"

"Of course!" said Wally.

"Weally—"

"Then I'll bring Curly."

"I shall be delighted," said Gibson.

"It's settled," said Wally. "We're all coming. Thank you very much, Gus!"

"But weally—"

"It's all right. Half-past eight, isn't it?"

"Yaas, wathah! But—"

"Right-ho! We'll be there, and you can rely upon us to be spick and span, old Gus!"

And the young rascals of the Third scuttled off.

D'Arcy carried in his consignment of spoons with a somewhat worried look.

"Young Wally is coming, Tom Mewwy," he remarked.

"Good!" said Tom Merry solemnly. "Any relation of Gustavus is, of course, welcome to an honoured seat to a festive board."

"Oh, pway don't wot, deah boy! And he's bwingin' in a fwend."

"Oh, is he?"

"Yaas, and his fwend is bwingin' a fwend, too."

"All the Third Form coming?" asked Tom Merry pleasantly.

"N-no! That's the lot. I twust—"

"Oh, that's all right! The more the merrier! Young Wally knows how to behave himself when he chooses, and he'll keep his friends in order. It's all right."

"Vewy good!" said D'Arcy, looking relieved. "You see, I—"

He stopped short. In the midst of the cheerful buzz and clatter of preparation a weird sound came echoing through the room.

Tap, tap, tap!

The voices died away at once. Cousin Ethel looked a little pale, and Figgins half-unconsciously caught her hand to reassure her.

"Bai Jove! The ghost again!"

A dead silence followed. But the sound was not repeated.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,235.

DR. HOLMES sat alone in his study. The room was very quiet, the deep silence broken only by the scratch of the Head's pen.

The reading-lamp at his elbow cast its light over the sheet as he wrote; the rest of the room was in shadow.

The Head gave a sudden start, and a blot of ink fell from his pen to the paper.

Through the silence the weird sound he had heard before came to his ears.

Tap, tap, tap!

Dr. Holmes sat bolt upright in his chair and listened.

The sound had been faint, and it was not repeated.

"Dear me!" murmured the Head. "I thought I heard that strange sound again! Perhaps it was only imagination."

He glanced round him rather uneasily into the dusk that lay thick in the corners of the room.

All was very still.

The Head turned to his work again. But his pen moved slowly now. In spite of himself, he could not dismiss the mysterious sound from his mind. Thoughts of that strange scene of the olden time were in his mind, of the blind monk tapping along the stone flags with his stick, of the savage blow from the wicked abbot's dagger that had laid him dead, of the ghostly visitations that had haunted the Abbot Wolfram to his dying day—so said the legend. In his mind's eye the Head could see it all—could again hear the ghostly tapping of the stick—and his pen ceased to move. No effort of will could concentrate his mind upon his work. He was listening in a state of nervous tension.

Tap, tap, tap!

Dr. Holmes sprang to his feet in alarm.

The mysterious tapping had commenced again.

Tap, tap, tap!

The headmaster of St. Jim's looked round the dusky room with quick, nervous glances. He was ashamed of the creepy thrill that ran through his limbs, but he could not help it—the sound was so startling, so indescribably eerie.

Tap, tap, tap!

Whence did it come?

He could not tell. He listened intently. From the wall somewhere—that much was certain. But who—how? Dr. Holmes felt himself in a maze. He listened, with beating heart, but the deep silence was unbroken.

For some minutes he remained standing, in painful uncertainty and suspense. Then he quietly left the room, and made his way to Mr. Railton's study. The Housemaster's room was dark, and he was not there. As the Head was turning away, Kildare came along the passage.

"Can you tell me where Mr. Railton is, Kildare?" asked Dr. Holmes.

"In Mr. Lathom's study, sir," said the captain of St. Jim's, with a curious expression upon his face that somewhat surprised the Head.

"Thank you, Kildare."

Dr. Holmes went to Mr. Lathom's study and tapped at the door. There was an abrupt exclamation within, and then the door opened.

"Really, I— Dear me, it is Dr. Holmes!" said little Mr. Lathom, peering out through his spectacles. "Pray come in, my dear sir!"

The Head looked into the study in amazement.

The study was in darkness, but for a faint glow from the fire. Mr. Railton was seated in an armchair, and even in the dimness signs of impatience were visible upon his face.

"Please be seated, sir."

"But—but what—" stammered the Head.

"It is a seance, sir," said Mr. Railton. "Mr. Lathom is endeavouring to trace the mystery of the tapping by spiritualistic means. I need not say that I am here as a sceptic—indeed, Mr. Lathom really dragged me in."

"I wish to convince you," said Mr. Lathom. "I should be glad to convince you also, sir."

"But, really—"

"Pray take a seat."

Dr. Holmes unwillingly seated himself. He did not want to hurt Mr. Lathom's feelings, but he regarded the whole matter as nonsense.

Mr. Lathom made them a sign to be silent.

"You see, I am a medium," he explained. "I hope that this time we shall see as well as hear. I can feel the mystic influence of the neighbourhood of a disembodied spirit."

"Dear me!"

"Do you not feel a mysterious thrill?"

"Not at all!"

"A sense of impending—of impending solemnity?"

"Not in the least!"

"Ahem! Listen! I am sure! Hark!"

Tap, tap, tap!

The Head started.

It was the same sound he had heard in his room. Mr.



The next moment, Fatty, with the pudding in his grasp, was falling! A loud shriek rent the silence. Fatty had plumped down heavily upon the holly, and he was hurt. "Ow!" "What are you doing here?" exclaimed Mrs. Mimms in angry amazement.

Railton compressed his lips. The Fourth Form master's countenance beamed with satisfaction.

"At last," he murmured—"at last!"

Tap, tap, tap!

"Spirit," said Mr. Lathom, in a deep and impressive voice. "Spirit I hear!"

"Upon my word, Mr. Lathom—"

"Oh, pray be silent! Spirit! Spirit, I'm here!"

But no more tapping came from the darkness. Mr. Lathom listened for some time, and then he switched on the electric light, looking quite disturbed.

"I am afraid the seance is spoiled," he said. "You really should not have spoken just then, sir. It is quite clear to me that your voice scared away the spirit."

"Mr. Lathom!"

"Had you not spoken, I have no doubt that a message would have been written down."

"Upon my word!"

"Surely, sir, that tapping in answer to my appeal to the unseen is a sufficient proof that there is something in the science of spiritualism?"

"I hardly think so."

"More likely a proof that there is a very daring and very impudent practical joker in the School House," said Mr. Railton, with a clouded brow.

"Oh, really, Mr. Railton—"

The Head and the Housemaster quitted the study, leaving Mr. Lathom very much disappointed with the result of the seance, and yet satisfied that communication had, indeed, been established with the unseen.

"I went to your study to speak to you, Mr. Railton, on this very subject," said the Head. "I have been disturbed by this tapping in my own study."

The School House master knitted his brow.

"It is growing intolerable!" he exclaimed. "Yet I cannot tell what should be done to discover the rascally joker. I do not know—"

A sound of voices in the Hall interrupted the Housemaster.

"Where is my darling Tommy?"

The Head smiled slightly.

"That is Miss Priscilla Fawcett's voice."

He went to welcome his guest, and the subject of the mysterious tapping was dismissed for the time.

Tom Merry had come out to greet his old governess, and Miss Priscilla clasped him to her motherly bosom before an admiring crowd of fellows.

"My darling Tommy!" she exclaimed. "How sweet of him to telegraph to his old nurse, was it not, Mr. Dodds?"

"Very!" said the curate of Huckleberry Heath.

"How the darling child has grown! Kiss your Uncle Frank, Tommy dear!"

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Francis Fawcett, in his abrupt way. "Nonsense, madam! Do you want to make a fool of the boy?"

"My dear Francis—"

"My dear Priscilla—"

Tom Merry escaped from his old governess' affectionate embrace with a very red face. His chums were all keeping serious faces, but the effort it cost them was tremendous.

CHAPTER 14.

The Secret Out—And a Jolly Party!

CLICK!

Jack Blake gave a start.

It was dusky in the Fourth Form passage and dark in Study No. 6. It was getting near the time for the feed, and Blake had run up to the study for some article that was required. As he came near the half-open door the sound of that faint "click" from within came plainly to his ears.

"By Jove!" muttered Blake.

The thought of the ghost of St. Jim's was in his mind. He remembered also what Tom Merry had told him of a mysterious sound in the study, which proved to be empty. He stepped quickly and quietly to the open door and looked in.

What he saw almost made him exclaim aloud with astonishment.

Outside, the snow was falling thickly, but there was a glimmer of starlight in at the window. The glimmer fell full upon the oak-panelled wall of the study, and it showed one of the panels that had opened like a door, disclosing a dark aperture.

Blake's heart beat hard.

He had heard the old legend of St. Jim's, which told of secret passages, in which the monks had hidden themselves or their treasures in the old days of the abbey. The passages, if they existed, were not known at the present day. As he saw the open panel in the wall of Study No. 6 he understood.

A dark form was stepping through into the study.

Blake could not make it out in the dimness, but he knew from the size that it must be a boy.

He had no doubt upon the subject now; he had discovered the ghost of St. Jim's!

The secret panel was the clue to the mystery.

The practical joker had discovered the hidden passages in the thick, old walls, and had used them to play this prolonged and daring trick upon the long-suffering inmates of the School House.

Jack Blake's face set grimly.

He stood quietly at the door, waiting. There was a glimmer of buttons as the dark form stepped into the starry gleam at the window.

Then a muttering voice broke the silence.

"Har, har, har! They little know!"

Blake gave a violent start.

"Binks!"

He uttered the name aloud in his astonishment.

The mysterious figure was just closing the panel. The click told that it was fastened. As he heard Blake's voice Binks made an effort to open it again. It came open, but at the same moment Blake's grasp closed upon him like a vice.

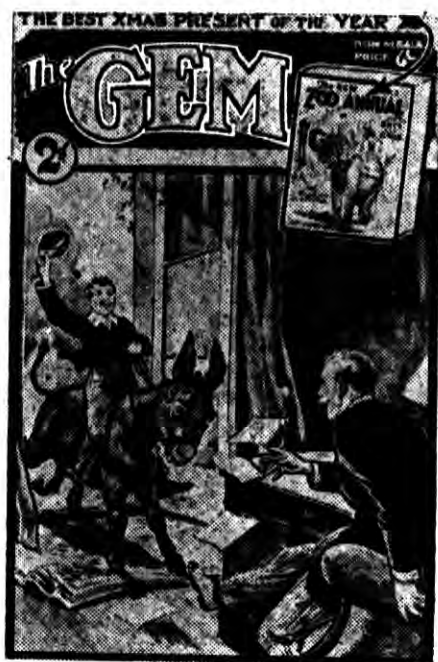
"No you don't!"

"Oh! Ow! Please——"

"AMERICA BOUND!"

By

MARTIN CLIFFORD.



Tom Merry sets out on a long and thrilling journey in next week's ripping yarn of the famous chums of St. Jim's!

DON'T MISS IT!

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The page struggled frantically for the moment. But he was an infant in the grasp of Jack Blake, and his resistance was very short.

Blake closed the door with a kick, and then flung Binks into a corner while he switched on the light.

The page was trembling violently now, and seemed on the verge of tears.

"You young rascal!" said Blake sternly. "So you are the ghost of St. Jim's!"

Binks began to whimper.

"Oh, Master Blake!"

"I've caught you!" said Blake grimly. "You'd better own up! By Jove, you ought to have a licking before you're kicked out of the school!"

"Don't—don't tell about me, Master Blake!" whimpered Binks. "I—I only did it for a joke! I—I shall get the sack!"

"Serve you jolly well right, too!"

"You—you wouldn't get me the sack at Christmas-time, Master Blake! I—I'll promise never to do it again!"

"You young ass! If you had japed us it would have been nothing; but you've been japing the masters—the Head himself! Nobody but a rotten cad would think of japing the Head! My hat! You'll look rather blue when you're up before him——"

Binks gave a howl of terror.

"Master Blake! Oh, don't tell him! I'll swear——"

"If you swear here you'll get a licking!"

"I—I mean, I'll promise——"

"I don't see how I can let you off."

"I—I'll do anything! Don't get me the sack at Christmas-time!"

Blake's expression relaxed. He was good-natured, and never angry for long. Binks certainly deserved to be "sacked," but Jack Blake did not care to be the means of his being discharged.

"Well, suppose I keep it dark," he said roughly, "then the mystery will never be explained——"

"I—I won't do it any more, Master Blake!"

"That's all very well. Look here, I'll see what can be done. You have been using the secret passages in the School House, I suppose, to carry on this tapping business?"

Binks grinned faintly.

"Yes, Master Blake."

"How did you discover them?"

"There's—there's a panel in the wall of my room at the top of the House," faltered Binks. "I found it out by accident. Then I thought it would be a lark to explore the secret passages, and I explored them with a torch. There's a staircase leading from the top of the House in the thickness of the wall. I—I never meant any harm, Master Blake. Only—I heard somebody talking about the ghost of the school, that tapped about the place when the snow was on the ground, and I thought——"

"You thought you'd pull our leg all round," said Blake. "Not a bad jape, either, if you had let the Head alone."

"I—I couldn't always tell who was in the room, you see. Sometimes I heard voices, but I could never make out the words. Sometimes I caught a chink of light through the panels. I—I thought it funny to startle 'em. I——"

"And I suppose when I caught you in here the other night you had just come in through that panel?" said Blake.

Binks grinned.

"Yes, Master Blake. There's a spring on the other side of the panel, and I found it from the other side. It's a long, spiral staircase up to my room, and coming out this way saved the long climb. Though——"

"Good! So you came out and were caught?" said Blake. He glanced at the open panel. "My hat! This may come in useful to us some time. I suppose there's a secret passage leading towards the New House?"

"Yes; in the thickness of the walls. There ain't any in the New House itself, nor yet in the new wing of the School House."

"Ah, of course! That accounts for Tom Merry never hearing the tapping in his study. Show me how to work this thing."

Binks obeyed. Blake closed and clicked shut the panel. Then he looked doubtfully at Binks, who was waiting in trembling suspense for his decision.

"I won't give you away, Binks," he said slowly. "You deserve it, but I won't. But mind, anything further in this line and I'll march you into the Head by the scruff of your neck and tell him the whole story."

"Ye-es, Master Blake."

"It wasn't wholly for a lark that you did this, either. You've got your silly head stuffed up with Red-handed Dick and Black-hearted Bill and the Ghostly Ghost of Spotted

spectre Gulch, and all that rot. You've got to give up reading that bosh."

"Ye-es, Master Blake."

"Mind, you've got to burn all that trash you've got, and never buy any more."

"Ye-es, Master Blake."

"That's agreed to," said Blake musingly. "I think I can let you off with six on each hand. You can look upon yourself as a junior and me as a prefect for a few minutes."

He picked up D'Arcy's cane out of a corner.

"Hold out your hand!"

"Ye-es, Master Blake."

Binks held out his hands in turn, and Blake gave him six on each. The Fourth-Former rather fancied himself in the role of prefect, and he laid on the cuts with pretty good force. Binks was squirming when he had finished.

"I hope that will be a lesson to you, Binks," said Blake, with a magisterial wave of the hand. "You may go."

And Binks went.

A few minutes later Jack Blake descended to the room where the feast was laid out. He met Mr. Railton in the passage.

"If you please, sir, I've discovered the chap who was playing ghost and doing that spirit-rapping, sir."

Mr. Railton started, and looked at the junior searchingly.

"Is it possible, Blake?"

"Yes, sir. I rather thought that if the secret was discovered it would be by a fellow in Study No. 6, too."

The Housemaster smiled.

"And who is the rascal, Blake?"

"If you please, sir," said the junior diffidently, "I've promised him to keep it dark. It would be like sneaking—"

"But he must be punished!"

"I've punished him, sir. I've given him a licking."

"But, really, Blake—"

"If you think I'm rotting, sir—I—I mean speaking untruthfully," said Blake, with a very red face, "you'll know it's all right, because there won't be any more spirit-rapping."

Mr. Railton dropped his hand kindly on the boy's shoulder.

"I don't doubt your word, Blake. I know you too well for that. I think you acted hastily in promising this wretched boy, whoever he is, to keep his secret. But I would be the last person in the world to recommend you to break a promise. I am only glad that the foolish fellow is now stopped."

And Mr. Railton looked relieved as he went on.

Blake stepped into the crowded room where the feast was laid, and a dozen voices greeted him.

"Where are those forks?"

"My hat!" said Blake. "I've forgotten them."

"You've been long enough to go to Sheffield for a fresh lot," said Tom Merry. "What the dickens have you been doing?"

"Yass, wathah, deah boy! What the deuce have you been doing?"

"Oh, only capturing the ghost of St. Jim's," said Blake.

"What?" yelled the juniors.

"Getting deaf?" said Blake pleasantly. "I've captured the ghost of St. Jim's."

"Rats!"

"Fact!"

"Who is it, then?" demanded Figgins.

"A silly kid."

"Name! Name!"

"I've promised him to keep it dark."

"Rats!"

"If any gentleman present doubts my word," said Blake, looking round, "I shall be pleased to step over to the gym with him and argue the matter out, with or without gloves!"

"Bai Jove, I wegard it as wathah wotten bad form to cast doubt upon the assuahwance of my wespected fwicnd Blake."

"Rats!" said Tom Merry. "Who's doubting his word? If Blake tell us it is so, honour bright—"

"Honour bright," said Blake seriously. "I'm not japing. I've thrashed the worm who was playing that little game, and there won't be any more spirit-rapping, that's all. Hallo, the guests are coming!"

They were. Wally, Jameson, and Gibson entered the room together. Arthur Augustus passed a rather anxious glance towards his younger brother, and then brightened up wonderfully.

For D'Arcy minor was keeping his word, and really looked a credit even to the swell of the School House on this

(Continued on page 32.)

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THRILLS AND ADVENTURES IN CENTRAL ASIA!

THE LOST LEGION!

By
DON ENGLISH.



Jim Nelson and Phil Harris set out on a world flying tour with their Guardian, Colonel K, and Rex Bruce, his secretary. Engine trouble brings them down in Central Asia, where, to their amazement, they find a city called "Rome the Second." The Romans go to war with the Albans, their ancient enemies, and Dolabella, a Roman rebel. The Albans capture the city, and are attempting to storm the Lake Palace, the last Roman stronghold, when the boys and Colonel K rush out in an attempt to overthrow the battering ram which the Albans are using.

AT the heels of Colonel K and the boys came a picked cohort of the Prætorian Guard, headed by the Emperor himself. Half of them were armed with the usual throwing spears, the rest carried strong poles to use as levers. All together they bore down upon the great engine, brushing aside the resistance they encountered.

It was the swiftness and unexpectedness of the whole daring manœuvre that made its success possible. It was all over before the astounded Albani could collect themselves and send reinforcements to the spot. The quartet of gunners, backed by the spearmen, held the causeway whilst their companions accomplished their purpose.

Getting their levers under the lower framework and wheels of the ram, more than a hundred Romans strained to overturn it. For a minute or two it resisted, rocking backwards and forwards as they heaved, urged on to greater efforts by their commander. But at last, heeled over beyond its centre of gravity, it hung momentarily at a dizzy angle, then went toppling down into the lake with a mighty crash, amid yells of joy from the guardhouse and a vast fountain of broken water that drenched the causeway.

The Prætorian Guard swung about, their labours completed, and made back through the archway at the double. The Albani, the first shock of surprise passed, were massing for a charge. In a few moments the causeway on this side of the guardhouse would be a very unhealthy place indeed for any Roman. The huge doors were swinging to as the last dashed through, and the colonel shouted to the boys, who had stopped to fire once more at the advancing enemy, to hurry.

They turned and ran for safety as the foremost Albani set foot on the narrow road, Jim and Camillus ahead, Phil several yards behind. And as the front pair whipped through the gate, Phil, glancing back over his shoulder, caught his toe against a stone, tripped, and fell. He scrambled to his feet and pelted on—a second too late. The gates clanged fast in his face, and he heard the massive bars drop into position. The warden, believing the other boys to be the last of the raiding party, had shut the portal.

Setting his teeth, Phil looked round at the howling mob
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of the enemy charging down on him. There was only one thing to be done if he was to avoid capture, and that was to swim for it. Then, just as he was making up his mind to take to the water, he was hailed from above, and something struck his shoulder. The crew of one of the ballistæ had seen his plight and let down a rope.

Swiftly Phil knotted it about him and gave the signal to haul. It was touch and go, for the front rank of the foe was now not half a dozen yards away. But a veritable rain of stones from aloft halted them for an instant, and in that brief space strong hands whisked the boy upwards out of reach, right from under their very noses. A few seconds later he had rejoined his friends, unhurt.

"By Jove, that was a lucky escape!" said Jim. "I—"

The rest of his sentence was lost in the sudden cry of alarm that came from the palace behind.

"The rebels! The rebels!"

They all swung about. And there, ferrying slowly across the still blue water from the far shore of the lake, were dozens of crudely built rafts, each one laden with half a score of the traitorous legionnaires who followed Dolabella. They meant to storm the high walls of the causeway behind the guardhouse, take the defenders in the rear, and throw open the road to their allies, the Albani.

"My aunt, this is going to warm things up a bit!" commented Phil.

The Return of the Albatross!

PHIL was right. Trumpets were blaring their commands, and legionnaires were pouring out of the Lake Palace in response. Archers and slingers lined the causeway to repel the attack, and showers of arrows and leaden bullets whistled down upon the rebels. Two of the ballistæ on the guardhouse were turned on them. A great stone struck one of the leading rafts and capsized it, flinging its crew into the water.

But nothing could halt their progress. The rest came on until their frail craft were bumping against the marble wall of the causeway. Then they tossed up grappling-irons and hooked scaling ladders, and swarmed to the assault. Many of them were hurled back as they reached the parapet,

crashing into their companions below, overturning the rafts and leaving them struggling in the lake.

But a few gained a precarious foothold near the gate, and helped up their comrades behind them. In an instant a fierce fight was raging across the narrow road. More and more rebels came clambering up as those already in action drove back the legionnaires. They flung themselves upon the guards at the gate, and proceeded to wipe them out of existence. Five minutes later the rebels had accomplished their purpose. The lightning attack had succeeded. The guardhouse was taken, and the causeway open to the Albani.

Fortunately, after the sally on the ram Valerius Martius had returned to the palace with the Prætorian Guard, and Colonel K and his party had followed, otherwise they must all have been trapped. Now, standing on the terrace overlooking the causeway, they watched with grim faces the triumphant Albani rushing through the half-way gate.

"The situation is desperate, O Colonnus!" said the Emperor in Latin. "We cannot hold them much longer. Another hour and it will all be over with us, unless help comes!"

And then, even as he spoke, Phil suddenly jerked up his head. Above the clash and clang of the metal, and the piercing cries of the battling men below, his keen ears had caught a faint, familiar drone. He clutched Jim's arm.

"Listen!" he yelled. "What's that?"

"By Jingo!" howled his chum a second later. "It's the Albatross!"

They headed the stampede round the terrace to the far side of the palace. There, already planing down in a long slant towards them, was the monoplane, like a huge white bird with scarlet wingtips. She landed smoothly on the blue water, and came taxiing up to the wall. The cabin door slid open, and they saw Rex's face grinning up at them.

"Hallo, everybody!" he shouted. "Glad I'm in time! Stand by to make fast the ladder. We'll bring the gun ashore."

Swiftly the rope-ladder was secured, and Rex and Llewelyn landed with the precious machine-gun. A quick handshake from the colonel for each of them, then they were all racing madly back for the causeway. The ornamental bronze doors closing the entrance to the palace were flung wide, and the gun was mounted at the head of the short flight of marble steps that led up to them.

And only just in the nick of time. The hard-pressed Romans had been beaten back right to the very foot of these stairs, where they were making a gallant stand. But a sharp command in Valerius Martius' powerful voice met with unquestioning obedience. They gave way and retreated pell-mell through the doorway, leaving the astonished Albani face to face with the machine-gun and the grim little group behind it.

For a moment the enemy hesitated, suspicious of this strange thing; then, with a yell, they charged. And at that instant Rex opened fire.

Rat-a-tat-a-tat-a-tat! The juddering gun spat death at them. The terrible hail of bullets swept the causeway from wall to wall, shearing viciously through their ranks, and dropping them by dozens in their tracks. With their fierce howls changing to wails of fear, the Albani halted. Had the gun ceased its staccato chatter for even a minute, they might have plucked up courage and come on again in a surging horde. But it mowed them down while they wavered, until at last the foremost turned in precipitate flight, smashing their way blindly through the crowds behind.

The panic spread. Line after line faced about, abruptly and stampeded for safety, until the causeway was filled with a terror-stricken mob, fleeing from the palace as from the plague. The rearguard passed under the guardhouse in a ragged stream, and only then did Rex cease fire. Two files of legionnaires went by him at the double, making for the now unguarded gate. There was a short, sharp tussle as an intrepid handful of the enemy tried to prevent them from closing it, then the portals swung to. The guardhouse was once more in Roman hands.

"Hurrah!" shouted Jim and Phil, joining arms with Camillus and executing a wild war-dance. "Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"By Jove, sir," said Rex, turning to the colonel, "it looks as though we didn't get back with many seconds to spare! But everything'll be all right now."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when a sudden uproar in the depths of the palace behind announced a new alarm. A tall young man in splendid brazen armour came racing out at the head of a small band of guards. It was Claudius, the heir to the throne of Roma Secunda.

"Valerius Martius! Colonnus! All is lost!" he cried. "Dolabella has remembered the secret passage, and his men are pouring in! We cannot hold them!"

"Great Scott!" roared Colonel K, in English, as he and the Emperor started on the run for the interior of the palace. "Come on, Rex! We shall need your gun again!"

For the second time that day an Alban surprise had followed a Roman victory. After the sally to overthrow the ram had come the assault on the causeway, and now there was this fresh peril. The secret passage connected the Lake Palace with three buildings in the city; one of them the Senate House, and through it the traitor Dolabella was sending his troops into the very heart of the royal stronghold.

Colonel K and his companions hastened to the scene. The entrance to the passage was in a little ante-chamber, and of this room and the great hall into which it opened the enemy had already taken possession. The Romans, dumbfounded by the sudden appearance of Alban soldiers in their midst, had rallied just in time to prevent them going any farther, and now fierce fighting was in progress in every doorway leading from the hall.

Rex mounted his gun in a convenient position and opened fire, sweeping the Albani back. Colonel K swung round to his wards.

"Here, you two!" he snapped. "Up on to the terrace with you, and keep an eye on the Albatross! Some of those rebels might take it into their heads to tamper with her if they see her unguarded!"

The boys needed no second telling. They were off like lightning, Camillus at their heels. They reached the rampart, to find the monoplane floating serenely as they had left her, and settled down to keep their watch, though they were itching for action. Jim stood leaning against the parapet, gazing towards the nearest hills. Little trails of blue smoke rose here and there among the rocks, showing the presence of fugitives from the city.

"Look here!" he said abruptly. "I don't believe all those fires belong to the townspeople. Some of them must be lighted by soldiers—fellows who bolted after the Albani took the wall and won that battle. They must see how hard-pressed we are; but they won't come down, because they've got no leader. If only we could go up there and collect them together, we could march down in the night, and attack the city at dawn. The Albani wouldn't be expecting it. It would be an absolute walk-over, with any luck!"

"My aunt!" breathed Phil, staring. "What a whale of an idea! How could we do it?"

"Like this," said Jim; and proceeded to go into detail. Phil translating for the benefit of Camillus. At the end of half an hour their plans were all out and dried. Camillus hailed a centurion as he passed, and ordered him to guard the Albatross, then the three of them slipped into the palace to prepare for their wild venture.

Victory!

FIFTEEN minutes later they returned, each clad in a thin, dark woollen tunic, with a belt into which their sandals were tucked. They were still munching the last mouthfuls of the hasty meal they had snatched as they bade the centurion keep a careful watch, and slid down the rope ladder to the Albatross. He was the only person to witness their departure, for they had not dared to say good-bye to anyone, knowing full well that they would have been forbidden to undertake such a dangerous mission.

They slipped from the monoplane into the water, and swam like otters for the shore, making as little noise as possible. But it was now high noon, and all those of the foe not actually engaged in fighting were taking their customary siesta, as Jim was aware. So it happened that the soldiers guarding the bank had allowed themselves to doze, and never noticed the three lithe figures that glided to land, and vanished as silently as shadows among the bushes.

It was the same with the men watching the horses. The spare mounts of the enemy officers were picketed in a hollow some fifty yards from the lake, and their half-dozen guards had decided to risk snatching a nap in the heat of the day. The first intimation they had that all was not as it should be came when their slumbers were rudely disturbed by a wild yell, and then the rumble of stampeding hoofs. They leaped up in alarm; but too late.

Riding fast out of the hollow towards the north were the daring trio, and pursuit was for the moment impossible. They had released and driven off every one of the horses. The baffled Albani could only stand and shake their fists after them. The very madness of the enterprise had ensured its success. The boys had slipped, unharmed, through the enemy lines in broad daylight.

"By Jupiter, that was well done!" chuckled Camillus, when they were well away and headed safely for the hills. "Let us hope to accomplish the rest of our purpose as easily! I must dry the standard!"

He unrolled from about his waist a square of scarlet richly fringed with gold, and spread it out before him in the sun. It was the banner about which they hoped to rally the scattered legions of Roma Secunda. Side by side, closely bunched together, they galloped bareback through the hot afternoon away from the city and its beleaguered fortress.

"Remember!" said Phil incisively in Latin, glancing round at the little group before him. "The essence of the whole thing is surprise—utter and complete!"

The sun had dipped behind the western range of hills, and dusk was beginning to fall over the valley. About a camp-fire, hidden among the rocks below the northern crags, were gathered a dozen people, whose conversation the Alban chiefs would have given much to hear.

Facing the three boys were the centurions who had

greeted them on their arrival, and whom they had picked out to aid them in their counter-attack on the enemy. Phil was just engaged in giving them final instructions.

"Warn your men to beware of loose stones and twigs, and to avoid clinking their weapons," he continued. "The sentries must not be allowed to suspect our presence and give the alarm before we are ready. We must fall upon the Albani unexpectedly from all sides, and gain a decisive victory while they are still bewildered. Now, farewell—we march in an hour. And the signal for attack will be a cockerow—thrice repeated!"

The centurions saluted and melted away like shadows into the growing dusk. The boys settled themselves to snatch a brief and well-earned rest. Their task had actually been far easier than they had dared to hope when setting out.

Four days had passed since the rout of the legions by the Albani, and during that time the shattered cohorts had been steadily massing in the hills. As Jim had surmised, only the lack of a really capable leader had prevented them from setting out before to the help of those shut up in the Lake Palace.

Now they rallied with tremendous enthusiasm to the red standard, eager to wipe out their recent defeat and avenge themselves on their ancient foes. In hundreds they crept from their hiding-place among the rocks, moving cautiously so that no keen-eyed Alban might notice anything strange afoot in the hills. And by an hour after sunset, when the night had settled down in real earnest, the boys found themselves at the head of a force of over ten thousand determined men.

In dead silence cohort after cohort swung down through the cloaking darkness on to the plain, and made their way towards Roma Secunda.

They did not march in formation, for the regular tramp of many feet might have carried in the still air and drawn attention. They advanced in twos and threes across the level in ragged lines, but by the appointed time—an hour before dawn—every man was in his allotted place beneath the walls of the city.

The Alban sentry on the rampart near the North Gate paused in his restless pacing back and forth, and stared down into the shadows, striving to penetrate the blackness that precedes the sunrise. Surely that was something moving stealthily below there? Phil and his chosen men, who were stationed at that point, sensed that he was suspicious and froze into immobility. Presently, satisfied that it was nothing but a trick of the imagination, the sentry passed on.

It was the moment Phil chose for the assault. A cockerow rang out—three times repeated. It was taken up all round the city, as though every rooster of the neighbourhood was answering the challenge.

Then, like a dark cloud, the Romans were at the walls, scrambling up hastily placed ladders, pouring over the battlements of their native town in an irresistible torrent.

The dumbfounded guards offered scarcely any resistance to the vengeful hordes, so taken aback were they by their sudden appearance out of the night. But here and there some sentry held his own for long enough to raise the alarm, and the city began to buzz like a nest of disturbed hornets.

The officers raced from their quarters in the finest houses, hurriedly donning armour as they ran to take command of their men. The common soldiers were turning out in their thousands, urged on by the shrilling trumpets that tore across the deep silence. But most of them were still half-dazed with sleep, and many were only partly armed, having dashed out without waiting to snatch up all their weapons. They rushed to and fro in disorderly bands, confused by the darkness and the tumult all about.

And the Romans were here, there, and everywhere among them, dealing death mercilessly to right and left. This surprise was their sole remaining chance of defeating their hereditary enemies and driving them out of Roma Secunda, and they gave no quarter. They were fresh, too, after their four days' rest, and the Albani, jaded with incessant fighting, were no match for them.

Headed by Phil in the full armour he had donned, the surviving cohorts of the First Legion slashed their way from the North Gate to the forum. They carved a path for themselves through the thick of the demoralised foe, sparing only those who surrendered.

The prisoners were herded in hundreds into the courts of the great houses and there disarmed; a mere handful of guards in the doorways sufficed to hold them in check.

By the time that dawn was lightening the sky, the boys, meeting with their chief officers on the steps of the Senate House in the forum, knew that they had brought off their great coup. The Albani were utterly broken, their generals either captured or killed. The daring master-stroke had proved a complete success. The city was in their hands.

"The only person we haven't got yet is Dolabella," Jim

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told Phil in English. "The rebels still hold the secret passage, and I'm willing to bet he's somewhere in that. But, with the watch we've had put on all the entrances, he's going to have a tough time trying to get out!"

Phil chuckled.

"He certainly is!" he agreed. "But come on! We must find out what the situation is at the Lake Palace. I only hope they've managed to hold the fort with the gun!"

Roused by the strange tumult in the city, every man of the guard at the causeway gatehouse was astir, thronging the narrow ramparts as they stared through the growing light at the white walls of Roma Secunda. What could have happened? they asked one another breathlessly.

Their amazement knew no bounds when the huge city gate opposite swung wide, and they saw emerge from it a familiar red standard, borne aloft by a tall signifier. Behind, mounted on hastily commandeered horses, came three equally well-known figures—the boys who had been given up for lost. After them came rank upon rank of triumphant legionnaires, singing and cheering as they marched.

"By Jupiter! They must have taken the town!" said the captain of the gate. "Quick! Open to them! They are badly needed here!"

He met the youthful trio of conquering heroes as they rode under the archway.

"Hail, lords!" he greeted them. "We all believed you dead. You come just in time—without you the palace must have fallen to-day. They are hard-pressed within; the rebels have been attacking through the secret passage all night!"

Phil and Camillus waited to hear no more. Shouting for the foremost cohorts to follow, they pelted towards the palace, with Jim, who had not understood a word, but who guessed that things were serious, at their heels.

No sentry barred their way with a challenge at the bronze entrance doors, which was a bad sign; every man was wanted at the scene of the fighting. They fairly hurled themselves across a great open court, and burst into the hall beyond like a cyclone.

Colonel K, who was standing near one of the farther doorways, swung quickly about at the sound of running feet, and his eyes widened as he saw them.

"Great Scott!" he said. "Where on earth have you been?"

Swiftly Jim told him.

"Up in the hills to fetch down the legionnaires, sir. We've taken Roma Secunda—the only thing we want now is to capture Dolabella!"

Colonel K chuckled deep in his golden beard.

"Well, he's here—with several hundred of his men," he said. "We couldn't stop them, even with the machine-gun. They hold all the centre of the palace; we're just a thin line all round, and they'd have smashed that soon if you hadn't showed up. You'd better go and turn over your command to Valerius Martius—he'll be glad to see you!"

The next half-hour was one of the most exciting of the whole siege. The rebels were firmly established in the very heart of the palace, and it was a difficult task to dislodge them.

But in the end superior numbers told. Valerius Martius himself led charge after charge against the all-important doorways which they held, and one by one they fell. The rebels were driven back slowly through chamber after chamber, till finally they were in possession of only one hall. And there Dolabella, unable to escape, turned at bay.

The Emperor himself engaged the traitor prince in combat, shouting a command to his men not to interfere. And while the rest of the rebels were being subdued, those two cut and slashed at one another, Valerius Martius pushing back his adversary bit by bit.

Out through an archway he urged him, right across a wide court, up a curved flight of marble steps, and on to the terrace which surrounded the entire palace.

Desperately Dolabella strove to beat down the other's guard, his short sword flashing to and fro like quicksilver. But the Emperor was more than a match for him. Slowly, inexorably, the renegade was forced backwards to the stone parapet, until at last he was pressed against it. And with a final, swift thrust Valerius Martius drove him over.

He hit the blue water below with a resounding splash and shriek, and did not come up. His heavy armour dragged him down. None of the scores who witnessed the scene offered to go to his help.

"Well, that's that!" said Colonel K that evening, as they sat—or, rather, reclined—at the great banquet prepared in their honour by the grateful Claudius. All their many friends were present at one or other of the tables, and the enormous torch-lit hall made an unforgettable picture.

"The war is over, the Albani are conquered for good, Dolabella is dead, and the throne is safe. It really seems to me that there's nothing left for us to do but go home!"

"What!" ejaculated Jim Nelson, sitting bolt upright on his couch. "After I've been to all this trouble to pick up a few words of Latin? It's just my luck!"

THE END.

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"THE GHOST OF ST. JIM'S!"

(Continued from page 27.)

auspicious occasion. The neatness of his Eton suit was only equalled by the cleanliness of his collar and the correctness of his tie.

Arthur Augustus gave him a brotherly thump on the back.

"Bai Jove, Wally, you look wippin'!"

"Well, don't bust my backbone," said Wally.

"Weally, Wally—"

Jameson and Gibson looked remarkably clean and neat. They had a subdued manner suitable to the great occasion. More guests were arriving now. Cousin Ethel came in with Miss Fawcett, with Mr. Dodds and Uncle Frank. Places of honour were found for them. Figgins, of course, contrived to get a seat beside Cousin Ethel, rather to the disgust of D'Arcy, who had intended to bag it himself. On Ethel's other side there was no chance for Arthur Augustus. Wally had bagged that seat.

Arthur Augustus tapped his cheerful younger brother on the shoulder.

"Pway vacate this seat," he whispered. "I am extremely desirous of sittin' heah."

"Oh, rats!" said Wally.

"Weally, Wally—"

"Moro rats!"

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And Arthur Augustus gave it up. Many expressive glances were cast at Wally, but he seemed quite unconscious of them. He looked after Cousin Ethel, and kept at least half her attention away from Figgins.

Tom Merry, of course, was next to Miss Priscilla. Perhaps he would have been glad to have Figgins' place, but he did not seem to mind. He looked after his old governess quite as devotedly as Figgins and Wally looked after Cousin Ethel.

What need to describe that feast—the toasts that were drunk, in lemonade and currant wine and ginger-pop; the speeches that were made; how Skimpole tried to read out his article on Determinism, and was jammed down in his seat by Blake and Lowther; how Miss Fawcett related a thrilling adventure of Tom Merry's childhood; how Uncle Frank grinned amiably at everybody; how Mr. Dodds kept the table in a roar; how Fatty Wynn distinguished himself by the most remarkable gastronomic exploit of his career; finally, how Manners took a flashlight photograph of the whole merry party?

Merry, indeed, they were, and it was agreed on all hands that that Christmas party was the jolliest gathering that had ever met within the ancient walls of St. Jim's.

THE END.

(Next week's yarn is the first of a grand series of stories of Tom Merry & Co., in America! Whatever you do, don't miss "AMERICA BOUND!" next week!)

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