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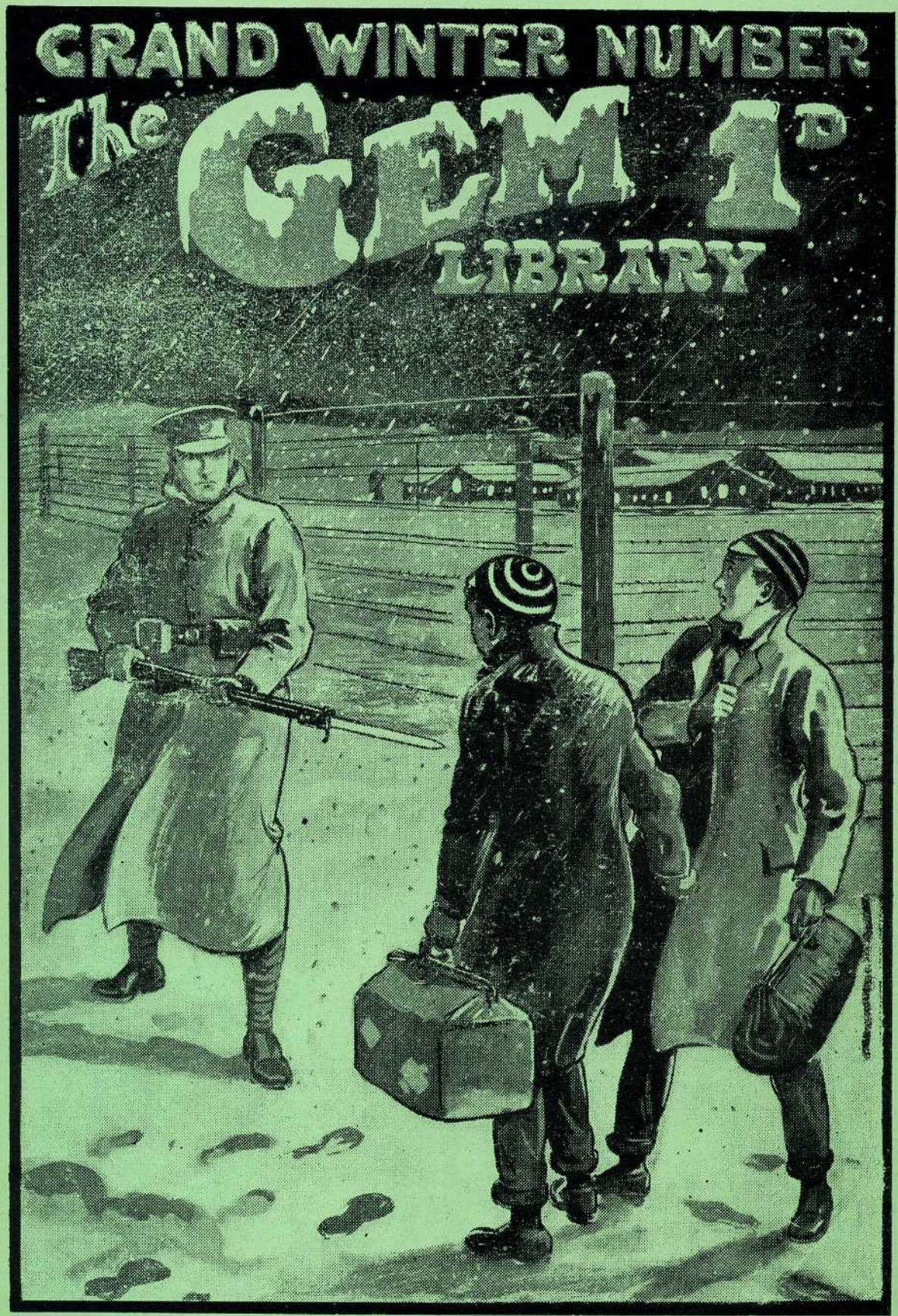

THE FAGS OF ST. JIM'S ARE CHALLENGED!

(A thrilling incident in the splendid complete school tale contained in this issue.)

No. 359. Vol. 9. December 26, 1914.

OUT ON NEW YEAR'S DAY—

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COMPLETE STORIES FOR ALL, AND EVERY STORY A GEM!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.
A Scrap in the Snow.

"GO it, School House!"

"Hooray!"

"Buck up, New House!"

"Hip-pip!"

Talbot of the Shell sighed. The merry shouts from the quadrangle came ringing to his ears as he stood at the window of his study in the School House at St. Jim's looking out.

The snow was falling in the old quad; the ground was thickly carpeted with it. The keen winter wind whirled the fleecy flakes to and fro in wild eddies. In the midst of the falling snow a battle-royal was raging—Tom Merry & Co. of the School House against Figgins & Co. of the New House.

It was the last day before the break-up for the Christmas holidays, and the old rivals of St. Jim's were indulging in a final "scrap" to wind up the term in style, with terrific energy on both sides.

Talbot of the Shell stood looking on at the scene from his study window, a cloud on his handsome face.

The handsome Shell fellow, who had made his mark in his House since he had come to St. Jim's, was generally well to the front both in work and play, and he entered keenly into the deadly warfare that raged between the juniors of the rival Houses as a rule. But now he looked on from his study window, his face clouded and his heart heavy.

On that day, when all the school rejoiced at the coming of the holidays and the merry prospect of Christmas, Talbot of the Shell had lost his usual cheerfulness.

He was thinking—thinking sadly enough—as he gazed on the merry and excited scene.

On the morrow the school was breaking up, and the fellows were departing to the four corners of the kingdom, to be greeted by kind faces, to pass their holidays amid familiar scenes of home.

But he——

Never before, since he had been at the old school, had Talbot realised his loneliness.

The hearty friendship of Tom Merry & Co. had been enough for him. But now that Christmas was at hand, Tom Merry & Co. were going home to parents, relations, or friends; and there was no home, no smiling face, to greet Talbot of the Shell.

He had no home; he had never known a home. An early boyhood passed in the excitement of lawless adventure—that was what he had known until he came to St. Jim's—and a new life had begun for the lad who had been known in the Thieves Club in Angel Alley as the "Toff." St. Jim's was all the home that had ever been known to him.

And now his chums—and he had made many chums at the old school—were going, and he was to be left alone!

On the morrow he would be lonely in the school. There would be Taggles, the porter, and Mrs. Mimms, the housedame; but the boys would be scattered far and wide, not to meet again till the New Year.

In the presence of the other fellows, Talbot knew how to keep a "stiff upper lip."

Always cheerful and good-humoured, he never allowed it to be seen that he thought with sadness of the coming Christmastide. But now, as he stood alone in the thickening dusk, his thoughts found expression in his face.

Next Wednesday:

"THE FOES OF ST. JIM'S!" AND "OFFICER AND TROOPER!"

"Go it, School House!"

"Wally wound, deah boys!" came the chirping accents of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth. "Wally wound!"

"Give 'em socks!"

The New House forces were getting the upper hand. Under showers of snowballs, Tom Merry & Co. were being driven back to the School House.

Talbot felt a dimness growing in his eyes as he looked on. He had no heart to join his comrades in that merry "scrap." He could not help thinking of the morrow, with its grim solitude, after the last brake had rolled away, the last good-bye had been said, the last friendly face had disappeared.

Not that Talbot had been lacking in invitations for the holidays. Tom Merry had urged him to come home with him, and other fellows had done the same. But Talbot had shaken his head.

The scholarship boy's pride was sensitive—too sensitive, perhaps. He shrank from accepting hospitality he could never return, and he was haunted by a fear that he was asked simply because he had no home, and his face flushed at the thought of being pitied.

His refusal had puzzled his chums, who, in their cheery thoughtlessness, could hardly enter into the workings of his mind; but Talbot always replied cheerfully that he was going to "swot" during the vac, and get himself ready for the Founder's Medal Exam—a scheme which the whole Co. agreed in characterising as "rotten."

Talbot wondered now whether he had been a little too stubborn in his pride—whether he might not have taken Tom Merry's cheery invitation in the same spirit in which it was given.

Certainly he would have liked to go with the merry party that would leave St. Jim's on the morrow; he would have liked nothing better. But, after all, his decision had been wise; he would not be a burden on his friends.

"Go for 'em!"

"One more rush, and finish the beggars!" came Figgins's ringing voice, quite close to the School House now.

"Buck up, School House!"

"Wally wound, bai Jove!"

"Pile in, you slackers!"

Talbot started. He came out of his gloomy reverie with a jump. Down there in the whirling snow his chums were getting the worst of it, and here he was "mooning" in low spirits over what could not be helped.

He pulled himself together. "Blue devils" would be all very well on the morrow. Just at present his aid was wanted by the Co. in the last tussle of the term.

"Wally wound!" shrieked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he was rolled over in the snow by a charge of the New House juniors. "Wescue! Yawooh! Ugh!"

Talbot dashed out of the study. He was quite himself again now, keen and active and alert, blue devils banished till the morrow. He slid down the banisters at top speed, and paused for a second to shout into the common-room:

"Back up! You're wanted! New House cads!"

And the fellows in the common-room, who were discussing Christmas holidays round a cosy fire, "backed up" at once at the call, and followed Talbot with a rush to the door, and out into the whirling snow in the quadrangle.

"Rescue, School House!"

Tom Merry & Co. were hard pressed. The New House army were superior in numbers, and they had driven the School House back to the porch of their House. There, round the old stone steps, Tom Merry & Co. were putting up a desperate resistance.

The sudden rush of Talbot and his followers brought a change upon the scene. Figgins & Co., coming on in a final, triumphant charge, were met by a counter-charge, and there was a wild and whirling struggle in the snow. Snowballs were forgotten, and the fight raged at close quarters. Fellows rolled over in the snow, grabbing one another, and punching one another's noses with great heartiness. The great Figgins himself was downed, and Fatty Wynn disappeared into a snowdrift up to the neck. Tom Merry & Co. rallied, and came on again, and the New House party were driven back in their turn.

Arthur Augustus jumped up, hatless, collarless, and covered with snow, but brimming over with pluck.

"Pile in, deah boys! Go for the boundahs! Hooway!"

"Back up!"

"Hooray!"

The charge of the reinforced School House army was irresistible. Back went Figgins & Co., right across the old quad to their own House, and showers and volleys of snowballs drove them into the porch for shelter.

"Forward!" roared Tom Merry. "Finish the bounders!"

"Hooway!"

And the School House juniors charged right into the porch, and Figgins & Co. went tumbling headlong into the house; and snowballs followed them in, and squashed on the walls and the stairs, till Reddy slammed the door. Then the victors in the last fight of the term gave three tremendous cheers, to inform everybody whom it might concern that the School House was Cock-house at St. Jim's, and trooped back across the dusky quad in triumph.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus, as he scraped snow out of his neck. "We vewy neahly got licked that time, deah boys. Aftah I was down, with some beast sittin' on my neck, you fellows hadn't much chance. If it hadn't been for old Talbot, the New House would have wound up the term with a win!"

"Good old Talbot!" said Tom Merry, slapping his chum affectionately on the shoulder. "Always the right man in the right place!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"And the silly ass," said Monty Lowther, "thinks we're going to leave him here to-morrow—what?"

Talbot smiled.

"That's all right," he said cheerily. "Let's go in and have tea!"

And the victorious heroes of the School House went in to have tea, without arguing that matter any further with Talbot; but they had their own ideas on the subject.

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CHAPTER 2.

The Last Feed of the Term.

STUDY No. 6 presented a very festive appearance that evening.

Blake and Herries and Digby and D'Arcy, the owners of that famous apartment, were giving a final feed to wind up the term, and the accommodation of Study No. 6 was hardly equal to the strain.

The chums who were going to separate on the morrow forgathered in Study No. 6 for the feed, and they came in great force. The Terrible Three, of course, were there—and Talbot and Kangaroo and Glyn and Dane, and Lumley-Lumley and Reilly and Hammond and Figgins & Co. from the New House—quite cheery and cordial in spite of their defeat in the great snow-fight. Redfern & Co., too, had come over from the New House, Skimpole came in, and Gore and Levison of the Fourth, all on good terms for once.

Monty Lowther had humorously chalked on the door "STANDING ROOM ONLY!" but it really looked as if it was a little doubtful whether there would be standing room. The inside of Study No. 6 was beginning to resemble the inside of a sardine tin, from the closeness of the packing. But good humour reigned supreme. Arthur Augustus did not even "grouse" when his beautiful boots were trodden upon. The study door was left wide open, and the fellows who could not find room inside "camped" in the passage. Good things were handed to and fro, and there were incessant calls from the fellows outside:

"Pass the cake!"

"Don't scoff all the tarts, Fatty!"

"This way with the pie!"

Other fellows whose names weren't on the list of guests, coming along and finding that festive scene in progress, generously joined the party of their own accord, and very soon in the Fourth Form passage there was a "block in the traffic."

Arthur Augustus did the honours of the study with as much grace as the crowded state of the apartment would allow. The swell of St. Jim's was in his element when he was entertaining guests. Blake and Herries and Dig cheerfully left their elegant chum to do the honours. They devoted their attention to the more solid satisfaction of securing a "whack" in the feed.

There was a merry buzz of voices in the study, most of the fellows talking at once.

"Talbot, deah boy, can I pass you the tarts?"

"Yes, thanks! Good old Gussy!"

"Lowthah, can I pass you——"

"You can't!" grinned Monty Lowther. "I'm wedged in. No passage."

"You misappwehend me, deah boy. Can I pass you the cake?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now you're talking," said Lowther affably. "This way with the cake."

"Let's see those tarts," came a voice from the passage.

"Sure and I haven't got my coffee yet, Gussy."

"Sowwy, Weilly, deah boy; it's all weady! Do you mind if I pass this coffee ovah your head, Lowthah?"

"That I jolly well do!" roared Monty Lowther. "Pass it over Blake's head, please. You are pretty sure to spill it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, that's all wight!" said Arthur Augustus, holding

out the saucer with the cup resting on it. "Can you weach it, Weilly?"

"Faith, and I think so," said Reilly, stretching his arm across Figgins and Kerr and Redfern, who were in the way. "Yes, I've got it! No, I haven't, don't let go—tare and ouns."

The warning came too late. D'Arcy had let go.

There was a fiendish yell from Blake as a cup of hot coffee descended upon his knees. He jumped up as if he had received an electric shock.

"Yaroooh! Oh, you ass! Gr-r-r-r-r!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Wow-wow! Oh, you ass——"

"Weally, Blake——"

"Take it calmly!" grinned Tom Merry. "All in the day's work."

"Yow-ow! I'm scalded!" roared Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of all the blithering idiots——"

"I wefuse to be called a blithewin' idiot, Blake!"

"Ow, ow, ow!" jerked out Blake, mopping the coffee off his trousers with his handkerchief. "Ow, ow! What are you silly idiots cackling at? Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wait a moment, Weilly, and I will pass you anothah cup!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Look out, Blake."

"If you pass any more cups over me there will be a dead idiot lying about here the next minute!" hooted Blake.

"Hand it this way," said Talbot, laughing. And he succeeded in navigating the cup of coffee to the Irish junior without an accident.

There was a sudden roar from the passage.

"Here, keep off! No room to pass! Buzz off, you fags!"

"Rats!" came a reply in the well-known tones of Wally of the Third. "I want to see my major."

"Bai Jove, that's my minah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I'm afwaid there's no woom for you to come in, Wally. Pway sit down out thah!"

"Rats! I want to speak to you, ass!"

"Weally, Wally——"

"Oh, I'll make room to pass!" said Wally. "Come on, Joe!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" said Joe Frayne.

There was another roar in the passage, and a sound of crashing crockery, as the two fags of the Third shoved a way through. They arrived in the doorway of Study No. 6 breathless—D'Arcy minor and Joe Frayne of the Third. Wally D'Arcy was looking wrathful, but Frayne was grinning. Frayne gave Talbot a cheery nod, which the Shell fellow replied to with a smile—the Toff had known the waif of the Third in the old days, when little Joe was a waif of the slums, before Tom Merry had befriended him and brought him to St. Jim's.

Wally and Frayne looked into the study, but certainly there was no possibility of getting further. It was crowded in the passage, but in the study it was crammed. Arthur Augustus jammed his famous monocle into his eye, and regarded his minor severely.

"Weally, Wally, you young wascal——"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gus!" said Wally in an imploring tone.

"Pway wemain where you are. You are vewy welcome to the feed, you young boundah, but you must tweat your eldahs with pwopah wespect."

"Oh, rats!" said Wally. "Look here, I didn't come here for a feed, though I'll chip in, as there's one going. You can pass the ham sandwiches. Pile in, Joe!"

"What-ho, Master Wally!" chuckled Frayne.

"Now, look here, Gussy——"

"Pway don't bothah now, Wally!"

"Can't be put off," said D'Arcy minor. "We're breaking up to-morrow. Now, as the house is closed up, and our people are abroad, the pater has arranged for us to spend Christmas with Aunt Adelina, and I told you from the start that I jolly well wasn't going to do anything of the sort. You can go to Aunt Adelina if you like."

"You are quite awah, Wally, that Tom Mewwy has kindly invited me to accompany him to Hucklebewwy Heath," said Arthur Augustus. "Undah those circs, I have excused myself to Aunt Adelina. With you it is diffewent. You are too young to be twusted awound without the eye of an eldah on you."

"Bow-wow!" said Wally disrespectfully. "I tell you I'm not having any! Haven't I fixed it up, dogs' ages ago, for Joe to spend Christmas with me; and do you think I'm going to take him to Aunt Adelina's to play beggar-your-neighbour with a set of little girls!"

"You are a diswespectful young wascal, Wally. Aunt Adelina's little nieces are a vewy nice lot of little gals, and little gals of seven and eight are vewy nice companions for little boys."

"Why, you—you—you!" gasped Wally. "Whom are you calling a little boy, you fathead? I tell you I'm not going to Aunt Adelina's. I wrote to her and told her so, and I've just had an answer that I must go because the pater arranged it before he went abroad. Now I want you to write."

"Weally, Wally——"

"As you're my major, aunty will take some notice of you," said Wally, with a sniff. "You can tell her I'm not coming. I've decided to come with you to Huckleberry Heath."

"You cheekay young wascal!"

"Have you, by Jove!" exclaimed Tom Merry, laughing.

"Yes, I have," said Wally; "and Joe's coming too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Glad to have you, my son," said Tom. "But you must get leave from your aunt, or else I shall have to deny myself the pleasure."

"You can wire to Miss Fawcett that I'm coming with you, if you like," said Wally, unheeding.

"I wefuse to allow Tom Mewwy to do anythin' of the sort!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "You are to go to Aunt Adelina's, Wally. It will do you good to mix in the impwovin' society of little gals."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not going!" roared Wally. "And if you don't write and catch the post, I'll punch your head, Gussy."

"I cannot thwash you in the cwowded state of the studay, Wally!"

"Oh, you couldn't, anyway!" said Wally. "Pass me those tarts, Figgins. Thanks! Now, Gussy, are you going to write that letter, or am I going to pelt you with jam-tarts? You can take your choice."

Arthur Augustus simply glared at his minor, while the other fellows roared with laughter. With so many guests wedged into the study, it was impossible for the swell of St. Jim's to get at the redoubtable Wally, while his elegant form presiding at the table offered an easy target for the scamp of the Third. Wally raised a fat and juicy tart aloft.

"Now, Gussy, yes or no?"

"You young wottah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yes or no?" roared Wally truculently.

"No, you cheekay little wascal—— Oh cwumbs!"

Whiz! squash!

Arthur Augustus strove to dodge the tart, with the result that he caught it with his ear instead of his nose. There was a horrid squash, and the swell of St. Jim's gave a wild yell.

"Oh cwumbs! My yah is all jammay! Oh deah!"

The second tart caught Arthur Augustus under the chin, amid fresh yells of laughter.

"Yes or no?" shouted Wally.

"Gweat Scott! I am stickay all ovah! Pway chuck that young wuffian out, deah boys! Oh, cwumbs! Hurl the young wottah out of the studay!"

"All hands on deck!" roared Kangaroo.

"Leggo!" howled Wally. "Hands off! Back up, Joe! Yaroooh! Oh, my only Aunt Jane!"

Many hands made light work! The two fags were hurled forth, and the crowd in the passage received them like a pair of battering-rams. There fresh hands were laid upon them, and they were "passed" down the passage like balls in a Rugger game. By the time they reached the end of the passage they were jammy, sticky, untidy, rumpled, and completely out of breath. And a shower of missiles, chiefly fragments of tarts and bits of pie and halves of oranges, followed them in a regular fusillade, and the two heroes of the Third were glad to beat a retreat down the staircase.

In Study No. 6 the great celebration went on without any further interruption from Wally of the Third.

CHAPTER 3.

D'Arcy's Dodge.

"LETTER for Master Merry!"

Master Merry took the letter from Toby, the page. The Terrible Three had returned to their study after the celebration in No. 6. It was not usual for the juniors

to get a letter so late in the evening, but it was an extra post due to Christmas-time. Tom Merry glanced at the letter carelessly.

"Tip for Christmas?" asked Monty Lowther.

"It's from my old governess," said Tom Merry, recognising the precise handwriting of Miss Priscilla Fawcett on the envelope, and he opened the letter.

Lowther and Manners grinned. The letter probably contained some valuable advice to Tom Merry about keeping flannel next to the skin, and not getting his feet wet, and about the importance of taking regular doses of Dr. Spoffin's Terracotta Tabloids for Tiny Tummies. But Tom, as he read through the letter, became very grave.

"What's the news?" murmured Monty Lowther. "Something new in the medicine line? What is it this time? Pink Pillules for Pathetic Pifflers?"

"Oh, rats!" said Tom.

"Or Patent Plasters for Seedy Schoolboys?"

"Blessed if I quite understand it," said Tom Merry. "I'm jolly glad I'm going home to-morrow, anyway! I don't quite like this. Some silly ass has been frightening Miss Fawcett."

Monty Lowther looked serious at once. Miss Priscilla Fawcett had many curious little ways; but she was a dear old soul, and the chums of the Shell all liked and respected her very much.

"Read it," said Tom. "You needn't read all of it; that part——"

"'I hope you are taking care of your dear little chest——'" read out Monty Lowther.

Tom Merry turned red.

"Not that part, fathead! Further on!"

"'If you should get your feet wet, remember that a hot-water bottle——'"

"Silly ass, further on! Begin there!"

"Oh!" said Lowther; and he read:

"'There have been some strange happenings here, which have alarmed me a little, and I shall be very glad to have my dear boy at home. You remember the old priory close to Laurel Villa, which the countryfolk believe is haunted? On several nights strange sounds have been heard there, and dark figures have been seen. It is very alarming. I myself saw a strange form in the priory last night when I was returning from the village at a late hour, and it startled me very much. I had been with Mr. Dodds to visit the prisoners' camp near Huckleberry Heath, where the German prisoners are interned, to take the poor fellows some little comforts for Christmas. It was quite late when I came home, and if Mr. Dodds had not been with me I should have been very frightened at seeing that strange figure lurking in the darkness. Mr. Dodds ran into the priory to see who it was, but it had vanished. Of course, I do not believe in ghosts, but it was very unnerving. I shall be glad to have my dear boy with me through these dark days. Of course, Tommy darling, you may bring your friend Talbot; I am always glad to see all your friends. You must be very careful on the journey down to wrap up your dear little neck——'"

"That's enough!" said Tom, jerking away the letter. "The rest wouldn't interest you, fathead! Now, I wonder what that means——"

"It means that you're to put a muffler on——"

"Fathead!" roared Tom Merry. "I mean, about the haunted priory. You remember going over the place when we were down there in the summer; we picnicked there with Doddy, the curate, and Cousin Ethel. Some silly josser must be playing tricks; and if any thumping ass has been frightening my old governess I'll—I'll give him such a thundering hiding——"

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther heartily. "We'll look for him and have him out, and make a giddy example of him. It will be a lark."

"So there's German prisoners stacked up near your place now, Tommy?" asked Manners. "We can have a look at them—what?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, there's a concentration camp on Huckleberry Heath; plenty of room there, you know. Miss Fawcett takes them things—winter clothes and things, and she's been supplying them with puddings for Christmas. Seems to me they get a better time in our concentration camps than they get in the firing-line. Of course, the poor chaps ought to be treated well; they can't help their potty Kaiser going to war."

"I'll take my camera," said Manners thoughtfully. "Worth keeping, some snaps of the giddy Germans. What are you wrinkling your noble brow about?"

Tom Merry frowned.

"I'm thinking of that fathead—whoever he is—playing tricks and scaring Miss Fawcett," he said, clenching his hand "I wish I had him within hitting distance!"

"Well, you will to-morrow," said Lowther comfortingly. "What about Talbot? The silly ass says he's not coming!"

"Oh, he's got to come!" said Tom.

"He's talking about swotting for the Founders' Medal through the vac," said Manners.

"Oh, rot!"

"I'm afraid Talbot's a bit touchy," said Lowther, with a shake of the head. "He feels it, having no people of his own, and he's afraid of being a burden on his friends. As if we didn't want him—the duffer! Only he's jolly obstinate!"

"He's got to come, though!"

There was a tap at the door, and Arthur Augustus's eyeglass gleamed in.

"I want to speak to you chaps about to-mowwow," said Arthur Augustus. "I pwesume it is settled that Talbot is comin', whethah he likes it or not?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Then there will be six of us," said Arthur Augustus thoughtfully. "You thwee and Blake and myself and Talbot. Hewwies and Dig are goin' by twain to Hewwies' place, so they won't be in the cah."

"The car?" said the Terrible Three together.

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Yaas. You see, my patah's abwoad; but his cah isn't, and I have contwived to awwange for it to be sent heah to-mowwow to take us away, instead of goin' by twain. I twust you fellows have no objection?"

"Not at all!" said Tom Merry, laughing.

"It's a wathah big cah, you know, and will take the baggage all wight," said D'Arcy, "and there is plentay of woom for six. You see, I thought of the cah when I was turnin' it ovah in my mind how to persuade Talbot to come."

"I don't suppose it will make much difference to Talbot, going by car or by train," said Tom Merry, puzzled.

The swell of St. Jim's smiled the smile of superior knowledge.

"That's where you make a little mistake, deah boy. You can wely on a fellow of tact and judgment to see to these little mattahs."

"What rot!" said Tom. "A ride in a motor-car won't make Talbot come if he's determined not to come."

"Yaas, it will, deah boy."

"How?" demanded the Terrible Three.

Arthur Augustus chuckled.

"That's where my scheme comes in, deah boys. Old Talbot will come out into the woad to see us off——"

"Well?"

"And I have awwanged with Hewwies and Dig and Kangawooh to see us off befoah they go to catch their twain——"

"Well?"

"And they are goin' to pitch Talbot neck and cwop into the cah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"My hat!"

"And then we shall be off with a wush, and we sha'n't stop till we get to Hucklebewwy Heath."

"Great Scott!"

"What do you think of that for a wheeze, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I considah it wathah nobbay myself. I have wequested Kangawooh to pack Talbot's things and send them aftah him by twain."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard it as a wippin' dodge. But as we are goin' to your place, Tom Mewwy, I felt bound to consult you in the mattah. Of course you appwove?"

"Of course," said Tom Merry, laughing. "It's a ripping scheme. Once in the car and going at top speed, Talbot can argue as much as he likes."

"Yaas, there will be no objection to that," agreed D'Arcy. "We'll give him his head, deah boys, so fah as that is concerned; but we won't let him get out of the cah at any pwice. I am wathah pleased with that dodge. I was thinkin' it ovah, you know, and it flashed into my bwain."

"Hear hear!"

"Not a word to Talbot, of course," said Arthur Augustus mysteriously.

"Not a giddy syllable."

And Arthur Augustus retired very pleased with himself and his "dodge." The Terrible Three were pleased with it, too. It was really the simplest way out of the difficulty.

CHAPTER 4.
Willy-Nilly.

THE morning dawned on St. Jim's.

It was a bright, keen December morning. The snow had ceased to fall, but the old school was gleaming with white from the quad to the summit of the old tower. St. Jim's fellows turned out in great spirits.

Talbot looked as cheerful as the rest.

If his heart was heavy, he knew how to keep a stiff upper lip. There was a cherry smile on his face when he came down, and he had a pleasant word for everybody. After the fellows had gone, there would come a difference; but then they would not see it.

The drive had been cleared of snow, and in the fresh morning a big, handsome car came whirring up to the School House. It was Lord Eastwood's car, with Lord Eastwood's chauffeur in attendance, and it was to take Tom Merry & Co. all the way to Laurel Villa, at Huckleberry Heath. A crowd of fellows gathered round to see them off.

The bags were placed in the car, and good-byes and good wishes were said. Then a sudden thought seemed to strike Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Wobinson!"

"Yes, sir!" said the chauffeur.

"Pway, wun the cah down to the gates, and wait in the woad."

"Yes, sir!"

The car glided away down the drive.

"You fellows can come down to the gates, and see us off," said Arthur Augustus, as he put on his beautiful coat, and gave his silk hat a final brush before he put it on. "Pway don't run away, Talbot. I specially want to have you see us off."

"I mean to," said Talbot, with a smile.

"You fellows wemembah what I told you," said D'Arcy, with a very significant look at Herries and Dig and Kangaroo.

"Shush, ass!" murmured Blake.

"Weally, Blake——"

"Come on," said Tom Merry briskly.

Arthur Augustus was so excessively cautious that there was danger of Talbot learning the little "dodge" that was planned for his benefit.

"Yaas. Did you put that extwa coat in the cah, Blake?"

"Yes, fathead!"

"That extwa coat will be required, you know. Good-bye, Wally. I twust that you and Fwayne will have a weally good time at Aunt Adelina's. Pway give my kindest wegards to all our little cousins."

D'Arcy minor bestowed a ferocious glare on his major.

"I'm not going to Aunt Adelina's, fathead!"

"Weally, Wally——"

"If Tom Merry wasn't a fathead and a rank outsider, he would ask me to come down to Laurel Villa," said Wally morosely "Not that I want to fish for an invitation."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear kid," said Tom Merry kindly, "I'd be jolly glad to have you, you know that, and Frayne too. But if you're to go to your Aunt Adelina, you must go, you know."

"Rats!" said Wally.

"Think how nice it will be for the little girls, Wally," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "You will be able to play kiss-in-the-ring——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Wally wrathfully. "I think Gussy is playing it low down on me. Cousin Ethel's coming to Laurel Villa, too. If I ask her, very likely she will go to Aunt Adelina's instead of me—she's a good sort"

"Wats!" said his major emphatically.

"You—you'll remember me to Cousin Ethel, won't you," murmured Figgins of the Fourth, and—and if you want a little run in the vac., 'tain't very far to Bristol, you know, and Kerr and Wynn will be there with me, you know——"

"Thank you vewy much, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "We might wun ovah one day, while Ethel is goin' wound lookin' aftah the poor people in the village with Miss Fawcett."

"Ahem!" stuttered Figgins. "I—I mean Cousin Ethel might like to run over too, you know. Bristol is a splendid place, you know, and—and I know Cousin Ethel would like to see the suspension bridge, and—and——"

"Weally, Figgins, I don't know that my cousin is specially intewested in suspension bwidges," said Arthur Augustus, beginning to suspect Figgins of ulterior motives. "Good-bye, deah boys; merry Christmas!"

Quite a little army of fellows marched down to the gates to see Tom Merry & Co. off. The car was waiting in the road. Five juniors took their places in the big car, then Robinson started the engine.

"Well, good-bye!" said Talbot cheerfully, shaking hands all round with the five juniors. "Best of times—— Hallo! What the dickens——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot suddenly found himself seized from behind by Kangaroo and Herries and Digby. He was whirled off his feet, and pitched bodily into the car.

He pitched down among the feet of the juniors there, and Blake promptly planted a knee in his back, keeping him down.

"Let her wip, Wobinson!" shouted Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I say," stuttered Talbot. "Lemme gerrup! What the deuce——"

Robinson let her "rip."

The big car buzzed away down the road, gathering speed, amid a cheer and a shout of laughter from the group of juniors at the school gates.

Blake kindly removed his knee from Talbot's back. The Shell fellow staggered up in the car.

He was amazed and bewildered.

"You duffers!" he exclaimed. "Is this a practical joke? Stop the car, Gussy!"

"Wats!" said Gussy serenely.

Talbot looked worried.

"You want me to come a little way with you?" he asked. "Don't take me too far to walk back, there's a good chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you think you can walk back from Huckleberry Heath?" asked Monty Lowther, in a thoughtful sort of way.

"No, ass! It's more than fifty miles, isn't it?"

"A good bit more," grinned Tom Merry.

"Stop the car, Gussy, old man."

"Bow-wow!"

"Now, look here! What's the little game?" demanded Talbot warmly.

"Here's your coat, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Pway get into it, or you will feel the dwaught, you know."

He helped the bewildered junior on with his coat.

"Now sit down," said Tom Merry, dragging Talbot into a seat beside him.

Talbot looked round at the grinning, good-humoured faces.

"What's the little game?" he exclaimed. "Don't take me too far; I've got to get back to the school, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Going to swot through the vac.—what?" chuckled Manners.

"Yes."

"I don't think!"

"But—but——"

"Here we are at Wayland already," said Tom Merry, as they passed through the old market-town. "This is quicker than trains—what?"

"Yes, wathah."

"I can get a train back from here," said Talbot uneasily.

"Not unless we stop the cah, deah boy."

"Where's your first stop, then?"

"Lauwel Villah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now look here——" began Talbot.

"No good, old chap," said Tom Merry; "you're coming. Can't be helped now. Take it calmly. You're booked for the vacation."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot frowned for a moment, and then his handsome face broke into a smile. He understood the deep design of his affectionate chums.

"But—but, I say——" he muttered.

"No escape," said Monty Lowther. "Did you think we were going to leave you behind, you ass? You've got to come!"

"We'll try and give you a good time at Laurel Villa," said Tom Merry. "As good as grinding at St. Jim's, anyway."

"But——"

"But me no buts, you're coming; and you don't go back to school until we go," said Tom. "You're in for it now, Talbot, and you may as well make up your mind to it."

"Yaas, wathah! I utterly wefuse to stop the cah!" grinned Arthur Augustus.

Talbot laughed.

"You duffers," he said, but there was quiver in his voice—"you duffers! What am I going to do for my things?"

"That's all wight; Noble is sendin' them aftah you. I've awwanged all that."

"You bounder! Then you had all this fixed up!" exclaimed Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah. I wegard it as wathah deep, myself."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Made up your mind yet, Talbot?" asked Tom Merry, laughing

"Yes," said Talbot, laughing, too. "It—it's awfully decent of you. I shall be glad to come. But——"

"No more buts! Hurrah!"

The car sped on through the gleaming countryside. Mile after mile raced under the rapid wheels. There was a buzz of merry voices in the car, and Talbot's voice was as merry as the rest His face was bright, his eyes shining. He had been carried off lawlessly, but he was glad of it. Those long,

lonely days at the school, while the other fellows were away—he would not experience that now. The cloud had been chased from his brow, and his heart was light. For the "Toff," as for the rest of the Co., there was to be a merry Christmas.

CHAPTER 5.
Home for Christmas.

"HALLO! There's the camp!"

The car had entered upon the long road crossing the expanse of Huckleberry Heath.

The sight of a khaki-clad figure by the roadside, with a rifle on his shoulder, made the juniors jump up in the car.

They waved their caps to Tommy Atkins, who smiled and saluted in return.

In the distance, across the heath, they could see the camp of the German prisoners of war.

A group of buildings, surrounded by a fence of barbed wire, with sentries on guard. Beyond the barbed wire they could see a crowd of Germans. In one spot they were playing football, and in other places they were talking in groups, chatting and smoking, apparently very contented with their lot. Probably they found the camp a very pleasant change after the shell-swept battlefields of Belgium, where their compatriots were driven in swarms to hopeless destruction by a semi-insane monarch. The juniors gazed at them with keen interest, Arthur Augustus telling "Wobinson" to slow down.

Commonplace-looking enough were the swarms of prisoners, in all sorts of attire. It was difficult to realise that these were the men who had carried fire and sword through unhappy Belgium, who had written upon one of the fairest lands of Europe the record of Prussian barbarity in blood and ashes.

There were sightseers on the heath, looking curiously at the Teutonic prisoners.

"Look pretty satisfied, as far as I can see," grunted Monty Lowther, as the car glided on, and the juniors resumed their seats. "Hanging's too good for some of them. But I suppose it's up to us to treat them well."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Always must play the game, deah boy. Besides, these poor beasts can't help it; they don't live in a fwee countwy like us. I dare say quite a numbah of them would be vewy glad to go back to shavin' and hairdwessin' and waitin' at table if it was not for their widiculous Kaisah!"

"Hallo! Stop!" exclaimed Tom Merry, as he caught sight of two figures coming away from the concentration camp towards the road. "There's Miss Fawcett."

"And Mr. Dodds," said Blake.

"Stop, Wobinson!"

The car whirred to a halt, just as Miss Priscilla Fawcett and the curate of Huckleberry Heath reached the road. Tom Merry jumped out, and ran to his old governess.

Miss Priscilla's kind old face lighted up at the sight of the junior. To Miss Priscilla, Tom Merry was always the dear little boy she had cared for from his earliest years; the sturdy Shell fellow was always "dear little Tommy" in her affectionate eyes.

"Tommy darling!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla, embracing the captain of the Shell, and kissing him on both cheeks. "My dearest little boy! I did not expect you till the afternoon train. I hope you have been careful to keep your neck well wrapped up in the car."

"Ye-e-es," said Tom, laughing and colouring. "How do you do, Mr. Dodds? You know all these chaps, excepting Talbot. This is Talbot of the Shell—one of the best!"

Miss Priscilla shook hands with Talbot of the Shell, and the curate of Huckleberry Heath followed her example. The handsome, frank face made a good impression upon both of them.

"Jump into the cah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I will sit beside the dwivah, deah boys; there's plenty of woom. Are you goin' home now, Miss Pwiscillah?"

"Yes, Arthur. Had you not better turn up the collar of your coat, Tommy——"

"Jump in, Mr. Dodds! You can dwive on, Wobinson!"

Miss Priscilla and Mr. Dodds sat down in the car. Tom Merry arranged a rug about his old governess. The car rushed on towards the village.

"You had my letter, Tommy dear?" murmured Miss Priscilla.

"Yes; it came last night," said Tom.

"And you have done all that I told you—you remember your chest is not at all strong——"

Tom Merry laughed. His chest was as sound as a bell.

"And I told you in my letter about your feet——"

"You told me about a giddy ghost at the priory," said Tom Merry, looking daggers at Monty Lowther and Manners, who were smiling. "What's all that, Mr. Dodds? Is it some silly duffer playing ghost there?"

Mr. Dodds looked grave.

"I do not know," he replied. "That is probably the explanation. There is a story in the neighbourhood that the place is haunted, and at Christmas-time the ghost is supposed to appear in the dark hours; but, of course, that is all nonsense. Certainly, a dark figure has been seen gliding among the ruins, and it had vanished when it had been searched for in a very mysterious manner. It will probably turn out to be some foolish fellow with a turn for practical joking."

The chums of St. Jim's exchanged glances. It occurred to them that a ghost-hunt would add a little liveliness to their Christmas holiday.

"We'll jolly well look for the bounder!" said Blake.

"What-ho!" said Tom.

Miss Priscilla looked anxious.

"My darling Tommy, I cannot allow you to go into danger!" she exclaimed.

Tom Merry laughed.

"Where's the danger?" he asked.

"It might be some rough person," said Miss Priscilla, with a shake of the head. "He might hit you hard——"

"I should jolly well hit him hard if he did!" grinned Tom Merry.

"Besides, there are all sorts of pitfalls in the old priory," said Miss Priscilla, in distress. "You might fall and hurt your poor little limbs, Tommy."

"That's all wight, Miss Pwiscillah; I will look aftah him!"

"Besides, too, it is very cold and windy there," said the old lady. "You might catch a cold, Tommy. You know, your dear little chest——"

Monty Lowther turned a giggle into a cough just in time. Miss Priscilla gave him a look of anxious kindness.

"Have you a cold, dear Montague?"

"Nunno!" stammered Lowther.

"You coughed a little, Montague. You must take some cough mixture before you go to bed to-night—some of Professor Pickler's Patent Potion for Little Lungs!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Lowther.

"Now, don't think anything more of going over that dreadful old priory, my dears," said Miss Priscilla. "You will make me very anxious. You shall go over it in the summer, when there is no snow, and I will come with you and see that you come to no harm. I am sure that will be very nice!"

"Is that the place, deah madam?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as the car passed a grey old building standing back from the road, lonely on the snowy heath.

"That is it," said Miss Priscilla.

The juniors looked at the priory as they passed in the car. It was a deserted old place, half in ruins. Most of the roof was gone, and the massive old walls were thick with ivy, now almost buried under snow. Round the old building the snow lay in a white mantle, thick and untrodden. Very different the old priory looked from its aspect in the summer, when the Terrible Three had picnicked there.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with a start. "There's somebody there now!"

"Where, Gussy?"

"I saw somebody—or somethin'—at that window. It's gone now," said the swell of St. Jim's. "Stop, Wobinson!"

The car halted.

"Let's go and have a look in the place, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus. "Miss Pwiscillah can watch us fwom the cah and see that we don't bweak our necks. Mr. Dodds will come with us, madam."

Miss Priscilla assented.

The curate of Huckleberry Heath and the juniors jumped down from the car, and marched towards the old priory. Their boots left deep prints in the soft, fresh snow. A spacious doorway, from which the door was gone, gave admittance to the old building. Within, it was shadowy, even in the daytime. Where the roof was gone snow had fallen into the interior, and lay thickly on the old flags. But where it was sheltered the flags showed moss-covered with age.

"Creepy old place," said Tom Merry, with a shiver. "Blessed if I should like to play ghost here of a night!"

"Wathah not!"

"Where's the giddy individual you saw, Gussy?" grinned Blake. "There doesn't seem to be any sign of him."

Arthur Augustus looked puzzled.

"I'm suah I saw somethin' or somebody at the window!" he exclaimed. "It looked like a shadow, but I am suah——"

The swell of St. Jim's looked round in bewilderment.

"There seems to be nobody here now," remarked Talbot. He was scanning the recesses of the old priory keenly. "And where there's snow, it hasn't been trodden on."

"Now for the vaults," said Talbot. Tom Merry guided them to the entrance of the vaults. The lanterns were lighted, and, gripping their cudgels, the juniors descended into the dark, damp regions below the old priory. *(See Chapter 12.)*

"No, bai Jove! Pewwaps I was mistaken."

"Quite a new thing for you, Gussy," said Monty Lowther solemnly. "I suggest getting back to the car. It's cold."

The explorers returned to the car, Arthur Augustus still looking very perplexed; and they glided on to the village. Mr. Dodds was dropped at his house, and the car glided on to Laurel Villa.

Laurel Villa was in a state of festive preparation.

It was a rambling old house, with wide grounds, and the river flowed past the garden.

Now the stream flowed under a thick surface of ice, which delighted the eyes of the juniors as they saw it. From the gardens the priory on the heath could be seen in the distance, and the frozen river wound its way on past the old walls of the ruin.

Outside, Laurel Villa gleamed with snow, and the leafless trees groaned and creaked in the gardens, but within all was bright and cosy and festive. Holly and mistletoe hung in the dusky, oak-panelled hall, where a big fire was blazing—logs piled and fizzing and hissing on the wide, ancient hearth. Talbot looked round him, and he felt a lump rise in his throat at that first sight of Tom Merry's old home.

"Jolly good to be home again!" said Tom Merry, warming his hands at the logs. "And we'll get some skating after lunch. Hallo, Hannah!" Miss Priscilla's faithful old servitor came along with a smile on her wrinkled face, and Tom Merry cheerfully kissed her under the mistletoe, for which Hannah boxed his ears. "Don't forget Gussy, Hannah; he's standing under the mistletoe on purpose!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Cheer-ho, Talbot, old son!" Tom Merry gave his chum a slap on the shoulder. "Not tired, surely?"

"Tired? No!" said Talbot, with a smile.

"Then what are you mooning about? Not beginning to wish you were back at St. Jim's, swotting for the Founder's Medal? You can swot here if you like. We'll stack up school books in your room, and come and watch you work——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Talbot laughed.

"I don't want to swot. I was just thinking what a jolly old place this is, Tom, and what a dear your old governess is, and what a lucky bargee you are generally! And you deserve it all, too!"

"Hear, hear!" said Tom Merry.

But he understood what was in his chum's mind. That quiet old home, that cheery fireside, to which Tom was so accustomed, was new and strangely moving to the wayward lad, whose young life had been marked by such strange vicissitudes. In the old house at Huckleberry Heath Talbot of the Shell first learned the true meaning of the word home.

CHAPTER 6.
Wally Has His Way.

WALLY snorted.

Wally was furious.

Wally was feeling greatly inclined to punch somebody's head. He came very near punching that of his loyal and affectionate chum Joe Frayne, for want of somebody else's.

Wally felt that he had cause to be indignant.

The car had rolled away with the merry party for Huckleberry Heath, and D'Arcy minor came back into the quadrangle of St. Jim's, Joe Frayne trotting along by his side with sympathetic looks.

Frayne would have been quite pleased to go to Aunt Adelina's. He would have been pleased to go anywhere that Wally went. So long as he was with his pal he was satisfied.

Was it not Wally who had always stood by him and been his chum when in his first days at St. Jim's he had needed a helping hand very sorely? There were snobbish fellows who had been "down" on little Joe because he had been found in a slum and Tom Merry's uncle was paying his fees at the school.

But Wally, who was the minor of the majestic Gussy and the son of a noble lord—Wally had thought him "good enough," and had chummed with him and stood his friend. And little Joe would have let himself be cut to pieces for Wally quite cheerfully. Now he was greatly concerned about his pal. Wally's indignant and discontented brow worried him.

"It's rotten!" growled Wally, solacing himself a little by catching Taggles, the porter, with a snowball as he went back into the quad. "It's beastly! Hallo, Taggy! Merry Christmas, old chap!"

Taggles picked up his hat, which the snowball had displaced, and glared.

"Young raskil!" he growled.

"Rotten!" repeated Wally discontentedly. "Are we going to stand it, Joe?"

"P'r'aps 'twon't be so bad at your aunt's, Master Wally!" ventured Frayne.

"If you call me Master Wally again, I'll punch your silly head!" growled Wally. "I tell you I'm not going to stand this, and you're not going to stand it either! Aunty is a good old sort, but she treats a fellow like a kid!"

Joe Frayne perhaps thought that it was not surprising that a lady of sixty years should treat a fag of the Third Form like a "kid," but he discreetly refrained from expressing his opinion on that point.

"Besides," continued Wally, "she'll make us walk out like good little boys with the little girls in pinafores. Besides that, I'm jolly well going to Tom Merry's place. They will have a good time there!"

"But if your aunt——"

"I'll send her a wire," said Wally moodily.

"But Master Tom said——"

"Blow Master Tom!" snorted Wally. "He ought to be glad to have us, oughtn't he?"

"He said he would be, Wally, but, unless your aunt agrees, he can't," said Frayne, with a shake of the head.

"Exactly; and we're going," said Wally. "I tell you I'm not going to stand it. And you're not going to stand it either, Joe. I'm really thinking of you chiefly!"

"Oh, don't mind me, Master Wally!"

"But I do mind you!" snapped Wally. "It's jolly unreasonable of my people to be abroad at Christmas-time! It's all the fault of those disgusting Prussians! My pater and mater are looking after the wounded in France, you know. Of course, that's all right, and I wouldn't grumble, only—only—I'm jolly well going down to Huckleberry Heath! If Tom Merry won't have me, I know what to do. Are you game?"

"Game?" repeated Frayne.

"Yes. Are you ready for a lark?"

"Anythin' you like, Master Wally," said Joe loyally.

"That's agreed, then," said Wally. "We're going. We'll pack our bags, and mind you pack in all the things we use when we're scouting and camping out!"

Frayne looked astonished.

"Camping out!" he repeated. "We ain't goin' to camp out, are we?"

"You leave that to me," said Wally. "We can take our time, and catch the afternoon train. We don't want to arrive at Huckleberry Heath before dark."

"My 'at!"

Wally had evidently made up his mind. When the scamp of the Third was obstinate, he could be very obstinate indeed.

"Hallo! Not gone yet?" asked Kangaroo, meeting the two fags as they came in. "We're just off. Merry Christmas!"

Kangaroo, otherwise Noble of the Shell, and Clifton Dane, the Canadian, were going home with Glyn, whose place was near St. Jim's. They started off together in high spirits. Wally and Joe watched the other fellows off.

Figgins & Co. of the New House were going together, and Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence in another party. Reilly and Lumley-Lumley of the Fourth were going to the Isle of Man with Kerruish, the Manx junior. Cutts of the Fifth and St. Leger went off in great style in a whacking big motor-car belonging to Cutts's people. Kildare of the Sixth was going to Ireland, and taking Darrel with him.

Wally frowned as he watched the crowd disappear. Few of the fellows were going by the afternoon train. Jameson and Curly Gibson of the Third came to say good-bye to the two fags.

"Looking down in the mouth—what?" said Jameson. "When are you starting for your aunt's, Wally?"

Wally grunted.

"Never! I'm going off on my own!"

"My only hat!" said Jameson. "You'll get into a row!"

"Bow-wow!" said Wally.

When their friends were gone, Wally and Joe proceeded with their packing. Joe Frayne packed the articles specified by Wally, without understanding in the least what they were wanted for.

He was feeling a little uneasy, in point of fact, but his trust in Wally was unbounded. Where Wally went, he would go. The last brake for the station bore them away from St. Jim's.

They changed trains at Wayland, and occupied a couple of hours in the refreshment-room, waiting for a train to Huckleberry Heath. When it came they embarked on it. The two fags had a carriage to themselves, and they proceeded to lighten the long journey by the consumption of a huge quantity of tarts and toffee, laid in for the purpose. Joe Frayne forbore to ask questions, but he could not help feeling a little worried.

Wally had sent a wire from the station to his aunt, explaining that he was going to Huckleberry Heath; so he had now burnt his boats behind him, so to speak.

"We get out at the next station," said Wally at last. "You can carry your bag if I carry mine—eh?"

"Wotto!" said Joe. "Is it 'Uckleberry 'Eath?"

"No; that's a station later. We're getting out at the station before that."

"We're not goin' to Laurel Villa, then?" asked Joe, considerably relieved, for he had been feeling very doubtful of the welcome there, under the peculiar circumstances.

"Of course we're not!" growled Wally. "If Tom Merry won't have us, he can go and eat coke! But I said I was going to Huckleberry Heath, and I'm going—see?"

"But—but where?"

"We're going to camp out."

"My heye! In the snow?"

"No, fathead. There's an old place within a stone's-throw almost of Laurel Villa—well, a bit further off than that. It's an old priory, and supposed to be haunted——"

"'Aunted!" repeated Joe, a little uneasily.

Darkness was falling, and a haunted priory after dark was not the same thing as a haunted priory in the daytime.

"Oh, we sha'n't find any ghosts!" grunted Wally. "It's a ripping old place; I've been over it lots of times. We're going to camp there."

"Oh lor'!"

"It will be a tremendous lark!" urged Wally. "A regular old labyrinth of a place, full of secret passages and things. It's more than a thousand years old, you know. They built part of it in the reign of Harold—that chap who got it in the neck at the Battle of Hastings, you know. Jolly old place in the summer."

"B-b-but in December!" murmured Joe.

"Well, I've packed this big bag full of grub, and we've got a stove and all the things we want for camping out," said Wally. "We can chop down a tree for fuel, you know, and

make a fire. We know how to make fireplaces of stones, don't we? It will be no end of a lark."

"Oh, Master Wally!"

"Didn't I swear a solemn swear that I would go to Huckleberry Heath for Christmas?" demanded Wally.

"Yes; but——"

"And do you think I can break my word, as if I were a rotten Prussian Kaiser?"

"Oh, no! But——"

"Well, then!" said Wally. "Besides, won't it be a lark? If you're funky——"

"I ain't funky, Master Wally," said Joe reproachfully. "But—but it's rather—rather—— Well, it's rather——"

"Here we are," said Wally, as the train slackened down. "Snow's falling again, blow it! Get hold of your bag. Out you go!"

Frayne jumped out, and Wally followed. A bitter wind swept through the open country station, and it bore flakes of fresh-falling snow. The two fags tramped out of the station, carrying their bags, and out into the falling snow. Wally, who knew the way well, led his chum out of the village, upon the road over the moor.

"My 'at! It's dark!" said Frayne.

"I've got a lamp for the camp in the priory," said Wally; "an electric-lamp—I collared it out of Glyn's study."

"It's cold!"

"Do you expect it to be sultry at the end of December?"

"Nunno!"

"Then don't jaw," said Wally, turning up the collar of his coat. "Come on; we've a mile to go yet! Blow the wind! Blow the snow! Blow Gussy! Blow Tom Merry! Blow everybody!"

And with that comprehensive anathema, Wally tramped off across the snowy heath, and Joe Frayne followed.

CHAPTER 7.
Camping Out.

"HALT!"

"My hat!"

"Oh lor!"

The glimmer of a levelled rifle brought the two juniors to a sudden halt on the dark road over the moor. A figure in a heavy coat loomed up behind the rifle. Wally and Joe Frayne halted instantly. There was something exceedingly businesslike about that levelled rifle and the sharp voice that commanded them to halt.

"My only Aunt Jane!" said Wally. "It must be some blessed Territorial having a lark. Hold my bag while I punch his head."

"Who goes?"

"Nobody goes at present," growled Wally; "we're stopping. Who are you, and what are you playing the giddy ox for with that gun?"

A light gleamed out, and showed a khaki-clad figure. It was a British Tommy, and evidently a sentry.

"Advance!" he rapped out.

"My 'at, it's a soljer!" said Frayne.

"How do you do, Tommy?" said Wally.

The man in khaki laughed.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Walking," said Wally cheerfully. "What are you doing here, old man—that's more to the point? I suppose the Germans haven't dropped in, by any chance?"

"Can't you see I'm a sentry?"

"Yes, I can see that," said Wally, puzzled. "Are you on guard to see that the Kaiser doesn't come in a Zeppelin and carry off the village church?"

"Don't you know it's a concentration camp here?" said the soldier, who was, fortunately, a good-humoured individual. "You can pass on."

"A concentration camp, by hookey!" said Frayne, looking curiously at the glimmering lights from the compound across the heath. "You've got the Germans there?"

"Two thousand of 'em," said the soldier.

"My 'at! Do they ever get away?"

"Not while I'm doing sentry-go," said the sentry cheerfully. The light went out. "You can get on."

The trooper resumed his pacing of the road, and the two juniors tramped on.

"Blessed if I knew they were keeping Germans here," said Wally; "two thousand of the bounders! My hat! Out of a lot like that I should think one or two would get away sometimes. Shouldn't like that chap's job, tramping round in the snow. Fancy having two thousand Germans for neighbours through Christmas! I—— Hallo!"

"Halt!"

"My only Aunt Jane! It's another sentry!"

"'Alt it is, old man," said Joe Frayne.

The sentry peered at them, and allowed them to pass. Then they were beyond the vicinity of the concentration camp. The lights of the village of Hucklebury Heath gleamed in the distance; but while the lights were still distant, Wally turned from the road.

"This way, Joe," said Wally.

"Wot's this 'ere, Master Wally?"

"The priory's here."

"I don't see it," said Joe, peering through the gloom.

"Well, you're not a blessed cat, are you, to be able to see in the dark?" growled Wally. "Keep behind me. I know the way, though the blessed path is covered up. Look here, Joe, if you're funky, we'll go on to the village, and stay in the inn."

Perhaps at that moment Wally was not wholly unconcerned about his chum. The darkness and loneliness of the heath had had an effect upon his own spirits. But Joe Frayne replied cheerfully:

"I ain't funky, Master Wally. I'll go where you go."

"Sure you don't mind, Joe?"

"Not a bit, Master Wally."

"You're game—what?"

"Game as a blessed bantam!" said Joe.

"Then, come on!" said Wally.

They tramped on in the darkness, the fast-falling snow covering up their footsteps behind them. A black mass loomed up ahead—it was the ruined priory. A chill wind blew the snowflakes in at the shattered windows.

"Looks rather cheery, doesn't it?" grunted Wally. "They say that the old prior was murdered here—I forget when—hundreds of years ago, one Christmas-time; and his ghost comes back every Christmas, Joe."

"Ow!" said Joe.

"Not scared, are you?"

"N-n-no."

"Anyway, there's two of us; and we shall be two to one if the ghost shows up," said Wally, more cheerfully than he felt, as a matter of fact. "Hallo! Was that the wind?"

The two fags halted in the shattered, old doorway, and were peering in. There was a sound in the darkness of the ruins.

Joe's teeth chattered.

"I—I think it was the wind, Master Wally. There can't be anybody 'ere."

"Anybody there?" shouted Wally

His voice rang with a thousand eerie echoes among the silent old ruins.

There came no reply but the echoes of his own voice and the wail of the wind.

"It's all right," said Wally; "even a tramp wouldn't stay here on a night like this. We've got the place to ourselves. It'll be all right when I get a light."

"G-g-get a light as soon as you can," stammered Joe.

Wally put down his bag, and felt in his pocket for Glyn's electric-lamp. He found it, and turned the light on. Bright white light streamed across the darkness of the ruins. It showed up the desolate loneliness of the place, the masses of snow that had fallen in where the roof was gone, and the moss-covered flags in the more sheltered spots. It was not a cheering spectacle.

"M-m-my 'at!" said Joe. "Are we goin' to camp 'ere, Master Wally?"

"No, ass; our fire would be seen here! There's one of the cells that's quite sheltered. I know the place like a book. Come on!"

Joe Frayne followed his leader, and they penetrated further into the ruins. Wally led the way undauntedly. His own high spirits were affected by the solitude and the loneliness; but he would not have admitted it for worlds. Perhaps just then he realised that it was a wild scheme to think of passing the days camped in that weird place; but he did not feel inclined to admit it even to himself.

"Here we are!" said Wally.

They stopped in an apartment which had escaped the ravaging effects of time. The thick stone walls were intact, and the roof unbroken. There was a huge window, but it was blocked up with masses of ivy centuries old, which effectually screened it from the wind. The doorway through which they had entered was bare of a door; but it looked into the interior of the ruins, and was thus sheltered. The floor, of massive flagstones, was covered with moss.

"This'll be quite cosy when we get a fire going," said Wally, "and we've got rugs and coats and things. We shall be all right."

"Right as rain!" said Frayne loyally.

"If you'd rather go off to the village inn, Joe——" said Wally, hesitating

"I wouldn't, Master Wally; that's all right."

"Then we'll get the bags unpacked," said Wally. "To-

morrow we can have a good time. The river will be frozen, and we can slide, as we haven't brought our skates. We can go and have a look at the Germans in the compound, too."

"We may meet Master Tom," said Joe.

"Of course we shall," said Wally coolly. "And I fancy my major will insist upon our coming to Laurel Villa. Twig?"

Joe grinned.

"But if they don't, Master Wally——"

"Then we stay here," said D'Arcy minor firmly. "Now, don't jaw; get out the grub."

The bags were unpacked, and the rugs and coats unrolled. They gathered big stones from the ruins to build a fireplace. Wally turned out of his bag a number of fire-lighters, several bundles of wood, and a newspaper full of coal cobbles. Joe Frayne regarded him admiringly.

"You think of heverything, Master Wally!"

"This'll start the fire rippingly," said D'Arcy minor. "But we shall have to have some wood to keep it up. There are lots of trees growing among these old ruins, and we can chop some branches off. It'll be wet, but it will dry by the fire in time to burn. See? There's a bike-lantern in the bag. Take it and the chopper, and go and get some wood, while I get the fire going."

"Right-ho!"

Armed with the lantern and the chopper, Joe Frayne sallied forth into the ruins, while Wally built a fire in the improvised fireplace and lighted it. The bright blaze threw a cheering light round the old refectory. Wally piled on sticks and chunks of coal with a skilful hand. From the ruins outside the refectory there came a sudden gasping cry and a rush of footsteps.

"Joe!"

Joe Frayne came speeding back into the refectory, panting for breath, his face white and terrified.

CHAPTER 8.

Uncanny Quarters.

"JOE! What's the matter?"

Joe gasped.

"There—there was——"

Wally caught up the frying-pan, which he had taken from his bag. He fixed his eyes on the doorway, ready for an enemy to appear. But silence and stillness reigned in the ruins.

He gave his chum a severe look.

"What's the matter with you, Joe, you ass? Have you been seeing any blessed ghosts?" he snapped.

Frayne panted.

"There—there was something! I—I heard it! It moved! A sort of dark figure, and then it whisked out of sight!"

Wally snorted.

"The ivy moving in the wind," he said.

"It—it wasn't that——"

"Then what was it?" demanded Wally.

"I—I dunno! I——"

"We've got to have some wood," said Wally; "that coal won't last two hours, and we've got to have a fire all night, or we shall be frozen. What have you done with your lantern?"

"I—I dropped it——"

"Fathead! I'll bring the electric lamp, and we'll go together. Give me the chopper."

"D-d-don't go, Master Wally! I—I swear there was——"

"Rats! Come on!"

Chopper in hand, Wally valiantly marched out of the refectory, flashing the light of the electric lamp before him. Joe Frayne followed him, shivering. In the old ruins the snowflakes trailed in on the wind, and the heavy masses of ivy swayed and creaked. But there was no sign of a living being.

The lantern lay on the ground, extinguished.

"Light that, ass!" said Wally.

Frayne lighted the lantern and cast the light about him, peering fearfully into the moving shadows. Among the old masses of masonry several trees had taken root, and Wally stopped before a young sapling wedged in among the shattered stonework.

"Hold the light while I chop," he said.

Joe Frayne took the electric lamp in his free hand.

"Orl right, Master Wally. But I tell you I saw——"

"Oh, rats!"

Wally started work with the chopper. The axe was sharp, and Wally's right arm was strong, and the slender trunk was hewn through at last. The sapling swayed down to their feet.

"We'll yank this in, and cut it up as we want it," said Wally. "Lend a hand."

They dragged the sapling, with its leafless, dripping branches, through the ruins into the refectory. The glow of the fire there cheered them up. Both of them set to work on the sapling with the chopper and a small saw, which the thoughtful Wally had provided, and it was soon cut up into chunks for fuel. There was ample to last the whole night, and they stacked the shapeless chunks of wood round the fire to dry. They were soon sizzling and sending off a cloud of vapour.

Joe Frayne had recovered from his shock now, though he still cast uneasy glances towards the door at intervals. He wondered whether it was a moving shadow that he had seen.

"Now for supper!" said Wally. "My only aunt, there goes twelve o'clock!"

The chimes could be heard through the frozen air from the distant village.

"Midnight!" said Wally. "What is it Shakespeare says about midnight? 'Tis now the very witching time of night when churchyards yawn——' And I feel rather like yawning myself," added Wally humorously. "Cut up the bacon."

Wally greased the frying-pan and planted it on the fire. Rashers of bacon were soon sizzling there, filling the old refectory with a smell that was grateful and comforting. Wally carefully extracted a box of eggs from his bag, and proceeded to poach them. Joe Frayne cut bread-and-butter and set out the plates, and boiled water on the spirit-stove and made the cocoa.

With the light of the lamp and the lantern, the cheery glow of the fire, and the smell of cooking, the old refectory was growing quite cosy and comfortable, and the young rascals felt their spirits rise. Wally decided that the camping-out for Christmas wasn't such a bad wheeze, after all. Anyway, it was better than going to bed at half-past eight at Aunt Adelina's.

The cooking completed, the chums of the Third sat down to the feed.

They were very hungry, and they did full justice to the supper, which was ample in quantity and well-cooked. Wally prided himself on his cooking.

"This is something like!" said D'Arcy minor, as he started on his fourth rasher. "This is better than Laurel Villa, if you ask me, young Frayne!"

"'Ear, 'ear!" said Joe.

"We'll pile up the fire, and sleep as comfy as anything. It's better than the dorm at St. Jim's!" said Wally.

"Wotto!" agreed Frayne. "I've camped out wuss than this, Master Wally, afore Master Tom took me away from Angel Alley. Many's the time when I 'adn't fire nor food in weather as cold as this."

"Horrid!" said Wally. "Thank goodness that's all over now! And you knew old Talbot in those days, Joe?"

Frayne nodded.

"Yes. And a kind-'earted young gent he was," he said. "Orfen give me a 'elping 'and. They called 'im the Toff—and a real toff he was. They was a swell lot, too, that used to meet at the club in Angel Alley," said Joe reminiscently. "There was Captain Crow—that was the Toff's father, 'im that was afterwards killed—and the Toff 'imself, and the Professor—reg'ler wonder the Professor was, could write anybody's 'and, and sometimes his daughter came there—Miss Marie." Joe's face clouded. "She was good to the poor folks, too—werry good. And goodness knows wot's become of 'er now! They called it the Thieves' Club, in Angel Alley. 'Ave another rasher, Master Wally?"

"Shove it this way. Seems to me it was a jolly good thing for you that Tom Merry fished you out of that," said Wally. "Hallo! What's that?"

The two juniors spun round towards the door. A sound had come from the ruins—an indefinable sound. For some moments their hearts throbbed.

"Only the snow," said Wally at last. "When it's piled up, you know, it—it tumbles down in the long run."

Frayne nodded without speaking.

They finished their supper in silence. It was long past midnight, and, in spite of their determination to be cheerful, the solitude was weighing on them, and the story of the spectre prior came unbidden into their minds. The wind, wailing among the old ruins, made strange and ghostly sounds, and the old ivy rustled and creaked.

Wally rose from the chunk of stone upon which he was seated.

"What about sleep?" he said.

"I—I—I ain't sleepy," murmured Frayne.

"Why, your eyes are jolly nearly shutting up!" said D'Arcy minor.

"I—I won't go to sleep, though——"

"I say, this is a lark, isn't it?" said Wally, with apparent enthusiasm. "What would Gussy say if he knew—eh?"

"Ye-e-es, it's an awful lark, Master Wally," said Frayne, with his eyes on the big, dark doorway.

"Stop blinking at that door; you give me the creeps!" said Wally.

"Ye-e-es!"

The fire was dying down. Wally heaped logs upon it, and the damp wood fizzled. The firelight died down at once, and the corners of the old refectory grew shadowy. Both the fags were very sleepy, but somehow they did not feel inclined to slumber in that weird and eerie place.

They wrapped themselves in the coats and rugs close to the fire.

"We'll leave the lights on," murmured Wally. "Hallo! That blessed lamp is going!" The electric lamp extinguished as he spoke. "And I haven't any refills! Never mind, the bike lantern is light enough, isn't it?"

"Ye-e-es."

"My only Aunt Jane!" Wally started suddenly to his feet. "What's that?"

It was a distinct sound this time; there was no mistaking it. It was the sound of someone outside the ruins, stumbling in the dark over one of the scattered masses of masonry.

"Somebody's comin'!" breathed Joe.

Wally clenched his hands.

Then, through the stillness of the night, came the sound of a voice they knew well:

"Bai Jove! Ow, ow!"

Wally jumped.

"Gussy!" he gasped.

"They've found out we're here, Master Wally——"

"They haven't—they can't have——" Wally reached for the bike-lamp, and put it out instantly. "They can't have seen the light yet." He piled logs and ashes on the fire. "The silly asses are coming here for a lark, Joe. We'll give 'em larks!" Wally grinned in the darkness. "I know their little game; they've heard about the place being haunted, and they're going to look for the ghost. That's the idea. We'll give 'em ghosts!"

And Joe Frayne chuckled softly, and murmured "'Ear, 'ear!"

CHAPTER 9.
The Haunted Priory.

TOM MERRY & CO. had passed a merry evening at Laurel Villa.

Miss Priscilla, delighted at having her "darling Tommy" with her again, was all smiles and happiness. She had arranged all sorts of celebrations for the Christmas holidays. On the morrow Cousin Ethel was to arrive, and with her Marjorie Hazeldene, her friend from Cliff House School. There was to be skating, sleighing, dancing, charades, and amateur theatricals—all sorts and conditions of merrymaking.

The first evening at Laurel Villa passed happily and quickly, and Tom Merry & Co. refrained from discussing their scheme of exploring the haunted priory, for the mere mention of it would have distressed their kind hostess. That was to be discussed later. For the chums of St. Jim's had quite made up their minds about it.

At a much later hour than usual the juniors went up to bed. Three double-bedded and communicating rooms formed their quarters, and there was a big fire burning in each room, and a hot-water bottle in every bed. Miss Priscilla's kindness and care knew no limits. The party gathered in Tom Merry's room for a final "jaw" before going to bed.

"Now, what about the giddy ghost at the priory?" said Blake. "Who says a ghost-hunt?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus.

"What do you say, Talbot?"

Talbot smiled.

"Just what I should like," he said. "We shall have to keep it dark, so as not to worry Miss Fawcett, that's all."

"That's the idea," said Tom. "And, anyway, it would be no good going in the daytime—ghosts don't walk in the daylight."

"No feah!"

"If there's a giddy ghost, we'll lay him!" said Blake. "I don't suppose we shall find anything, though; but it will be a lark."

"I'm suah I saw somethin' there, you know."

"Mr. Dodds says something has been seen there—a ghostly figure or something," said Tom Merry. "It's jolly odd."

"It's very odd," said Talbot thoughtfully. "What reason could there possibly be for anybody playing ghost?"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"Some silly asses are ass enough for anything!" he said.

"But in such an out-of-the-way place," said Talbot. "It lies back off the road, and nobody ever goes there, I suppose. It really looks more likely that whoever has been seen there has been seen by chance, and didn't intend to be seen at all."

"Then why should he be there?" asked Manners.

Talbot shrugged his shoulders.

"That's a mystery," he said.

And his brow wrinkled in deep thought. It seemed as if an idea had come into his mind.

Tom Merry looked at him curiously.

"Penny for 'em!" he said suddenly.

Talbot laughed.

"I was thinking that the ruins aren't more than a mile or so from the prisoners' camp," he said. "I wondered if there could be any connection—somebody with a dodge of communicating with the prisoners, perhaps, and hiding there."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that, you know!"

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"It's possible—more likely than a ghost, anyway," he said. "If there's anything going on, we'll jolly well bowl it out, anyway! It's agreed—we're going to-night?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll keep our clobber on, then," said Tom, "and we'll get up about half-past twelve, and clear out quietly. We can drop out on the verandah from this window, and needn't go downstairs at all."

"Good egg!"

"Just like breaking bounds at St. Jim's," grinned Blake. "All the comforts of a home."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors turned in on their beds without undressing, to wait for the appointed hour.

They were soon fast asleep.

Laurel Villa was buried in silence and slumber, and Tom Merry was deep in the land of dreams, when a touch on his shoulder awakened him. He started out of sleep.

"Hallo! Wharrer marrer?"

There was a soft laugh in the darkness.

"Half-past twelve!" said Talbot's voice.

"Oh, good!" Tom sat up and yawned portentiously. "Blessed if I wasn't fast asleep! How did you manage to wake up, you bounder?"

"Old habits," said Talbot quietly. "I used to be a night-bird, you know. Jump up, and I'll call the others!"

The juniors were soon up. Tom Merry opened the widnow. Outside, a pale starlight fell upon sheets of snow. The flakes were still falling.

"Grooogh!" said Blake. "It's cold!"

"Shove your coats and mufflers on," said Tom Merry. "You'll need 'em. Mind how you get out—it's jolly slippery."

The juniors, well wrapped up against the cold, clambered out of the window to the verandah.

"Bettah let me go first, deah boys," murmured Arthur Augustus. "This is wathah wisky. I'll show you the way to do it, deah boys!"

"Bow-wow!"

However, Arthur Augustus went first, and promptly slipped on the slippery roof, and disappeared from sight. A soft, squashing sound was heard below and a gasp.

"Oh ewumbs!"

"My hat! Are you hurt, you fathead?"

"I wefuse to be called a fathead!" came back a voice from the darkness.

The juniors chuckled. It was evident that Arthur Augustus was not hurt. They clambered down from the verandah. The swell of St. Jim's was discovered buried up to the neck in a snowdrift, which had fortunately broken his fall. He was struggling wildly to extricate himself.

"Pway lend me a hand, deah boys——"

They dragged him out. Arthur Augustus groped for his eyeglass, and fortunately discovered it unbroken. He wiped it carefully and jammed it in his eye.

"There is nothin' whatever to cackle about," he remarked; "and you are makin' a wow cacklin'! Pway follow me!"

"Are you going to show us how to do it again?" grinned Blake.

"Oh, wats!"

The juniors stole down the path, the thick, soft snow muffling their footsteps. They came out quietly into the road. In the distance, across the heath, the searchlight playing on the concentration camp glimmered eerily through the darkness.

A bitter wind blew the snowflakes into their faces as they started for the old priory.

Tom Merry led the way up the snow-covered path to the ruins. Arthur Augustus stumbled over a stone in the snow, and tumbled over, with an ejaculation.

"Still showing us how to do it?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You might give a chap a hand up instead of cacklin' like

silly hyenahs, deah boys! Thank you, Talbot! Bai Jove! Where's my eyeglass?"

"Lost, I hope!" said Blake consolingly. "Come on!"

"I wefuse to come on till I have found my eyeglass! Leggo! I ordah you to let go the back of my neck, Blake, you beast!"

"Kim on!" said Blake.

"You'll alarm the ghost if you make that thumping row!" said Monty Lowther warningly.

"I am going to give Blake a feahful thwashing!"

"Order!"

The incensed swell of St. Jim's, having found his eyeglass inside his collar, allowed himself to be soothed. And the ghost-hunters tramped on through the snow into the old priory.

"J-j-olly dark!" said Blake, his teeth chattering.

"And we never thought of bringing a light!" growled Tom Merry. "I must say that you are a set of silly duffers!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"I've got an electric-torch," said Talbot.

"Good egg!"

Talbot flashed the light on. It gleamed and glimmered on the old masonry and the piling masses of snow. Talbot gave a cry:

"Look! Look there!"

"My hat! What——"

"Bai Jove!"

It was a slinking, shadowy figure; but it was only seen for an instant. From the opposite direction, where was the doorway of the refectory, a snowball whizzed, and it struck the little electric-lamp from Talbot's hand. The lamp went to the ground with a smash, and the priory was plunged into instant darkness. Talbot uttered a startled exclamation as the lamp fell.

"That was a snowball, I think; the snow's not falling just here," he said.

"Bai Jove, then it must be some wottah wottin' us!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus wrathfully.

"Strike a match, somebody."

Tom Merry struck a vesta, but the wind wailing through the ruins instantly blew it out. Darkness intense wrapped them round.

In the midst of the darkness there came a sudden, terrible sound, a deep, deep groan, that sent the blood thrilling to their hearts.

Groan!

"B-b-bai Jove," stuttered Arthur Augustus, through his chattering teeth, "d-d-did you yah that, deah boys?"

Groan!

"It—it's some beast japing," muttered Tom Merry.

"It—it comes from the other direction, though," said Blake, straining his ears to listen. "Where we saw that—that thing was behind us, and that row comes from in front."

"Then there's more than one of them!"

Groan!

"Come on!" exclaimed Tom Merry, taking his courage in both hands, as it were. "We're jolly well not going to be frightened away by some ass playing ghost."

Groan!

Tom Merry stumbled on in the dark in the direction of the sound. He caught his foot in the loose stones and fell with a bump. He sat up, gasping, and as he did so he shuddered—an icy finger touched his forehead in the dense darkness!

"Oh!"

Tom Merry struck out fiercely shudderingly, but his lunging arm swept only the empty air. The icy contact on his forehead had sent horror through his veins. He scrambled up, and groped wildly about him in the dark.

Groan!

The old ruins were echoing with groaning. And the groans were deep-drawn and awful to hear.

"B-b-bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "P-p-pewwaps we'd bettah come back in the daylight, deah boys. This is—is—wotten!"

Groan, groan, groan!

"Gweat Scott, I've got somebody!" shouted D'Arcy, grasping a figure in the darkness. "Now, you wottah, take that, and that!"

"Yow-ow-ow!" roared Blake's voice. "You silly idiot!"

"Bai Jove! Is that you, Blake"

"Oh, you thumping idiot!"

"I didn't wecognise you in the dark, deah boy. My hat, who's this?"

"It's I," said Talbot, laughing. "Don't punch me, Gussy!"

"We can't do anything here without a light!" growled Tom Merry. "Let's get out. Might break our blessed necks here in the darkness. Get out, you chaps!"

"Wight-ho!"

"We'll come back at dawn and drop on them, the rotters!" growled Tom.

Groan!

A deep groan almost at his ear made Tom Merry start and shudder. In spite of his disbelief in ghosts, it was horribly uncanny and unnerving. He made a hasty retreat out of the ruins.

Groan!

A little more hastily than was really necessary, the ghost-hunters retreated from the ruined priory. When they reached the road again, they paused and looked at one another a little sheepishly.

"Of course, it wasn't any silly ghost!" grunted Blake.

"Wathah not! But it was wathah howwid!"

"Are we going back?" said Lowther, hesitating.

"No good goin' back without a light," said D'Arcy, "and—and if we take a light, the wottahs will knock it out with snowballs befoah we spot them, same as with Talbot's lamp. I weally—ahem!—think we had bettah leave it till daylight!"

And the Co. decided to leave it till daylight. They agreed to come back at dawn before the house was astir. And so, not overjoyed at the result of their ghost-hunt, they took their way back to Laurel Villa, and in half an hour they were in bed, sleeping the sleep of the just. And in the ruined priory two rascally fags of the Third Form at St. Jim's were chuckling gleefully.

CHAPTER 10.
A Night of Horror!

"My only Aunt Jane! It worked a treat!"

"'Ear, 'ear!"

"Won't we chip 'em about it later on!" chuckled Wally, as he relighted the lantern, satisfied that the ghost-hunters were quite gone. "Blessed if I thought you could groan like that, Joe. You nearly gave me the creeps. I jolly nearly got one in the eye, I think, when I tapped Tom Merry on the napper in the dark—ha, ha, ha! They were awfully scared. If they'd come a bit further in they'd have miffed the smoke."

Joe Frayne chuckled.

The ghost-hunters had been discomfited, and the two young rascals were undiscovered, and they looked forward very cheerfully to "chipping" Tom Merry & Co. on the subject.

The fire had been completely concealed by ashes and logs. Wally kicked the logs apart, and stirred the fire, and the blaze flared up again, and the firelight danced on the old walls and on the window aperture blocked with snow-covered ivy.

The fireplace manufactured by Wally's skillful hands was placed on the old hearth of the refectory, the smoke escaping up the wide old chimney—a chimney of huge proportions, built of solid blocks of stone, in the thickness of the ancient wall. The two fags sat down by the fire again; but, somehow, unconsciously, they sat so that their eyes turned upon the door of the refectory. The encounter with the ghost-hunters had enlivened them a little, but now that Tom Merry & Co. were gone, the loneliness of the old place settled upon them again, and the whining of the wind in the ruins made them start and listen.

"Suppose we keep watch in turns, Joe?" suggested Wally. "After all, you know, we ought to keep watch when we're camping out—what?"

Joe nodded.

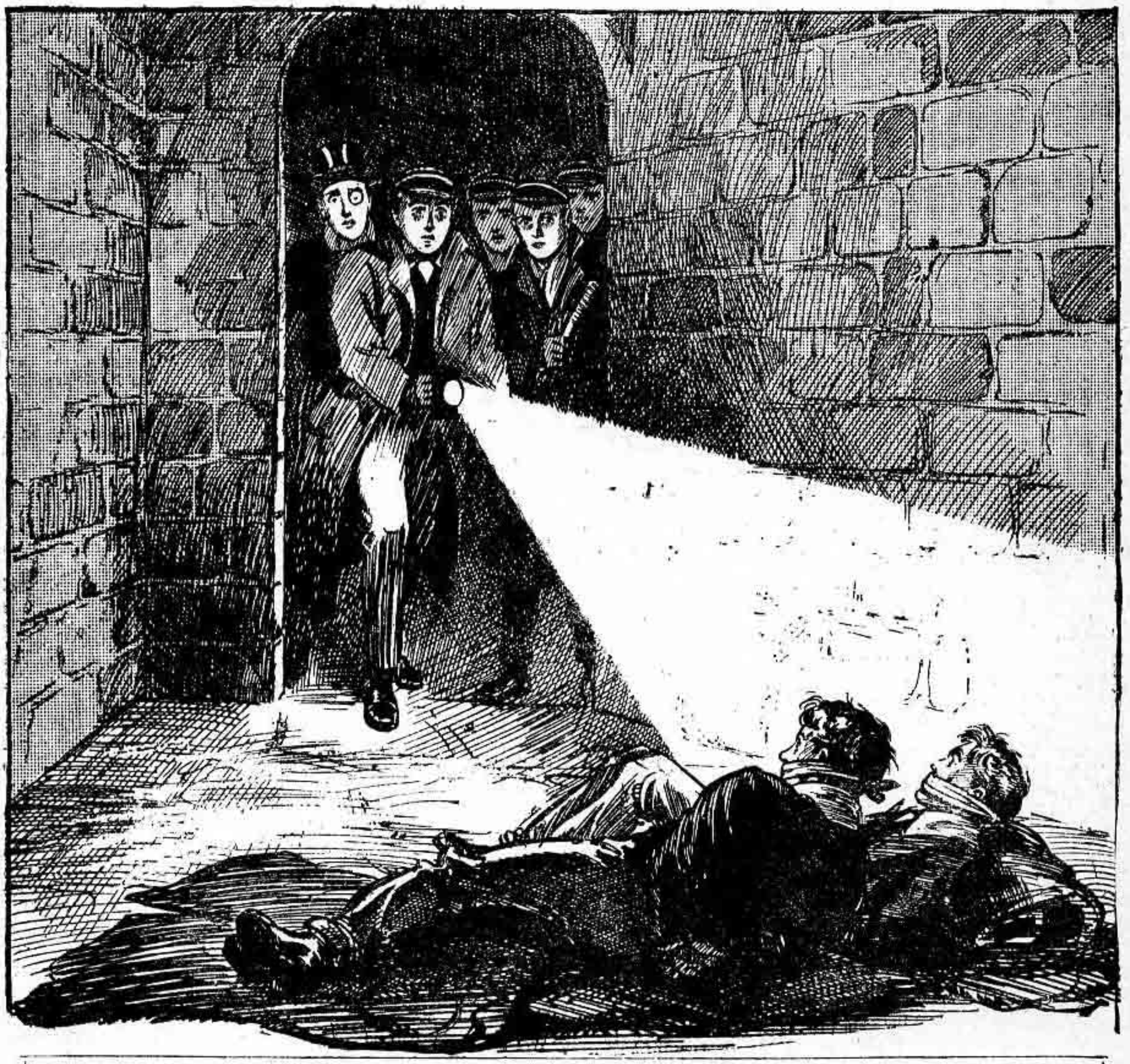
"Yes Master Wally. I'll watch first, if you like."

"Call me in an hour," said Wally.

"Orlright."

Wally closed his eyes. He was almost asleep already. He was soon in deep slumber stretched on the floor before the fire, rolled in a rug and a coat, and with his feet towards the glowing embers.

Joe Frayne sat on a chunk of masonry near the fire and watched.



"Found!" shouted Tom Merry.
On a heap of rugs and coats, in a corner, lay two still forms. The two prisoners were bound hand and foot, and gagged with cruel tightness, and not a movement or a sound came from either of them, even at the sight of their rescuers. (*See Chapter* 14.)

He was sleepy, but the eerieness of the place made his nerves in a twitter, more than ever now that his companion was asleep, and he felt himself alone.

There were indefinable sounds from the darkness of the ruins. It might have been the wind, which was howling over the heath, or the shifting of masses of snow. Joe Frayne kept his eyes on the doorway.

But slowly, in spite of himself, he gave way to slumber.

The fire died down.

Outside the refectory, in the roofless old hall of the priory, the snow was falling in, thickly and more thickly. The wind wailed with a ghostly voice round the ruins. The fire died lower; and the lantern, which had been burning low for some time, gave a final sputter and went out.

Save for a faint glimmer from the fire, the refectory was in darkness now. As the last embers glowed and faded, strange dark shadows moved and glimmered on the old walls.

Lower and lower sank the fire.

Wally slept on.

The last faint glimmers were dying out, when Wally suddenly awoke, and raised his head. He shivered as he blinked round him in the darkness.

"Groo! It's cold! You've let the fire out, Joe."

There was no reply.

"Joe, you ass! Asleep?"

Silence.

Wally threw off the rug and started to his feet.

He groped his way to where Joe Frayne had been sitting by the fire.

"Joe, Joe!" D'Arcy minor's voice was sharp and shrill, as a strange uneasiness seized upon him. "Joe! Where are you, Joe?"

But there was no answer from the waif of the Third.

Wally's face grew pale, and he cast a hunted look round into the threatening shadows. Where was his chum?

"Joe! Joe Frayne!"

He shouted, and the old ruins rang with the echoes. But the voice of Joe Frayne was silent.

Wally realised that his chum was no longer there.

A shudder ran through his lips. He struck a match, and in the flickering light looked about him. Joe's cap lay on the floor, almost at his feet. Wally picked it up, shuddering. The match went out, and left him in the darkness, the cap in his hands.

Where was Frayne?

Wally bent over the almost extinguished fire, and raked the embers together. He felt that he must have light; the darkness was terrifying. There was a little blaze, and the lights and shadows danced on the old walls again.

Where was Joe?

What had become of his chum? He had slept on his watch, perhaps; but he could not have gone out beyond the reach

of Wally's voice? Where was the waif of the Third? What had become of him?

"Joe!" Wally's voice was a terrified whisper now. "Joe, old man!"

The raked embers died down again, and left him in darkness. In the darkness he heard the sound of a movement—a footstep—he could not tell from whence.

"Is that you, Joe? Joe, answer me!"

But no answer came.

D'Arcy minor stared round him in the darkness, every nerve quivering with dread and horror. What had become of his chum? What was about to happen to him?

He scrambled away towards the doorway. He must get out of that, and return with help and hunt for his missing chum.

He groped and stumbled in the darkness, out of the refectory, into the falling snow in the roofless old hall.

Again that footstep. It was behind him now.

A cautious, stealthy footstep in the darkness—in the room where he had been. And it was not Joe.

Wally panted, and stumbled on blindly. He understood now that he was being pursued. By whom, by what, he could not know.

A quick, hurried breath behind him. The thing, whatever it was, was close. Wally gave a shriek, and sprang away in the darkness, and caught his foot in a mass of masonry, and fell.

Something dark and shadowy loomed over him in the gloom. He felt an icy touch, and, with a faint cry of horror, he fainted.

CHAPTER 11.
Vanished!

"WAKE up!"

Arthur Augustus sat up in bed and yawned.

The sharp winter sunlight was streaming in at the windows, and Arthur Augustus blinked at it sleepily.

"Bai Jove! It's past dawn, Blake, deah boy. We were goin' to get up at dawn."

Jack Blake grinned.

"It's nearly ten o'clock, fathead. Up with you!"

"Bai Jove!"

The programme of early rising had not been carried out. After their nocturnal adventure, Tom Merry & Co. had been sleepy, and the morning was well advanced when they turned out.

It was half-past ten when they came down to breakfast, and they felt, as Monty Lowther expressed it, like a precious lot of slackers.

Miss Priscilla greeted them with her kind smile. She was sure that her dear Tommy would be tired after his journey down, and so the juniors had not been called.

The guests of Laurel Villa did full justice to a substantial breakfast, which would have delighted the heart of Fatty Wynn if he had been there. A telegram lay beside Arthur Augustus's plate, and after breakfast he opened it lazily.

But when it was opened, Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and read it over again in great astonishment.

"The young wascal!" he ejaculated.

"Hallo! What's the row?" asked Blake.

"The young boundah!"

"Wally again?" asked Talbot.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What has he got to say?" queried Tom Merry, laughing. "Is he satisfied with Aunt Adelina?"

"'Tisn't fwom Wally, deah boy. It's fwom Aunt Adelina."

"What's Wally been doing, then?"

"He hasn't been there."

"Phew!"

"The young wascal!" repeated Arthur Augustus indignantly. "Where has he gone to? He can't have stayed at the school. And he hasn't gone to Aunt Adelina's. Wead that."

The juniors read the telegram. It was from D'Arcy's aunt, and it ran—with a reckless disregard for the charge of a halfpenny a word:

"Dear Arthur,—I hope Wally has arrived safely. I received a telegram from him, saying that he would be with you, and that I was not to expect him. Let me know if he has arrived safely. AUNT ADELINA."

"But he hasn't come here, the young bounder!" said Tom Merry.

"Wathah not."

"He said he would come to Huckleberry Heath," grinned Lowther. "The young sweep has kept his word. Perhaps they've put up at the inn. Frayne would be with him, of course."

"Bai Jove! I shall wegard it as my dutay to administah a feahful thwashin' to the young wascal when I find him!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Aftah bweakfast you fellows can come and help me find him."

"Hear, hear!"

"We shall dig him up in the village somewhere," said Tom Merry. "As your aunt seems to be willing to let him stay, we'd better bring him here—what?"

"Yaas; but I shall give him a feahful thwashin' first," said D'Arcy. "I cannot allow my minah to tweat Aunt Adelinah with diswespect."

The juniors finished their breakfast, and donned their coats and caps, and sallied forth. As Wally had not come to Laurel Villa, and as he had evidently telegraphed to Aunt Adelina that he was going to Huckleberry Heath, they expected to "dig him up" in the village, as Tom Merry expressed it.

They walked down to the village inn, and inquired for Wally. But no schoolboys had been heard of there.

"We'll go to the station, and find out what train he came by," said Tom Merry.

To the station they accordingly proceeded.

But at the station there was no information, excepting of a negative character. Traffic was not very heavy at the little country station, and few people had arrived by train the preceding afternoon and evening. And the old porter was quite certain that no schoolboys had been among those few.

The juniors left the station in a perplexed mood. That Wally and Frayne had left St. Jim's for Huckleberry Heath was pretty certain. But they had not arrived.

"The young duffahs have got into some twouble," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps they are hidin' somewhah to bothah us, you know. But I've got to wiah to Aunt Adelinah about Wally, or she will be wowwied, you know. I don't want to bothah you fellows, but I shall have to hunt for the young wascal."

"Bow-wow!" said Tom Merry. "We'll help you find him, and when he's found, we'll help you lick him."

"Hear, hear!"

"He can't have had an accident," said Manners thoughtfully. "Besides, there were two of them. Frayne must have been with him. They can't have had two accidents. They must be lying low somewhere."

"But they must have come by train, if they came at all," said Lowther.

"They might have got out at the next station," suggested Talbot. "Might have felt a bit uncertain about coming to Laurel Villa, under the circumstances, and may be putting up somewhere near. Let's inquire at the next station. How far is it?"

"Mile and a half," said Tom Merry.

"Well, a walk won't hurt us."

"I weally don't want to take up your mornin', you know ——"

"Rats! Come on!"

And the Co. tramped away down the snowy road over the heath. They passed the German concentration camp, with the sentries on duty outside the barbed wire. After a brisk walk they arrived at the next station to Huckleberry Heath, where they proceeded to make their inquiries—this time with success. They learned that two schoolboys, with big bags, had arrived there by the evening train, and had been seen to start on the road over the heath. By the description of them, there was no doubt that they were D'Arcy minor and Joe Frayne.

"Blessed if I get on to this," said Tom Merry, in perplexity. "They arrived right enough, and they started for Huckleberry Heath. That road doesn't lead anywhere else. But they never arrived at Huckleberry Heath. What the dickens can have become of them?"

"Some beastly accident," said Arthur Augustus anxiously.

"I don't see what accident could have happened to them. The road's plain enough to follow, and Wally knows the way well enough. They couldn't have walked into a snowdrift. Surely they couldn't have been idiots enough to camp out anywhere in this weather!"

Talbot uttered an exclamation.

"My hat!"

The chums looked at him inquiringly.

"I can see you've got it," grinned Blake. "What is it?"

"The old priory."

"Wha-a-at!"

"You remember the ghost last night," said Talbot laughing.

"My only aunt!"

"Why, the young rotters——"

"Gweat Scott!"

It only needed the suggestion, and Tom Merry and Co. had

no further doubts. And their faces turned pink at the thought of their inglorious retreat from the haunted priory the previous night.

"That's it, bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, with conviction. "The young boundahs have camped out in the pwiowy. And they played ghost on us. And they must have gwinned at the way you fellows were scared. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Who was scared?" demanded Blake.

"You were, deah boy. You wan for it, anyway."

"And what did you do?" exclaimed Lowther.

"Ahem! I executed a mastahly wetweat," said Arthur Augustus loftily. "Pway don't argue, deah boys. Let's get back to the pwiowy and surpwise those young wottahs, and give them a tewwific lickin'."

"What-ho!"

That seemed to the Co. a really excellent idea, under the circumstances. They had no doubt now that it was the fags of the Third who had "pulled their leg" the previous night in the haunted priory, and they were anxious to give the humorous fags their opinion on the subject. They tramped back by the road over the heath, passing the concentration camp again, and arrived at the ruins. The old priory, in its mantle of snow, looked quiet and deserted as usual.

"They're hidin' there, the young boundahs," chuckled Arthur Augustus. "We'll make a sudden wush and surpwise them."

"Hear, hear!"

Tom Merry & Co. trod cautiously over the snow, without making a sound, till they reached the big doorway; and then they rushed in.

"Wally, you young wascal——"

"Where are you, you image?"

"Wally, you cheeky fag——"

They rushed through the ruins in search of the delinquents. But the ruins were silent and deserted. Only the echoes of their shouting came back in reply. There was no sign of any living being there.

But when they came into the old refectory, Talbot uttered an exclamation, as he pointed to the dead fire on the hearth.

"Somebody's been camping here!" he exclaimed. "That wasn't here when we looked in yesterday."

"Wally and Frayne, right enough," said Tom Merry. "But where are they now?"

"Bai Jove! Where have the young wottahs disappeahed to?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps they heard you fellows comin', and cleahed out."

"They may be in hiding about here. Hunt through the ruins for them."

But a hunt through the ruins only disclosed the fact that Wally and Frayne were not to be found. Half-buried in the snow in the roofless old hall, Talbot picked up a cap. It was recognised at once. It was Wally's cap; his name was inscribed inside it.

"That's pwoof, deah boys."

"But where's Wally?" exclaimed Tom Merry. "If he's cleared off, why should the young ass leave his cap here?"

"It's a blessed mystewy."

"Most likely we shall find them at Laurel Villa, all ready to grin at us," said Monty Lowther. "It's close on dinner time too."

There was evidently nothing more to be done in the ruins. The juniors, perplexed and a little uneasy, returned to Laurel Villa. Miss Priscilla met them in the doorway.

"Has Wally come, deah Miss Fawcett?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Wally! No."

"Bai Jove!"

"Was Wally coming?" asked Miss Priscilla.

Tom Merry made his chum a quick sign, and they understood and held their peace. It was useless to alarm the old lady.

"He was talking about coming," stammered Tom.

"No, he has not arrived," said Miss Priscilla. "But your dinner is ready."

The Co. went in to dinner; but they did not attack it with their usual gusto, in spite of their long walk in the keen December morning. They were worried about Wally. The scamp of the Third had certainly spent the night in the haunted priory. What had become of him?

CHAPTER 12.
Talbot Thinks It Out.

AFTER dinner, Tom Merry & Co. sauntered down to the frozen river. Miss Priscilla supposed that they were going to skate, and carefully tied on Tom Merry's muffler before he started. But the chums of St. Jim's were not thinking of skating just then. They were thinking of Wally.

Once safe out of hearing of Miss Priscilla, they held a council of war.

"No good telling Miss Priscilla anything," said Tom. "She would be awfully alarmed. And—and I can't help thinking myself that something has happened."

Arthur Augustus rubbed his aristocratic nose very thoughtfully.

"The young wascal may have spotted us comin', and cleahed out," he remarked. "But it is vewy wemarkable that Wally should leave his cap there."

"The cap had been there some time," said Talbot, with a shake of the head. "It was nearly hidden in the snow, and was frozen stiff. So he couldn't have dropped it there just before we came. It had been there hours, at least."

"And Wally couldn't be going about without a cap in this weather," said Blake, utterly puzzled.

"Then what the dickens has happened?"

"The little rascals may be pulling our legs all the time," growled Manners. "If they alarmed us, and made us hunt high and low for them, I suppose that would seem like a joke—to the Third-Form sense of humour."

"Yaas, wathah! But——"

Talbot shook his head.

"It isn't that!" he said quietly.

Tom Merry looked at the Shell fellow curiously. He had great faith in Talbot's judgment. The peculiar experiences of the "Toff" had given him an old head on young shoulders.

"What do you think about it, then, Talbot?" he asked. "You think there has been an accident of some sort."

"Yes."

"But—but what?"

"Look at it," said Talbot. "Those young scamps came down and camped in the priory last night—that's a cert. It must have been them that played ghost on us. They had a fire there—they must have darkened it somehow while we were there. Now, this morning they've disappeared. It hasn't been snowing since dawn—I asked Hannah; she was down early."

"What did you ask Hannah that for, deah boy? I weally don't see what the snow has to do with it?" asked Arthur Augustus.

Talbot smiled.

"Don't you see? They camped there for the night, and it's pretty certain that they wouldn't leave their quarters before dawn, isn't it? They had no reason to start off in the middle of the night."

"Yaas, but——"

"And if they left since dawn—since the snow stopped falling—they would have left footprints in the snow!" said Talbot.

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that."

"Neither did I," said Tom Merry. "Let's go and hunt for giddy tracks in the snow."

"I looked for them while we were there," said Talbot quietly. "I thought of that. There were no tracks near the old priory excepting those we made ourselves."

The chums of St. Jim's looked at one another oddly. The Toff, with his usual cool clear-headedness, had gone to the heart of the matter at once. It was extremely unlikely that the fags would have left their camp before dawn, if they left it at all. But they could not have left it after daylight without leaving distinct traces in the snow that surrounded the priory.

"Sure of that, Talbot?" murmured Blake.

"Quite sure."

"But—but—but——" said Tom Merry. "That makes out that they're there still, Talbot."

Talbot nodded.

"But—but if they're there, why didn't we find them?"

"Yaas, wathah."

"Because they're hidden from sight, I should say," said Talbot. "Whether they're hiding themselves to alarm us, or whether they're being hidden by somebody else, is what we've got to find out."

"Somebody else!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Exactly. We know that something has been going on at the haunted priory for several days now, from what Mr. Dodds and your old governess told us. Wally and Frayne knew nothing about that, of course, and they camped down in the place without a suspicion. What was going on there, we don't know; but it's quite easy to conclude that the young bounders may have tumbled on to it——"

"Bai Jove!"

"And if it's something that's being kept secret—as it certainly is—they wouldn't be allowed to come away and talk about it——"

"Talbot!"

"We've got to find them," said Talbot quietly.

Arthur Augustus was very pale.

"What—what can have happened to them?" he stammered. "You—you don't think some villain may have—have——"

D'Arcy's voice trailed away. He thought of the masses of snow piled in the roofless old building, and of what that snow might hide.

"Don't look at the darkest possible side of the matter," said Talbot quickly. "It's barely possible that they're hiding themselves to give us a scare. Or they may be shut up somewhere; that old place must be full of secret corners. There's some secret in the priory, you chaps, and we've got to find out what it is.

"It isn't some village duffer playing ghost. A chap would have to be a pretty rabid practical joker to stick in that dreary old place in the middle of the night to do that—a place, too, that hardly anybody passes after dark. He might stick there for night after night without succeeding in scaring anybody. It isn't that. Who ever has been haunting the priory is somebody who has reasons for keeping himself hidden there—that's what I think."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"You suggested yesterday somebody trying to get into communication with the German prisoners, Talbot."

"It's quite possible—or something of the sort, at all events. The priory is less than a mile from the concentration camp, so naturally it brings the Germans into one's mind. Some captured spy there, perhaps, may have valuable information to pass on to somebody else, if he could be communicated with——"

"My hat!"

"Anyway, it's jolly certain that somebody has been using the ruins as a hiding-place," said Talbot.

"But—but in that case, he'd keep out of sight, and wouldn't let himself be seen," said Manners.

"If he's trying to get at somebody in the camp, he would have to come out, and after dark, of course. Besides, he would have to get food. That's another point. The kids must have had food with them, and we know they brought bags from the station. We didn't find them there—there was nothing left. They've disappeared along with Wally and Frayne. One thing's jolly certain—they never left the priory."

"Let's go and have a another look," said Tom Merry uneasily. "If there's some secret place there where they could be hidden, we'll find it fast enough. I know there are vaults under the old place. We can search them."

"Good! We shall want lanterns, and we'd better take a stick apiece, too."

A couple of bicycle lanterns and half a dozen sticks were soon secured. The juniors started off by way of the frozen river, in order not to acquaint Miss Priscilla with their destination. They reached the haunted priory. Round the old ruins the snow lay in a white, unbroken sheet. There was not a single footprint to be seen, save those which Tom Merry & Co. themselves had left there in the morning.

It was with a chill at their hearts that the chums of St. Jim's entered the ruined priory. They searched the ruins once more from end to end, and Arthur Augustus drove his stick again and again into the masses of snow, though without saying what he half expected and feared to find there. The juniors understood what was in his mind. If some desperate rascal were hiding in the haunted priory, with some dastardly object to serve, and the two fags had discovered him, what measures might he not have taken to secure their silence?

But no discovery was made.

"Now for the vaults," said Talbot.

Tom Merry guided them to the entrance of the vaults. The lanterns were lighted, and, gripping their cudgels, the juniors descended into the dark, damp regions below the old priory.

Dark and dreary the grim old vaults looked as they flashed the lights to and fro on the oozy walls.

From end to end of the vaults they searched, but there was no sound—there was no sign. The juniors examined the old flags beneath their feet, but there was no sign of a footstep there—and their training as Boy Scouts would have enabled them to detect the slightest "sign."

They returned to the upper regions at last. The search had been a failure.

They gathered in the old refectory, where the remains of the dead fire showed that the fags had camped the previous night.

Save for a few embers and a few logs still unburnt, there was no trace of the campers. Here and there they picked up fragments of eggshells and a crust or two of bread, remnants of the "feed." But the bags the fags had brought with them—the food, the cooking utensils—all had vanished. Either Wally and Frayne had disappeared of their own accord, and had deliberately covered up their tracks behind them, or else they had been taken by force, and the Unknown had laboured to conceal the fact that anyone had been there at all.

There was still a faint hope in their breasts that this might be a "jape" after all—that Wally might be only pulling their leg; but the hope was faint. The fags had been there, and they had disappeared. Where?

"What are we going to do?" muttered Blake.

Talbot put his hands to his lips.

The juniors left the ruins in silence. They did not speak again till they were on the frozen river-bank.

"You—you think somebody might have—have heard us there, Talbot?" said Tom Merry, in a hushed voice.

"Why not?"

"But—but where could anybody be hidden? We've searched the place from end to end; and as for any secret door, or anything of that kind, how could a stranger here—a foreigner, as you think—know anything about that? It's not possible."

"It beats me," said Talbot; "but it's plain enough that they are there."

"What about calling in the police?" asked Manners.

"We can do that—or try again ourselves. The police couldn't do more than we've done—search the place," said Talbot. "I don't see what use that would do. But we've got another card to play yet."

"And that——"

"After dark. Whoever it is—whatever his game is—he only shows himself after dark—whatever plan he is trying to carry out, he has to work at night," said Talbot. "It's at night that he can be spotted. It's getting dusk now. This evening one of us must get into the place quietly, and watch."

"All of us together, surely," said Tom Merry.

"You don't want to explain to Miss Fawcett. And Cousin Ethel will be here this evening," said Lowther; "we don't want to alarm her. But a couple of us——"

"I must be one, deah boys." D'Arcy's face was white and strained. "The young beggah is my bwothah, you know——" He broke off.

"Two of us, then," said Talbot. "We shall have to make an excuse to get out without alarming Miss Priscilla, and keep watch in the priory. And then——"

Tom Merry clenched his hands.

"Then we'll spot the scoundrel, whoever he is, and make him suffer for this," he said, between his teeth.

And the Co., with deep worry on their minds, and heavy hearts, returned slowly and thoughtfully to Laurel Villa.

CHAPTER 13.

In the Dead of Night.

COUSIN ETHEL had arrived, with Marjorie Hazeldene. The juniors were late for tea—certainly a thing that had never happened before when Cousin Ethel was there. It was not easy for them to keep up a flow of cheerful spirits with that dark trouble that was weighing on their minds, but they did their best.

Talbot—much more used from his early life to concealing his feelings—made the best show. Cousin Ethel was very kind to Talbot. She had heard his curious story, and it was her first meeting with the "Toff." Arthur Augustus, usually quite a flowing talker, was almost silent—for once, he did not appropriate the lion's share of the conversation. He was thinking of his brother—the young scamp whom he had often threatened with a "feahful thwashing," but for whom his affection was strong and deep. What had become of Wally? That was the question that haunted his mind, and brought dark clouds of thought to his face.

Miss Priscilla suspected nothing; neither did Marjorie. But Tom Merry noticed that Cousin Ethel looked at him very curiously sometimes during tea. The girl had observed that there was something weighing on the spirits of the juniors. Tom Merry was very anxious not to alarm his old governess, who would have been in a state of distraction if she had known of the mystery of the priory. But after tea he decided to tell Cousin Ethel quietly what had happened.

Ethel listened with a very grave face.

"Some of us are going to keep watch to-night," said Tom. "We've got to find out what has become of poor old Wally—and Joe too."

"You may be going into danger," said Ethel uneasily. "If the ruins were searched by the police, Tom——"

"They cannot search them more thoroughly than we've done," said Tom moodily. "It's up to us, Ethel; though goodness knows what can have happened. Talbot thinks there may be some spy rotter hiding there, trying to get into communication with some other scoundrel shut up in the camp——"

Ethel started a little.

"I saw Mr. Dodds as I came in," she said. "He told me that there was a disturbance at the camp last night. One

of the sentries fired upon someone who was standing along by the barbed wire."

"My hat!"

"The man escaped, and the sentry picked up a pair of wire-cutters, which he must have dropped when he ran away," said Ethel. "Mr. Dodds says the man hasn't been found. It must have been some friend of the German prisoners."

Tom Merry knitted his brows.

"Then it's very likely that old Talbot's right. I know there are a good many spies in the camp—they bagged a lot of them and shut them up there, along with the other prisoners. Some of them must be chock full of information, and would give anything for a chance to send it to Germany. If it's a scoundrel of that sort hiding in the old priory, we'll put an end to his little game, somehow."

"But—but he may be a desperate man——"

"Oh, we'll handle him all right!"

"I—I shall feel very uneasy," said Ethel.

"I wouldn't have told you, only I could see that you had spotted something," said Tom Merry ruefully.

"I am glad you told me," said Ethel quietly. "I wish I could keep watch with you. But, at least, I will take care to keep Miss Priscilla from suspecting anything. She must not be alarmed, if it can be helped."

"What a brick you are, Ethel!" said Tom gratefully.

During the evening Arthur Augustus and Blake went out for a walk. It had been agreed that if they made any discovery, they would not attempt to tackle the enemy, but to return and report. It was late in the evening before they came in, and their dejected looks showed that they had nothing to report.

Tom Merry & Co. went to bed early that night. They did not want to sleep—they wanted to get to their work of watching the haunted priory. In the rooms above Blake and D'Arcy were questioned.

"Nothing done!" growled Blake. "We kept watch, and there wasn't a sound—not a shadow of one. Nothing doing."

"We'll all go together now," said Tom Merry.

"It might give the game away—a crowd of us," said Talbot. "Half a dozen fellows are sure to make a sound or two, at least; and a sound will be enough to put the rotter on his guard, if he is hidden there."

"But——"

"Let us all go, and only one of us go into the priory and keep watch," said Talbot. "The others can be near enough to hear a whistle."

"Perhaps that's the best idea. We've got a lantern each now—I've taken care of that," said Tom Merry. "Let's get off."

They quitted the house by way of the verandah without waiting for all the lights below to be put out. The snow was beginning to fall again. They tramped through the falling flakes towards the mysterious priory. Dark and silent, it loomed up before them in the grim winter night.

They halted in the snow, close to the old building. Save for the wailing of the wind, there was no sound in the ruins.

"There's a shelter here," whispered Tom Merry. "We can get under this bit of roof out of the snow. Which of us is going in?"

"I am, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus firmly.

"You've had your turn, old chap," said Tom uneasily. "Better leave it to Talbot or me, you know."

"It's my minah that's been done away with by that scoundrel," said Arthur Augustus. "It's up to me, and I insist. Besides, the mattah will be safah in my hands."

The Co. had very strong doubts on that point, but they did not feel inclined to dispute with the swell of St. Jim's. They knew the bitter anxiety that was gnawing at his heart. Anxious as they were about Wally, their anxiety was naturally not so keen as that of Wally's brother.

"You'll be careful, Gussy," said Tom Merry hesitatingly.

"Wely on me, deah boys."

"And if you see anybody—anything, or hear anything——"

"I'll give you the signal at once, deah boy—the curlew call," said Arthur Augustus. "Listen for the scouts' signal."

"Right-ho!"

And Arthur Augustus, with infinite precautions, stole to the ruins. It had been arranged that the watcher should take up his position in the old refectory, as the best-sheltered spot, and there keep his "patient watch and ward."

Tom Merry & Co., keeping out of the falling snow under the partial roof of an old cell, waited and listened.

It was weary waiting. Yet it would certainly not have done for a crowd of fellows to watch in the ruins.

If the Unknown was hidden there, certainly he would have heard some slight sound among so many fellows, which would have put him on his guard. But each of the juniors wished that he had been in D'Arcy's place.

It was cold, bitterly cold, even in their thick boots and coats and mufflers. They beat their chests with their arms to keep warm, and moved restlessly to and fro, but with great caution. They heard eleven o'clock strike from the village. Still there came no sound from the interior of the ruins.

Was the vigil to be in vain? Yet if there were someone hidden there—if, as Talbot suspected, it was some rascal seeking to communicate with the prisoners' camp—surely he would not remain idle a whole night. He must stir out of his hiding-place. The minutes passed wearily.

Suddenly the juniors started. From the silence of the ruins came the clear call of the curlew—the agreed signal!

It was followed by the sudden sound of tramping of feet, of struggling, and a yell:

"Help! This way! Help!"

The juniors rushed madly into the priory.

CHAPTER 14.

The Secret of the Priory.

TOM MERRY was the first, running and stumbling at furious speed. Talbot was close behind him, and his light was already gleaming out; he was the only one of the excited juniors who had thought of that. They stumbled and scratched through snow and masses of masonry, and came in a rush through the doorway of the refectory.

"Help, deah boys!"

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

Even as they rushed in, a dark figure suddenly leaped out of the gloom, and rushed past them. The lantern was knocked from Talbot's hand, and the figure vanished into the falling snow.

"Collar him!"

"Get a light!"

"Gussy, are you hurt?"

"Bai Jove! Oh cwumbs!"

Blake struck a match, with shaking fingers, and lighted his lantern.

The rays streamed through the old refectory.

Arthur Augustus was lying on the floor and he raised himself on his elbow, panting, and he put his hand to his head.

"Have you got him, deah boys?"

"He's gone!"

"Clean gone!" said Lowther. "Did anybody see him?"

"Just a glimpse," muttered Talbot. "Somebody in dark clothes. He vanished like a ghost. He's gone."

"Are you hurt, Gussy?"

"Yaas. Ow! It's all wight—only a knock on the nappah."

The juniors gathered round him, and Blake helped the swell of St. Jim's to his feet. Arthur Augustus pressed his hand to his head, and grunted. The juniors were too anxious about their chum to think of pursuing the Unknown for the moment. And he had already vanished into the darkness of the falling snow.

"Let me look at your napper," said Blake anxiously. "My hat, you've got a lump there, Gussy!"

"Only a bwuise, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "Oh, cwumbs!"

"But what happened?" exclaimed Manners.

"I was listening like anythin', deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, breathlessly; "and suddenly I heard somebody movin'——"

"In this room?" asked Talbot.

"Yaas. I was standin' neah the doorway, leanin' on the wall, you know, in the dark, and watchin' like anythin'. I heard him movin', and I gave the signal. He came towards the doorway, and I collahed him. He stwuggled like anythin', and he was stwongah than I was, the wottah. When you fellahs came in he hit he on the head with somethin' hard—— Ow! It was wathah wuff!"

"And cleared off," said Tom Merry. "Hunt for him!"

The juniors spread through the ruins, with all the lanterns alight.

"Here's the footprints," said Talbot.

Deep footprints, in the soft snow, led away from the haunted priory, in the direction of the open heath. But the rapidly-falling snow was fast obliterating them.

The Unknown had vanished into the night.

The juniors returned to the refectory for shelter. They had discovered, to a measure, the secret of the priory—a mysterious Unknown had been hidden there. But he had escaped them, and they were as far as ever, seemingly, from discovering the missing fags. Would the Unknown return?

"He will come back," said Tom Merry dubiously. "He must come back, if he wants to hide, or else stay in the open. He can't do that in a snowstorm."

"We'll have him yet."

"Hold on!" said Talbot quietly. "If he comes back, he

won't do so till he's pretty sure that the coast is clear. We've got plenty of time. You say you were in the doorway, D'Arcy, and you heard him in this room?"

"Yaas, deah boy."

"Then he must have been hidden here. You can see that the ivy at the window has not been disturbed. This room holds the secret," said Talbot.

The juniors cast the light round upon the massive walls, on the mossy flags of the floor. If there was any secret opening, it seemed vain to search for it. And how could it have come to be known to a stranger?

Tom Merry had known the old place since his childhood, and he knew nothing of any secret opening. He shook his head at the thought.

Talbot was scanning the old room almost inch by inch. He uttered a sudden exclamation and knelt on the floor. The juniors hurried to him.

"What is it, Talbot?"

"A sign."

"Only a smudge on the stone," said Blake, in wonder. "What does that imply?"

Talbot rubbed the "sign" on the stone with his finger. He held up his finger—it was stained with charcoal.

"That's as good a clue as we could want," he said, and he turned towards the great hearth of the refectory. "Whoever left that mark had been treading on burnt embers."

"Oh!"

"There could be only one reason for that—he had been on the hearth," said Talbot; "and only one reason for treading on the hearth—he came down the chimney!"

"The—the chimney?"

"Yes."

"But the dead fire isn't disturbed—look!"

"He would be careful not to tread on that, of course—he did not want to leave a black trail where he moved. He had trodden on a loose ember by accident. That explains; there is no secret opening, but the chimney is big enough to hide a dozen men."

"It's barred across some distance up," said Tom Merry; "you can see the bars in the daytime. The top of the chimney is gone, you know."

"Then he had been hidden below where it is barred."

"But—but there can be nothing to stand on, even if he could climb up," said Tom Merry, bewildered. "It's just an empty chimney—you can see the sky through it in the daytime."

"Exactly; and that's why we never suspected anybody of hiding in it," said Talbot. "But this chimney is hundreds of years old, and they built them differently in those days; they had need of secret hiding-places then."

"But the fags had a big fire here last night, to judge by what's left of it. If he'd been there, he'd have been toasted," said Blake.

"I fancy he wasn't there then. Suppose Wally and Frayne camped here while he was out on one of his expeditions at night; he came back and found that he couldn't get back to his hiding-place without disturbing them——"

"My hat!"

"There are old chimneys with lateral openings in the shaft," said Talbot. "I fancy this is one of them, though I didn't think of it before. We know there was an alarm at the concentration camp last night—a sentry fired on somebody, who fled, and left a pair of wire-cutters behind him. Suppose it was our man; he came back, he was anxious to get into his skulking-place, thinking, perhaps, the soldiers were after him, and he could not pass the fags without waking them. And once they saw him they had to disappear, or they would have given him away. Anyway, I'm going up this chimney."

Talbot stepped into the hearth. The space above his head was more than 8ft. wide over the hearth. The other juniors followed him; there was ample room for all. They flashed their lanterns up the chimney above. Only grimy walls and grimy, rusty bars far above met their eyes.

"This is how he climbed," said Talbot, quietly touching the old rusty iron stanchion jutting from the stones. "They used to put these things here for chimney-cleaners in the old days. My idea is that the man dodged in here to hide, and took to the chimney when somebody or other came into the ruins, and accidentally discovered a secret hiding-place, and made use of it afterwards. But we shall see."

There were rusty old stanchions, one above another, and Talbot, with easy activity, drew himself up from one to another. The juniors held the lanterns to light him on his way as well as they could. At the height of a dozen feet Talbot uttered a sharp ejaculation:

"Eureka!"

"You've found it?"

"Yes."

"Hurrah!"

"There's a block of stone missing here, in the side of the chimney—it's a passage wide enough to walk along, stooping," said Talbot. "Get on those stanchions, one after another, and pass up the lanterns, and I'll take them."

"Good egg!"

The juniors climbed up actively. Even Arthur Augustus did not think of his clothes just then, though the state they were in after the climb was horrible. They joined Talbot in the opening in the side of the chimney—a low, narrow passage leading away into the thickness of the wall.

In Indian file they followed the passage, stooping their heads, Talbot leading the way. A dozen yards further on the passage opened out into a small chamber, completely closed in by stone walls. There was a single small opening, doubtless where a hidden pipe ran to the open air for ventilation.

Talbot cast his light about the little cell, and gave a shout.

"Hurrah!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Found!" shouted Tom Merry.

On a heap of rugs and coats, in a corner, lay two still forms. Two white faces looked at the juniors—two faces white with pain and horror—speechless. For the two prisoners were bound hand and foot, and gagged with cruel tightness, and not a movement, not a sound, came from them even at the sight of the rescuers.

CHAPTER 15.
A Merry Christmas.

"WALLY!"

"Frayne!"

"Oh, the wottah—to tweat them like that! Oh, the scoundrel!" cried Arthur Augustus, half blubbing, as he bent over his minor, and cut away at his bonds with his knife.

The two fags had been tied up, not only their limbs, but together, so that they could not even move. Strips of cloth had been used for the purpose, and the work had been done with cruel and unfeeling thoroughness.

The bonds and the gags were quickly removed, but the two exhausted fags could not move or speak. They lay helpless, numbed, cramped, white, and exhausted.

The juniors chafed their limbs anxiously. Wally and Joe had suffered at the hands of their brutal captor, but the rescuers were only too glad to find them alive.

"Oh!" panted Wally at last. "My only Aunt Jane! This is a go! Have you got that German blackguard?"

"My 'at!" groaned Frayne. "Oh, crikey!"

"We haven't caught him," said Tom Merry. "It was a German, then?"

"Ow! Yes. Some beastly spy, I suppose!" said Wally. "Oh dear! I'm cramped all over! The villain has kept us tied up all day. He let us a bit loose in the daytime, but fastened us up again like this before he left us. And the gags have been in our jaws all the time; he wouldn't trust us not to call out. We've had nothing to eat or drink. What time is it?"

"Midnight," said Blake.

"My only Aunt Jane! Then we've been here more than twenty hours!" said Wally, with a shudder. "It seemed like twenty years!"

But the scamp of the Third was already recovering his spirits. The steady chafing of his limbs was restoring the circulation.

"It's all Gussy's fault!" he added.

"Weally, Wally——"

"Of course it was!" said Wally obstinately. "I told you I wouldn't go to Aunt Adelina's——"

"Oh, you young wascal!"

"So we came and camped out here," said Wally. "Then Frayne went to sleep on the watch—that was after we frightened you bounders out of your wits with a set of amateur theatrical groans."

"You young ass——"

"I jolly well wish we hadn't now!" grunted Wally. "I'd have been glad of your company a bit later, when that beast collared me! Joe went to sleep, the ass——"

"I'm sorry, Master Wally!" murmured Frayne.

"Not that it would have made much difference if he hadn't," admitted Wally. "The German beast was too strong for us, and he might have used his revolver, too, if we'd given him too much trouble. I know he's got one."

"But what happened last night?" demanded Tom Merry.

"I—I woke up," said Frayne, shuddering at the recollection—"I—I woke up, and saw 'im—saw a 'orrid dark figure—sneakin' across the room. I think now he was tryin' to get at the chimbley without wakin' us up. But I gave a jump,

and then he was on me like lightning. He put a big 'and over my mouth, and I couldn't make a sound; and there was Master Wally sleepin' like a top all the time. And when I struggled he hit me over the head with something, and I don't recollect any more of that. I s'pose I was stunned. I know I got a hawful lump on my napper. I got a sort of dreamy reckerlection of being dragged and dragged, and nigh on choked, and I s'pose the villain was dragging me up 'ere, and that's all. When I came to 'ere I was trussed-up like you found me, and Master Wally was tied to me."

"And how did you let him bag you, Wally?"

"I didn't let him bag me!" said Wally indignantly. "I woke up and found the fire out and Joe gone, and yelled to him, and then"—he shivered—"then I heard him in the dark—that villain! I couldn't see him. I did a bolt, and he got hold of me in the dark, and—and then—— I—I don't seem to remember——"

"You fainted—eh?"

"No, I didn't—I never faint!" growled Wally. "What rot! But I don't seem to remember what happened next, not till I found myself tied up here to Frayne. I—I suppose I was too—too sleepy or something."

The juniors grinned. Wally was not likely to admit that he had fainted.

"Give us some of that grub!" said Wally, seating himself on his bag. "We've been watching the German beast eat our grub all day, and never had a mouthful!"

D'Arcy minor and Frayne started on the provisions, and for some time their jaws were too busy for speech. The juniors soon decided upon their plan of action. The lights were extinguished, and they prepared to wait. It was not likely that the German was gone for good. There was a heavy greatcoat in the little cell, which evidently belonged to him, and a leather bag, which was locked.

Doubtless, having hidden in the chimney to escape casual observation, the German had discovered that secret chamber, and had made it his headquarters. He had hidden there while the ruins had been searched, more than once, without a discovery being made; and there was no reason why he should guess that the secret had been discovered now. He would return—and, finding the priory apparently deserted, he would ascend to the secret chamber, expecting to find his prisoners as he had left them. And if he came——

Tom Merry & Co. knew what they would do in that case.

Suddenly, from the silence of the night, there came dull, muffled sounds in the distance, penetrating faintly even to the recess in the old chimney. Talbot gave a faint whisper.

"Rifles!"

The juniors caught their breath.

It was the firing of rifles on the heath, and they knew what that meant—an alarm at the prisoners' camp. Once again the sentries had been too watchful for the German. And if he was being pursued——

They clenched their hands and waited.

Ten minutes later there was a sound below—a sound of scraping, of hurried and panting breathing.

They did not stir.

They knew that someone was climbing the old chimney—that it could only be the German desperado. Hunted by the sentries at the concentration camp, he had returned to his lair, little dreaming of what awaited him there.

The panting breathing was in the narrow passage now—it came closer. The man was almost upon them as they crouched there in the darkness. There was a heavy footstep in the secret chamber, and a light flashed out—an electric-lamp.

The juniors caught a glimpse of an athletic frame, with a heavy German face and cold, cruel, pale-blue eyes. The next instant they were upon him. Talbot caught the electric-lamp from his hand as the other fellows fastened like tigers on the German.

"Ach! Mein Gott!"

The man struggled furiously. Talbot set down the lamp quickly, and piled in with his comrades, getting his arm round the German's bull-neck. The man made a fierce effort to draw a weapon, but he had no chance. There were too many hands upon him. He went down with a crash, the juniors sprawling over him. Blake had one wrist, Lowther had the other. Manners had him round the legs, Talbot round the neck. Wally and Frayne and Tom Merry and D'Arcy piled in where they could. The rascal almost disappeared under the struggling heap of juniors, all anxious to have a "go."

"Ach!"

"Ach as much as you like; we've got you, sonny!" chuckled Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll give him some of his own giddy medicine," grinned Wally. "Hold the beast while I tie him up. And I'll make it tight enough, too."

The German, still resisting, was bound hand and foot. Then he lay regarding his captors with furious eyes, that glittered like a snake's. The panting juniors stood round him triumphantly. There was a sound from below; the sound of heavy footsteps and voices in the old priory.

"He ain't 'ere!" called out a voice.

"Tommy Atkins after him," grinned Tom Merry. "We'll give them a surprise."

He hurried along the narrow passage to the chimney, and called down:

"Hallo, down there!"

"By gosh! Who's that?" came a startled voice from below.

"Looking for somebody?" asked Tom Merry, as a light gleamed up the chimney, and a bewildered man in khaki stared up at him.

"Yes. Have you seen a giddy German? Wot are you doing there, young shaver?"

"What's he been doing?" asked Tom Merry. "The giddy German, I mean?"

"Nosing round the camp," said the soldier. "We fair spotted him this time, but he got away, and my mate says he bunked into these 'ere ruins, but I can't find him. He got into the camp by cuttin' the wire, and he's been talking to a prisoner—a spy, too. If you've seen him—— Wot are you doing there, anyway?"

"Catching your giddy German for you," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "He's here, and we've got him tied up."

"By gosh! Wot sort of a blighted place is this 'ere?" asked Tommy Atkins, staring round the old chimney. "Nice sort of a 'ole, I must say. 'Ow does a chap get up there? I 'spose you got up there somehow."

Tom Merry pointed out the stanchions, and the trooper, slinging his rifle, came up as actively as a cat. He grinned with delight at the sight of the bound German.

"Got him!" he said. "You young shavers 'ad better come along, and give an account of yourselves to my sergeant. And you can lend me a 'and gettin' my man down. My word! What a queer 'ole!"

And Tom Merry & Co. very cheerfully helped Tommy Atkins to march off his prisoner.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Tom Merry & Co. were late down the next morning.

Miss Priscilla Fawcett had the surprise of her life when they came down, and brought Wally and Joe Frayne with them.

Cousin Ethel and Marjorie, who had spent a very anxious night, were overjoyed to see them.

"Dear me!" said Miss Priscilla, as she kissed D'Arcy minor affectionately. "However did you arrive, my dear child?"

"Through the window," said Wally cheerfully. "We came rather late—didn't we, Joe?"

"Which we did!" grinned Joe.

"How very extraordinary!" said Miss Priscilla. "And did you wake up and let them in, Tommy dear?"

Tommy dear laughed.

"I came in with them," he explained.

"Oh, Tommy!"

And over breakfast the tale was told, to the surprise and terror of Miss Priscilla. Now that it was all over, the good old lady, of course, had to be told all about it. And, assured that her dear Tommy had not been hurt, and that the whole party had won great distinction in the capture of a dangerous German spy, Miss Priscilla's delight was great. She insisted that Tom Merry had done it all, in spite of Tom's valiant efforts to point out that it was all really due to Talbot.

The Co. had, indeed, distinguished themselves by that capture. The German had succeeded, at last, in getting speech with the captured spy, whose information he was to send to the Fatherland. And, closely chased as he had been by the men in khaki, he could have lain hidden in his hiding-place till the coast was clear, had not Tom Merry & Co. been on the scene. The dangerous rascal had joined his acquaintance in the prisoners' camp now, and was not likely to get outside the barbed wire again till the end of the war.

Wally and Joe, of course, stayed at Laurel Villa for the holidays, Arthur Augustus despatching a long and reassuring telegram to Aunt Adelina. And the two young rascals had what Wally enthusiastically described as a high old time.

There was a great gathering for Christmas Day and Boxing Day; Figgins & Co. coming, and Kangaroo and his friends turning up, and Herries and Digby. It was a very happy party. And the happiest of all, perhaps, was Talbot of the Shell. For it was the first time in the chequered career of the "Toff" that he had known what was really a Merry Christmas.

THE END.

(Next Wednesday's splendid, long, complet estory of Tom Merry & Co. is entitled "THE FOES OF ST. JIM'S!" Please order your copy in advance.)

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THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF OUR GRAND NEW SERIAL STORY.

OFFICER AND TROOPER.

An Enthralling New Story of Life in the British Army.

Specially Published for Patriotic British Boys.

By BEVERLEY KENT.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS INSTALMENTS.

Bob Hall, a fine, strapping young fellow, in the employ of a moneylender, grows tired of the monotonous clerical life he is leading, and decides to lay down the pen for the sword. By a stroke of great good fortune, he succeeds in joining a crack regiment known as the "Die-Hards." Although he finds a splendid chum in Private Bill Dent, Bob falls foul of a braggart named Goss, and in the fight that ensues gives his adversary a terrific thrashing. In revenge, Goss causes a serious accident to befall Bob in the regimental riding-school. For this he is severely punished by his comrades. A few days later Bob is called up for special guard. While at his post he hears the sound of a struggle in the road, and goes to the aid of a couple of gentlemen who are being attacked by a crook. For neglect of duty Bob is placed immediately under arrest, and brought before the orderly-room. The colonel of the regiment, however, comes to the rescue, and Bob is liberated. A trooper named Smooch having deserted, Bob and two of his comrades are commissioned to go to York and affect his arrest.

(Now go on with the Story.)

Smooch is Released.

"Quite correct!" the governor remarked brusquely. "Here, Ansell, file that." And he pitched the document across the room to a desk where a clerk was seated. "Step outside with your men, corporal. Dunbar, take the escort along, and see if they can identify the prisoner, Christopher Smooch."

The governor carelessly acknowledged the salute of the escort, and immediately busied himself with a huge pile of letters and reports. The warder Dunbar, who had been standing at the door, conducted Brett and his troopers back the way they had come, until they entered a corridor where about twenty prisoners were ranged in a row.

"Pick out your man," he said to Brett.

There was little difficulty in doing that, for Smooch was the only one of the prisoners with any semblance of a military bearing. There was an ugly look in his eyes when Brett tapped him on the shoulder.

"This is Trooper Smooch," he said.

"Right-ho! Come along, till we get him his uniform; then you can cart him off."

"Good job, too!" Smooch growled. "I'm sick of stopping in your hotel!"

"You ain't as glad to go as we are to get rid of you," the warder retorted scornfully. "A chap as runs away—— But there, you'll be paid out time enough, and serve you right!"

Smooch flushed scarlet, his eyes flashed fire, and he checked his fists. Brett commanded him to march on, and he sullenly obeyed. When once again he had donned his uniform, the escort marched him down to the gate. Another warder stopped Brett there.

"You must sign the receipt," he said.

"What receipt?" the corporal demanded.

"The receipt for this bloke's body!"

Dent could hardly stifle a laugh, the idea struck him as so quaint. Brett attached his signature to a document, and then, drawing forth a pair of handcuffs, he slipped them over the prisoner's wrists.

"Right turn! Quick march!"

The massive gates of the prison were flung open, and the escort, with Smooch in the centre, stepped out on to the road. Dent, who had known Smooch well in the ranks, tried to console him as they marched along, but the prisoner retained a sulky silence, and his face was working with passion. A crowd quickly gathered, as crowds always do under such circumstances, and before long the escort was surrounded by fifty or sixty navvies, emerging from work for the dinner-hour.

Sympathy was with the prisoner, for evidently he was in trouble, and that of itself was enough to stir the good-hearted crowd. They began to close in on the escort, the better to question Smooch as to the cause of his arrest, but without any intention of attempting a rescue, when suddenly the prisoner wheeled round, the handcuffs fell with a clang to the pavement, and he struck Brett, who was marching behind, a terrific blow, which lifted him off his feet.

"Help! Help!"

The Deserter Brought Back.

Dent seized Smooch, as the latter shouted passionately, and Bob, standing before the two men as they wrestled together, yelled to the crowd to stand back. They came with a rush, though, carried away by the excitement of the moment, and the lad was flung to one side.

Springing forward again, he knocked over a huge navvy, pushed a couple more aside, and jumped to Dent's assistance. He was seized by the tunic-collar, pulled back, and flung to the ground.

The crowd rushed over him, knocking him down again as he struggled to rise. At last, bruised and shaken, he managed to get his footing, and for some seconds he was carried backwards and forwards in the whirl of excited humanity. Half-dazed and with his head smarting from the fall, he saw a red coat disappearing in a throng down an alleyway some distance ahead, and, without pausing to seek his comrades, he managed to break loose, and dashed after the fugitive, the crowd following in hot pursuit.

Smooch was disappearing into a doorway, his rescuers hurriedly urging him along as Bob came in view. Some of the men turned round and tried to stop Bob; but, swerving as if on the football field, the lad managed to elude the extended hands, and safely got into the doorway.

Across the hall and up the creaking stairs he bounded after Smooch, who, reaching the top flight, dragged himself through the skylight and on to the roof. The escaped prisoner tried to close the skylight, but Bob's shoulders were through; so, turning quickly, Smooch crawled along the slates, seeking some means of escape. Bob went after him, and at last, catching him by the ankle, he clung on for dear life.

Both were in imminent danger of rolling off and falling into the street, as Smooch continued desperately to struggle; but the lad's blood was up, and he cared little what happened. One thing was certain, he would never let go of his prisoner now that he had caught him again.

Below, the crowd shouted hoarsely—women shrieked,

children screamed, and above the din was heard the shrill summons of a policeman's whistle.

"Do you hear that, you fool?" Bob gasped, as he strove to pin Smooch to the slates. "If the police come, you'll be put in quod, and you'll only get worse punishment."

"I don't care a rap!" Smooch cried, in a choking voice. "I ain't going back to barracks! I'd sooner do time for ten years! That cur of a corporal won't have a chance of bullying me again!"

"Rot! You'd better give in! You'll have to come, whether you like it or no. I've got you now, and as long as there's an ounce of strength in my body, I'll——"

"Hallo—hallo!"

Bob turned his head for half a second. Dent was crawling along the slates towards them, grinning from ear to ear.

"Bully for you, Bob!" he gurgled. "Cling on to him all you know. Smooch, you're the silliest terror I ever dropped on!"

"Where's Brett?" Bob shouted.

"I dunno! He'll be here pretty quick, I reckon. Half York is running this way. Ah, now we've got him! Drag the idiot along, and let us get out of this!"

They hauled Smooch, still struggling violently, along the slates. Dent grasped him by the tunic-collar, and Bob, jumping down on the top landing, gripped him by the legs, despite his frantic kicks and plunges. As the desperate private dropped on the floor, he again struggled wildly for freedom; but Dent had soon come to Bob's assistance, and between them they held him securely, as Brett raced panting up the stairs.

"Got him?" the corporal yelled. "Hurrah—hurrah! Haul him along, and let's get out of this den with whole bones whilst we have the chance!"

"The police are coming," Bob urged. "I heard the whistle a minute ago. If we take him out through the front door——"

Half a dozen navvies were swarmnig up the stairs.

"Stand back, there!" Brett thundered. "You chaps have done enough mischief as it is! You may think it a fine game to play up this way, but it's our prisoner who'll suffer. If any of you dare to come farther, I'll loose off, for, I tell you straight, I'm not having any more of your nonsense!"

"No harm meant, maister," the foremost of the rough crowd urged apologetically. "We've come to help you and the bloke as is in trouble. There's a way out o' here that will get you away from the crowd, and you can slip off unbenoticed. Down the stairs, that's right. Shove open the door, Bill! Now, out you go, and we'll send the bobbies up on the roof. By the time they twig they're on the false scent you'll have vamped!"

The escort and prisoner stepped out on to a small court-yard, and, passing under an archway, they entered a narrow, silent thoroughfare, with high warehouses on either side. Far away they could hear the hoarse shouts of the crowd, like the dull roar of the waves.

Brett stopped short, and faced Smooch.

"Well, are you sick of yourself?" he demanded sternly. "You nearly got us all into trouble, and I don't know as I ever did you any harm. All you could have gained by this nonsense would have been a few more hours' liberty, and then you'd have been punished twice as bad. What's more, you knocked me down, and striking a superior officer is a crime, as you know well. If I liked, I could pay you out!"

"I was fair wild," Smooch muttered. His face was now pale with excitement and exhaustion. "If all the non-coms. were like you, I wouldn't——"

"What's the matter with them?" Brett rapped out.

"Oh, they're right enough! It was only one I was thinking of."

"One that has something to do with Barrack-room Six?" Dent inquired quickly.

"Yes."

"That explains it. Now I know why Barrack-room Six was so mighty high and haughty."

"Well, you are going to come quietly now, anyhow?" Brett demanded of the prisoner.

"Yes; I give you my parole."

"Right-ho! Then let's make for the station and clear out of here afore the police can spot us. None of us want any trouble we can avoid, and we don't bear you any malice, Smooch. I forget that you struck me and that you resisted arrest."

"Ay, ay," Dent agreed cordially. "We all try to pal together in the Die-Hards."

Escort and prisoner, without more ado, struck out for the station without any outward show of custody; and as they reached the platform a train was starting for London. They took their seats in an empty compartment, and Brett produced his tobacco-pouch.

"Got a pipe?" he inquired of Smooch.

"Yes."

"Well, load it. Heigho! I'm glad that dust-up is over. Say, Bob, if it wasn't for you I'd have stood a chance of losing my stripe."

They reached Aldershot late at night, and got into barracks unobserved. When Smooch had been handed over to the guard, Brett and the two troopers strolled away.

"Well, we've had a good time, and a bit of excitement we didn't reckon on," Brett grinned. "It was touch-and-go for a bit, though. Poor Smooch, he looks fair upset."

"He always was an odd chap, and he can't stand being chipped," Dent remarked. "I'm sorry for him, in a way. You're very silent, Bob. A penny for your thoughts, lad!"

"I've been thinking about Smooch, and I fancy he's not a bad sort," Bob explained. "Say, Dent, don't you think we could get him round if we had him exchanged into our barrack-room? He's an excitable, nervous sort of chap, and he wants friends, I fancy."

"Mebbe it might do him a bit of good. What do you think, corporal?"

"I dare say Knox is right," Brett replied. "We'll try, anyhow."

And thus, at Bob's suggestion, a kindly act was done, for which he was repaid to the full later on, when he himself was the victim of disgrace, and his life was in danger.

Bob Overhears a Shameful Plot.

"Now, then, you lubber, look sharp, else I'll warm your ear for you!"

The speaker was Corporal Cole, a non-com., universally disliked in the Die-Hards, and Bob Hall flushed crimson as, hanging his equipment on the rack above his cot, he turned to follow him out of the barrack-room.

"None of your skulking when on duty with me!" Cole continued harshly. "You're a sight too big for your boots considerin' you only joined recently. I'll show you that it doesn't pay to meddle in my business! Now, cling on to that bucket and swab down that passage-way. If it ain't to my liking when you've done, I'll start you right over the job again!"

Cole paused and glared at Bob, hoping that the latter might make some reply which he could construe into an insult to his superior officer. But the lad had been long enough in the regiment to know what class of man Cole was, so, without word in reply, he started to work vigorously. The corporal watched him for some seconds, till, finding there was nothing to which he could take exception, he muttered some further threats and strode away.

"So that's the game, is it?" Bob murmured when left to himself. "You've got your knife into me for befriending Smooch, I see. Well, he's out of your clutches now, and it won't be long before you'll have nothing to say to me either. No, Corporal Cole, I'm not such a fool as to fall into the trap you've laid for me. I'm to get my stripe any day now, and you may nag all you like. I'm not going to lose it for the sake of punching your ugly head. Not much!"

Bob scrubbed with a will, for fatigue duty was often in the day's work, and he was quite content to take the rough with the smooth. In twenty minutes' time he had backed half-way down the corridor with his bucket, and then, still kneeling, he paused for a short spell. A door a couple of yards away was ajar, and a loud laugh reached him, followed by the buzz of voices. Bob identified some of the speakers at once; they were the younger subalterns in the regiment.

"That's Wilkins!" the lad reflected. "I wonder what the joke is that tickled him? To judge by his hatchet face it would take a lot to make him grin."

"It won't do!" a voice remarked. "Groves is too old a soldier for that! Can't you think of some other way, Mayers, by which we can pay the cad out for his cheek in joining the regiment?"

Bob's eyes grew round with wonder as he heard this speech, for Lieutenant Groves, commissioned to the Die-Hards on his promotion from the ranks, was one of the most capable and pleasant officers with whom the men had to deal.

"Half a mo'!" another subaltern cried. "Why not play up old Harry in his rooms? The chap is nearly stony-broke, and it's just possible he may clear out if it falls on him to buy a new kit. At all events, we'll be quit of him for a bit, except on parade, for he won't have the spare cash to accept invitations, and that sort of thing."

"Bully for you, Forsyth!" Wilkins laughed uproariously. "We'd better start at once! I saw Groves going into the town an hour ago, and he won't be back for a spell yet, probably. Come along! We'll give him something to look at when he returns."

"No, no; not yet!" another subaltern explained. "We must wait for Jennings. He'd be fair wild if he was kept out of the fun!"

Bob stood up, and, seizing his bucket, he stepped noiselessly away. He had no wish to overhear this or any other conversation, but now that he had learned of the cowardly prank about to be played, his honest heart rebelled. Groves was a good officer and a straightforward man. Why, then, should his belongings be destroyed and his feelings outraged? To Bob Hall the proposal seemed a most dastardly one, and he forthwith resolved to thwart it if he could.

"Nice row there'd be if one of us ran amuck and smashed up the chaps' equipments in the barrack-room, and yet we're only privates!" he muttered. "These coves would come down pretty hot on the chap who played a game like that! And yet they're not above such a low trick themselves. Well, if I have the luck to find Groves, I wouldn't care to be in any of their shoes!"

As Bob turned the corner of the corridor he heard a footfall on the winding stairs, and, thinking it might be Cole, he laid down his bucket and began to scrub for dear life. He was thus busily engaged when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and a laughing voice addressed him:

"That's right, put your back into it, my man! All the same, though, I'd be obliged if you'd make room for me to pass."

Bob scrambled to his feet and stood to one side, as Groves, nodding cheerily, passed on to his rooms. For some moments the lad watched his retreating figure hesitatingly. Now that the moment had come he did not quite know what to do. Groves might resent his interference, for, after all, he was only a private, and he knew from experience that the officers kept their affairs to themselves. Yet, if he was to act, he must do so at once."

"I'll chance it!" he murmured; and, without more ado, he marched along the corridor and tapped at the door.

"Come in!" Groves shouted heartily.

Bob entered the room, to find the lieutenant changing from mufti into his mess uniform.

"Hallo! What do you want?" Groves rapped out in astonishment. "Where's my batman, by the way? He hasn't asked you to take his place, has he?"

"No, sir," Bob replied. "I've come to my own accord—that is, I want to speak to you, if I may."

"Certainly, Hall; only you choose a rum time for doing so. However, fire away! What's the trouble?"

"I was scrubbing down the corridor just now, sir, and some of the officers were in Mr. Wilkins's quarters, and I couldn't help overhearing what they said."

Groves wheeled round and gazed sternly at the private.

"Humph! I don't like that sort of thing! Why didn't you let them know you were there?"

Bob flushed a trifle under that penetrating glance.

"I hadn't time, sir. They mentioned your name, and what they said gave me a fair start."

It was now Groves' turn to get red. He knew that he was not popular with his brother-officers, but he had hoped that the men were unaware of the fact. Apparently he was mistaken, he thought, and now probably Bob Hall, when he went back amongst his chums, would have further gossip to give them as to the doings in the mess.

"I can't see, still, why you should have listened to a private conversation," he remarked coldly, "nor have I any wish to know what my brother-officers said about me. I'm well able to look after myself; and in any case, as you must know, there's always a lot of talk whenever a crowd of people are living together. Take my advice, and don't meddle in matters that don't concern you. No good can come from that sort of thing, and——"

Bob drew himself to his full height.

"I'm about the last chap living who cares for meddling," he replied quickly. "But there's a plot against you, sir, and I——"

"A plot?"

"Yes. A plot to drive you out of the regiment. Wilkins and half a dozen more are coming to your rooms to smash up your kit. They're only waiting for Lieutenant Jennings to join them before they start."

Groves' face had grown dark with passion as Bob spoke.

"You know this for a fact?" he thundered.

"Wait and see for yourself. They may be here any moment."

The lieutenant strode to his press, and quickly bundled his uniforms into his tin trunks, which he carefully locked. Then he beckoned to Bob to follow him out of the room.

The two crossed the corridor and entered an empty room. There they stood and listened. They had not long to wait, however, for in a couple of minutes they heard steps along the passage, and, peeping through the keyhole, Groves saw four of the subalterns slip into his room. He stepped across, closed the door, and locked it quickly.

"Come along to the adjutant!" he whispered. "Look sharp, or else they'll escape!"

The immured officers rapped loudly with their fists against the door, as, breaking into a run, Groves and Bob started for the adjutant's quarters. His rooms were on the next landing, and they mounted the stairs swiftly. Captain Hamshaw, the adjutant, seated in an armchair by the fire, looked round in amazement as the pair hurriedly entered.

"What's up?" he cried.

"This man has reported to me that some of the subalterns mean to smash up my kit, Hamshaw!" Groves cried. His face was working with excitement and wrath. "They're in my room now. I've come to you as the adjutant of the regiment to complain formally, and if they injure any of my property I'll—I won't stop at anything! I'll have them court-martialled! I'll——"

"Impossible!" Hamshaw cried, springing to his feet. "There must be some mistake! The officers in this regiment wouldn't——"

"I tell you I've locked them in my room!" Groves shouted. "They're there now, and they can't get out. If you come along, you'll see for yourself that——"

The tall adjutant strode to the door and clattered down the stairs, followed by Groves and Bob. As he entered the lower corridor, he heard the noise inside Groves' room, and he saw Cole hastening to the spot.

"Stand back, corporal!" he thundered.

And Cole, with a face of amazement, paused and wheeled round. Hamshaw brushed past him.

"Open the door!" he commanded of Groves.

The lieutenant took the key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock, gave it a turn, seized the handle, and flung the door wide open. Wilkins and his confederates were standing in a group in the middle of the room. Hamshaw walked in and looked around.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked icily. "What do you fellows want in Groves' quarters?"

Wilkins was the first to regain his self-possession. He laughted lightly.

"Well, of all the extraordinary things I ever saw, this takes the biscuit!" he cried. "We chaps came along to see Groves, and someone locked us in. We banged at the door to get out, and now you and Groves appear, both of you looking as black as thunder, and——"

"You came here to see Groves?" Hamshaw queried.

"Yes. Of course."

"You didn't mean to injure his kit?"

The other subalterns had taken their cue from Wilkins, and now they looked at one another in simulated astonishment.

"To injure his kit!" Wilkins gasped. "Not likely! Whatever put such a wild idea as that in your head? If it wasn't you, adjutant, who——"

"Liar!" Groves shouted. "You were overheard planning your villainy. Private Hall here was outside the door, and he reported to me what you said."

For a moment the conspirators looked aghast.

"You'd better retract that word, Groves," Wilkins said at last, as his face grew crimson. "I don't allow any man to call me names."

Groves stepped forward and gave Wilkins a resounding slap across the cheek.

"Liar and cur!" he cried. "That's what I call you. You and these other puppies have had a down on me ever since I joined, but, by heavens, I'll stand no more of it!"

Hamshaw seized Groves and dragged him back. Wilkins, trembling in every limb, and white to the lips, turned to the adjutant.

"You see what we gained by allowing a ranker into our midst!" he sneered. "This cad forgets that he's no longer a private, and——"

The sentence was never ended, for, shaking off Hamshaw's detaining hand, Groves sprang forward and felled his traducer to the floor.

The Regiment Gets Out of Hand.

A great cloud had fallen on the Die-Hards, and as the men went about their work it was hard to believe that they were the bright, merry crowd of a day before. Every face was gloomy, the work was done in silence and indifferently, and in spare time they gathered in small knots, sullenly regarding their officers as they passed, and whispering confidentially together.

Upstairs, at the corner of the barracks, Lieutenant Groves, under arrest for conduct misbecoming to an officer and a gentleman, sat in his room looking out of the window on to the men below. In the centre of the square, Bob Hall, attired in full marching order, tramped up and down, wheeled round, stood to attention, marched forward again, halted, turned, and moved once more in one continued, irritating maze, as Cole, standing a few yards away, put him for the third time that day through all the horrors of pack-drill.

The lad was drenched with perspiration from head to foot, and still the relentless voice rang out every couple of seconds, bidding him turn and twist within a radius of half a dozen yards.

"'Tain't fair!" Bill Dent growled, as he watched the lad at the mercy of his enemy. "Bob's not the kind to shirk work; he's too keen on soldiering."

"Groves is a good sort, too!" Hosty growled.

"That's so! We haven't heard the rights of the matter yet, Harry, but when Bob gets out of the clutches of that cur Cole for a spell, we'll learn what the trouble has been. And if what the chap says is true, then there'll be such a rumpus as—— Hallo! Cole's tired out! He's let Bob go at last!"

The corporal was sauntering away, as Bob Hall, pale, exhausted, and dizzy, slowly made his way past his chums to his barrack-room. They let him go on without comment, and as he disappeared into the barracks every man belonging to his room followed from all corners of the square. They found the object of their quest lying on his bunk, with his tunic and equipment thrown down upon the floor. He had just managed to drag himself up the stairs, and now he lay prostrate with weakness. Dent poured out a glass of water, and the lad drank it eagerly.

"What's the row been about?" Dent inquired. "The chaps say as Groves struck one of the other officers, and you mixed yourself up in the scrap. Let's have the truth, Bob. Every bloke is spinning a different yarn.'"

Bob sat up and mopped his face.

"There's been no end of a row!" he remarked. "Wilkins and some other subalterns wanted to rag Groves, and I got wind of it. Groves caught 'em in his room, and fetched the adjutant. Wilkins denied that he meant mischief, and after some words Groves knocked him down. I was there, and that's why Groves has been put under arrest. Cole had given me the job of swabbing the corridor, and when Groves was marched off to his room he turned upon me. I hadn't finished the work, because I had been talking to Groves, you see, so Wilkins, to pay me out, then and there ordered me 'pack drill.' Cole, of course, is delighted, for he's had his knife in me since I got Smooch out of his clutches."

"Of course, Groves was wrong to hit his brother officer in presence of a private," Hosty suggested. "If they'd had a row amongst themselves, it would have been a different matter."

"But why did they want to rag Groves?" Dent demanded.

"Because he's sprung from the ranks," Bob explained. Wilkins taunted him with that, and then Groves let fly."

The privates turned and gazed at one another in breathless astonishment.

"Groves has proved himself a good man by earning his promotion, and he's tons a better officer than some of these smooth-faced young whelps!" Delmege cried excitedly.

"He's the best sub we've got, and he's fit to command a squadron!" Bolt shouted. "It's only the other day I heard the sergeant-major say the same."

"I'd sooner have him over us than that puppy Wilkins, whom we have to put up with!" another private remarked hotly.

"'Tain't good enough!" Dent growled. "Here's the case of Bob, too; what's he done that he should be treated as a defaulter?"

"Nothing!" the barrack-room then cried in chorus.

The lad was now hitching his equipment on the rack, and he turned quickly as he heard the excited voices.

"Don't bother about me, chaps," he urged. "Cole has got a down on me, and he's done this out of spite; but I'll get even with him yet. It's hard lines on Groves, though, for if he'd remained quiet these young cubs would have destroyed his kit and shoved him out of the regiment in that mean way, and when he played the part of a man he only got into trouble."

"And all because he's been a private!" Delmege argued hotly. "What do these chaps think themselves, anyhow? I s'pose they fancy they ain't of the same flesh and blood as we are! Where would the regiment be if we fellows didn't join, and work hard, and fight when called upon? They don't s'pose they could lick creation by themselves, do they? All right; just wait till the blokes get wind of the truth! There'll be a rumpus then, I bet!"

As Delmege spoke, he wheeled round and stamped out of the room. Bolt, Hosty, and half a dozen other troopers followed his example. Bob looked wistfully at Dent.

"You'd better go after them and cool them down, Bill," he urged. "They can't do any good, and there'll only be the more mischief if the chaps take it into their heads to sulk."

Dent sat down on the bunk. His face was dogged.

"Let 'em kick up what row they like!" he granted. "They only want fair play, and that's what we'll have always, or we'll know the reason why. If we chaps took this sort of thing lying down, Wilkins and his crew would walk right over us. Let there be a row—a regular, thunderin' row! And the sooner it starts the better. Hang it all, Bob, Cole must be a fair brute, for there goes the 'Angel Whisper' again!"

The trumpet had sounded the defaulter's call, and Bob rose from his bunk at the command.

"Yes; Cole is keeping me on the trot," he remarked wearily. "I know what his game is. He wants to wear me out, and goad me into doing something insubordinate when he's badgered me beyond all endurance."

Stiff, tired, and heavy-eyed, the lad walked from the room to answer the summons. Cole was in the square, and as the lad moved towards him a crowd of troopers flocked out from the gymnasium. Their faces were flushed, and they moved forward in a body like men who had decided on a definite course of action.

They pushed forward till they got under the windows of Groves' room, when, taking off their caps, they broke into ringing cheers, repeated again and again.

The lusty voices awoke the sleepy barracks. From all quarters other troopers came hurrying in couples, singles, and batches, and as the crowd grew larger and more excited the volume of sound rose to a hoarse roar which could be heard half-way to the town.

Officers protruded their heads in startled amazement from all the windows, and the non-coms., rushing from their mess-room, pushed their way into the seething mass, vainly endeavouring to calm and disperse the gathering.

"What's the reason for this?" Cole snarled, as Bob joined him. "You young cub, if you've caused the men to mutiny you'll catch it hot. Just like you, though, to carry tales, and tell lies, and——"

Cole dashed forward and joined the band of non-coms., and Bob, dismayed at the outbreak, followed quickly.

Groves, standing at his window, was shouting to the troopers to go away, but as his lips moved the soldiers cheered still more wildly, and drowned his voice in the clamour.

"Three cheers for Lieutenant Groves! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! Three cheers for the soldiers' best friend! Good old Groves! Plucky old Groves! The best officer in the Die-Hards! Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

The officers rushed out on the square, the sergeant-major yelled stentoriously, the quartermaster elbowed his way into the middle of the throng, and was whisked about like a cork in a whirlpool, the colonel laid about him with his cane, the adjutant dragged half a dozen troopers away, and tried by sheer strength to quell the riot, and all the time the men, growing more wild and throwing discipline to the winds, swayed backwards and forwards regardless of all attempts to calm them down.

"This is Hall's doing!" Cole yelled to the colonel. "He's stirred up the men to mutiny, sir. The young villain ought to be shot! He's——"

"Drag him out!" the colonel thundered. "Clap him in the guard-room! By heavens, I'll stop this row, or else——"

Cole dashed at Bob, and seized him. Hosty and Dent flung themselves on the corporal, and dragged him away. The other troopers closed round the scuffling group, and the colonel was driven back, and would have fallen if Hamshaw had not caught him.

Shaking himself free, Cole, with face livid with passion, rushed at Bob again. A terrific scuffle ensued. Clenched fists were raised, and blows followed freely between the non-coms. and the men as the swirling crowd eddied away from the windows in a thick mass towards the centre of the square.

In that vortex of passionate humanity it was impossible to see between whom the hard knocks were exchanged; but Cole, having received a black eye, dashed again at Bob, and struck him in the mouth. The lad, enraged at the assault, hit back with all his strength, and Cole fell with a shriek.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Bob Hall for ever! We'll have fair play! Down with all sneaks! Stick together, lads!"

Bob was grasped, and, though struggling desperately, he was raised on to the shoulders of his comrades. The troopers broke out into renewed cheering, snatches of song followed, yells and imprecations filled the air.

What could be the reason for it all? What could have made them delirious with wrath? And as the colonel stood aghast, and the non-coms., by expostulation, reasoning, and appeals, struggled to restore order, the troopers every moment grew more and more out of hand, and yelled for that fair play which the colonel had always boasted they enjoyed to the full.

"No ragging in this regiment! No bullying corporals! Down with the curs! Hurrah for Bob Hall and plucky old Groves!"

(Another grand instalment of this story will appear next Wednesday. ORDER IN ADVANCE!)

FROM THE FIRING-LINE!

A Series of Letters of Enthralling Interest received direct from Corporal Charles, of his Majesty's —th Dragoons, who is an old reader of "The Gem" Library, and is now on active service on the Continent with the British Expeditionary Force.

(Exclusive to "The Gem" Library.)

No. 12.—

THE FIGHT FOR A VILLAGE!

I think it's a cruel shame the Kaiser should give us cavalry so little work to do, so few chances of showing his pet ewe-lambs—as we call his Uhlans—a few tricks of our trade.

Here we are, the King's Dragoons, fit as a fiddle, keen as a razor, despite day and night bombardments, fogs, and icy winds, and ankle-deep mud, simply dying to get in the saddle and give the Kaiser's beauties what for, while the silly old josser is still obsessed with the idea of winning a way to Calais, and we cavalry boys have to wait till he's got tired of having his hordes mown down by the thousand.

We threatened to go on strike if they didn't give us more work to do, so they put us in the trenches.

We found some work then, with a vengeance. Still, Tommy's a wonderful chap. He sees the humorous side of everything. When we relieved the infantry they gave us their residential quarters. They'd made sort of caves, after burrowing like rabbits in the trenches, as retreats from bursting "Jack Johnsons." We've got a board up over the entrance, "Hotel de Tipperary. At home to the Germans—always. Beware of the dawg!"

As I believe it's never been known before this war for cavalry to fight from the trenches, I'll give you a few words about my experiences there.

It happened round about Ypres, which we call "Wipers," and which has been the scene of the most terrific slaughter the world has known.

The Kaiser, poor, demented creature, apparently made up his mind to win a way through the town to Calais or Boulogne, and so he sent up battalion after battalion of his squareheads. On they came in close formation. As fast as our infantry in the trenches bowled them over, another lot followed. I could make your heart ache by telling you how thousands of German lives were ruthlessly squandered by their mad master.

Thousands upon thousands of them were mown down, and still they kept coming on. They were ten to one, perhaps more, but our lads did marvellous work. Maxims and rifles were almost worn out through constant firing at the foe, and so, too, were the brave lads behind the weapons.

Night and day, with scarcely an hour's pause, the Kaiser's hosts kept marching up to be shot down. Our brave boys had no time for food or sleep or anything. There was nothing the cavalry could do to help them, save by taking their places in the trenches.

Bayonets were served out to us, and then we passed into the trenches after dark. We'd hardly taken up our positions, before the Germans came on like a great moving wall. We let fly as fast as we could empty our magazines. Still they came on. We had to get out and hurl them back with the bayonet.

That settled them. The Germans have pluck of a peculiar kind. They come on in close formation without fear—I suppose they think there's safety in numbers—but directly they see the cold steel they squirm and bolt like a horde of rats.

The usual result happened. They got back to the safety of their own lines, and then their artillery set to work. When you whack the Kaiser's pets they always skedaddle, and they always retaliate by letting off their big popguns, which make more noise than damage.

For four days and nights we were continuously in the trenches, eating and sleeping there, and only getting out, a few at a time, to stretch our weary limbs at dusk for a little exercise. And all the time there was a terrific shell-fire going on. Artillery duels all day, infantry attacks at night—that's the programme.

The enemy were only seven hundred yards away. During daylight everlasting sniping goes on, except when they make their mad rushes forward. The mere sight of a cap above the trench brings a hail of bullets, but yards off the mark.

One of our wags made a bullseye target out of a square of cardboard, and stuck it up above the trench on a rifle. The Germans must have loosed off about ten pounds' worth of ammunition before they got an "inner." Not in the hour the target was up did one of them get a "bull," even by accident.

The Germans put a target up above one of their own trenches. It's not boasting when I tell you that in the first minute it was so riddled with shot that it was practically destroyed. I suppose their officers were ashamed of their men's marksmanship, for there were no more targets put up.

Still, we were mighty pleased when the weather brightened up a bit, and we were relieved. After a few hours' rest we were ordered to "boot and saddle."

The rumour went round that the German cavalry were getting active again. It was hinted that the Kaiser had given up the road to Calais as a bad job, and was going back to his beloved Shermany, accompanied by der Sherman band.

If a German retreat was on the boards, you can bet our lads in the cavalry wanted to have a hand—and all the rest of 'em, in fact—in it.

We were ordered to make for the river. Sure enough, the Uhlans were busy on the other side. We had something of a scrap for a time, but it was getting dark, and the Germans weren't anxious to remain within shooting distance.

The difficulty that faced us was how we were going to cross the river, swollen by the heavy rains and the floodings, by which the Allies had forced the enemy from round about Dixmude.

All the bridges were destroyed, and for miles up and down the river the few shallow spots and fords were being well watched by detachments of German infantry with machine-guns.

"Who'll volunteer to force a passage?" cried our old colonel.

There was no lack of lads willing. Half a dozen times sections of us endeavoured to force one of the fords, but it was simply throwing away lives before those murderous quick-firers.

At nightfall a certain member of our troop, whom modesty forbids my mentioning, made a suggestion to our dear old chief. He smacked him heartily on the back.

"Bravo!" he cried. "It's about the only way we'll get across. If it comes off trumps, I'll see that there's a medal for somebody."

About nine o'clock, therefore, when it was pitch-dark, this cavalryman and a chum crept down to the river. They stripped, and plunged into the icy water at a point between two fording-places. There were camp-fires in sight on either side of them when they landed, dragging a cable after them.

That job accomplished, it was comparatively easy for a rough pontoon bridge to be slung across the river. Some of

(Continued on page iii. of cover.)

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us crossed, and took up positions. In the first streaks of dawn the remainder crossed with the horses.

Those who had been there since overnight had made a reconnaissance. At once we moved quietly into a wood half a mile or so from the river. To our surprise, it was untenanted.

Through this we moved, almost holding our breaths lest we should disturb the Kaiser's pets finishing their slumbers.

"Don't forget, corporal," the colonel told me, "there are only eighty of us. Don't attack unless you have a very favourable opportunity."

This was because I had been given charge of a patrol sent out to feel the way. Under cover of a mist we crept towards a village. Thanks to the darkness, we were able to get right into the place. The Germans were there in droves, and so sure were they, that they had not even got sentries out.

The market-place was crowded with horses. Cavalrymen of all sorts were loafing about the place smoking cigars, whilst from the houses came ribald laughter. It was evident, though we did not venture near enough to actually see, that the Germans were having brekker, in which looted wine was playing a big part.

In less than half an hour we were back before the colonel.

"Well done, my lads!" he exclaimed. "It's a chance to act at once. We'll pay 'em a surprise visit."

The fight—quite a tuppeny-ha'penny affair—was all over in about ten minutes. About a couple of hundred of them got away. We were too busy rounding up the main body to prevent a lot of them getting their horses and bolting, but the eighty of us, with not a man of us scratched, took back to the river two hundred and fifty prisoners, which wasn't at all a bad bag before lunch.

Our adventures at the village, however, were not over. When we had handed over our prisoners, we were ordered to move back to the village and keep it at all costs.

Twenty men had been left behind, I amongst them. In the afternoon our patrols announced the oncoming of a large force of mounted men. As we learnt afterwards, they were some of the cavalry we had routed earlier in the day.

Four to five hundred strong they were. It was obvious they had orders to hack their way back and capture the village. Twenty of our lads, plucky as they are, could not hope to hold out long against that crowd in a hand-to-hand fight.

A dozen of us hid our horses in some farmsheds, and then split up, each man entering a cottage and posting himself at one of the upper windows. The other mounted chaps divided into two patrols, and made themselves scarce for the time being.

On came the Kaiser's squareheads, making a brave show, and chuckling at the empty state of the village.

Not a man of us showed himself until the Germans got right into the middle of the market-place, then from a dozen cottages a dozen rifles opened fire. There was a lusty British yell from the windows. My word! What fun! We picked 'em off as easy as shelling peas. They didn't know what to make of it.

The horses reared and backed and bolted in panic. Their riders were in just as miserable a plight. Some of 'em fired back, but most of 'em were too precious anxious to keep whole skins to stay long.

And all the time we potted the beauties as fast as we could pull the trigger. We got hoarse with yelling, too. They must have thought there was at least a hundred snipers in the various cottages. Anyway, for the second time that day the village was the scene of a panic and a German rout.

The two sets of patrols came up, one at each end of the village, and charged through and through them as if the Germans were made of brown-paper. The slaughter was terrific. Out of the village the Germans galloped, only to re-form a few minutes later and return to the attack.

This time they showed grim determination and pluck. Perhaps they had twigged our game. They clattered into the village. Half a dozen dismounted before each house, battering open the door and rushing inside.

We held our own, however, for an hour. The Kaiser's pets were not to be done. They got petrol from somewhere and started to set some of the cottages alight. But before their desperate scheme could get properly into working order, our colonel and the rest of the troop galloped into the village. That settled their hash.

Net result—a dozen very tired but very happy King's Dragoons came downstairs into the street with no wounds worth making a fuss about, and another fifty-three German prisoners and as many dead and wounded were added to the list.

THE END.

(Do not miss our soldier chum's further stirring letters from the front, which appear in next Wednesday's "Gem" Library.)

THIS WEEK'S CHAT.

The Editor's Personal Column.

For Next Wednesday—

"THE FOES OF ST. JIM'S!"

By Martin Clifford.

In next Wednesday's grand long, complete tale of the chums of St. Jim's the fun rules fast and furious. Herr Schneider, the German master, makes himself very objectionable, especially when airing his views on the national crisis. When war broke out the Herr was of the opinion that the Germans would speedily land on our shores. True, a large number of them have already landed—as prisoners of war. Matters reach a head when the French and German masters fall out, and many exciting events occur ere

"THE FOES OF ST. JIM'S"

are pacified, and things resume their usual footing.

THE ANTI-GEM SOCIETY.

A few weeks ago I published on this page an attack upon the "Gem" Library, emanating from a Robert Carlton, who signed himself as president of the above society. I have since received quite a shower of communications, describing Master Carlton's conduct as

caddish in the extreme.

I append a letter received from two Leamington chums. It sums up the situation nicely:

"Dear Editor,—In reply to Master Robert Carlton's letter, we should like to mention a few things in connection therewith:

"1. The stories in the 'Gem' aren't nearly so impossible as Bobbie. Does he expect to find a copy of the 'Gem' similar to an Encyclopædia Britannica, with Russia leather cover, and gilt-edged leaves, for a modest penny?

"2. Why is he so down on the fact that certain letters are not answered in the 'Gem'? If he has any sense he will know that it is impossible to publish sixty letters each week in a penny paper. What room would there be for the stories?

"3. We don't doubt that the joke prizes go abroad if Bobbie's letter is a specimen of what he calls humour. It is very kind of him to consider terms with the Editor, but we are not anticipating the collapse of the 'Gem' through Bobbie's efforts, and shall call round for ours as usual every week.

"P.S.—Instead of Bobbie giving the Editor two weeks to come to terms, if we had our way we should give Bobbie six months', without the option!

"Yours truly,

"B. H. NOWELL,

"R. BUTTERWORTH."

One of my Lancashire chums, L. Mahon, writes as follows:

"Having seen the letter from the president of the Anti-Gem Society, I am writing to give my opinion of it. I think that the principles of such a league are utter rot, and only a coward would write such a letter and refrain from giving his address. I am sure that no boy would desert your splendid paper because of his wild statements."

To these and to all other reader-chums who have written to me on this subject,

many thanks!

Loyalty seems to be the keynote of the "Gem," and the Anti-Gem Society may congratulate itself in so far as, instead of causing others to give up the old paper, it has been the means of inducing readers to rally round and keep the "Gem" on a firmer footing than ever. As for Master Carlton, I fear he must hide

his diminished head.

One of my correspondents advises me to "write him a stiff letter," but as the worthy president has withheld his address, I am, of course, unable to do this. However, if this page meets his eye, he cannot fail to be struck by the scorn and contempt in which he is held by all true Gemites. Without wishing to pose as an injured individual, I really think that Master Carlton would be wise to

write and apologise

for his somewhat slanderous statements, thus putting himself right with his fellows and ensuring peace all round.

THE EDITOR.

THE STORY OF ST. JIM'S

By the ST. JIM'S RHYMESTER

A SCHOOL that always was a school!
Its story soon is told!
No castle keep or dungeon cool,
It isn't even old——
At least, compared with Rookwood or
With Greyfriars, both antique!
They'd say it's only stood there for
A week!

. . . .

Three hundred years, or thereabouts,
St. Jim's can fairly own;
If any fellow has his doubts,
The date is clearly shown
Upon the records, which declare
'Twas sixteen twenty-one!
Unless, of course, it's written there
For fun!

. . . .

A single School House was enough
In those days for the Saints,
Which Figgins thinks was rather rough.
But there were no complaints!
For fifty years one house was kept,
And then the New House came,
In which there's nothing new, except
The name!

. . . .

But new or old, the school has won
Its measure of renown,
And on its victories the sun
Will nevermore go down,
For Britain's heroes battle on,
Far-flung from Pole to Pole,
And there are many Saints upon
The Roll!

. . . .

And worthy followers are those
Who tread its precincts now,
True blue, as everybody knows
And willingly avow!
Tom Merry, Figgins and the rest,
Who, at their country's call,
Will prove themselves among the best
Of all!