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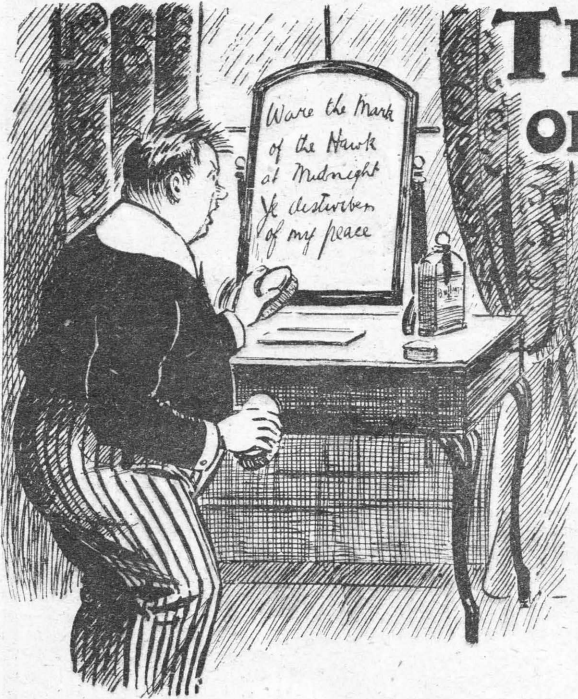


TRIMBLE
BREAKS
THE ICE!

No. 983. Vol. XXX.—December 18th, 1926.

NOW ON SALE—EVERY BOY'S HOBBY ANNUAL! PRICE 6/.

THE WITCHING HOUR! Do ghosts really exist? Can they write messages without the aid of any human agency? Tom Merry & Co. on holiday at a haunted house say "No!" But for all their conviction the chums of St. Jim's await the coming of midnight with no little trepidation, for the ghost of Drere Manor has warned them to beware—



THE MARK OF THE HAWK!

A Grand Long Complete Story featuring the adventures of Tom Merry & Co., Jack Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co., of St. Jim's, during their stay at the haunted Manor.

BY
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. Brekker!

"FREEZING!"

Kit Wildrake turned a ruddy face from the latticed window of the library at Drere Manor and uttered that ejaculation. It certainly was freezing. Drere Manor, perched on the summit of an eighty-foot cliff, lay shrouded in a thick mantle of snow. The dull booming of the sea as it beat against the base of the cliff came plainly through the crisp morning air to the party of schoolboys grouped around Kit Wildrake.

"This is something like!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Rather!"

"Better than being at St. Jim's," said Monty Lowther. And the nine juniors agreed that it was.

St. Jim's had broken up for the Christmas vacation, and Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co. were the guests of Kit Wildrake and his uncle at Drere Manor, situated on the outskirts of Murranhurst.

"This is the right sort of Christmas Eve," remarked Figgins. "Give me snow every time."

"Snow good," ventured Monty Lowther. "It melts!"

"Shut up, Monty!"

Monty Lowther's attempt at humour did not receive the encouragement its perpetrator doubtless considered was his due.

"What about half an hour's skating on the lake before brekker?" suggested Kit Wildrake.

"The very thing!"

The chums of St. Jim's were unanimous on that point with one exception. Fatty Wynn shook his head.

"Who's going to prepare the brekker?" he inquired.

The faces of the juniors fell, for it came home to them that there wasn't a servant in the whole of that vast house. And brekker was certainly an item that could not be left out of the day's events.

Fatty Wynn was a great trencherman; meals played a very prominent part in his daily life and he believed in starting the day with a solid foundation. The keen crisp air had given an edge to his appetite as indeed it had done to his chums.

Kit Wildrake broke the silence.

"I was forgetting that we haven't any servants," he remarked.

Tom Merry's face clouded.

"I wonder why they all cleared out before we came yesterday," he said. "Do you think the story that the house is haunted put the wind up them?"

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"Blessed if I know," said Kit Wildrake. "Nunks engaged an army of servants at an employment agency in London and sent them on here yesterday to get things in readiness. You chaps remember Buck declared that the servants were all here before he set out to meet us—"

"But the silly asses were gone when we did arrive," added Monty Lowther.

"I think the same as Tom Merry does," remarked George Francis Kerr. "The story that the manor is haunted sent them scuttling home. You know what servants are to-day—thumping independent."

"Something in that," said Kit Wildrake. "But they might have stayed until we arrived at least. Some sort of explanation was necessary. You see, Nunks had engaged them for an indefinite period."

"It's jolly strange," admitted Blake. "But we can't do anything but surmise what might have happened, and that won't help us to get brekker ready."

"You're right," said Kit, with a grin. "Anyway, Nunks will get on the phone to the agency this morning and ask them what it all means. But the need of the moment is brekker."

Fatty Wynn stepped forward.

"I'll get the brekker ready," he said. "You chaps know what a dab hand I am at cooking."

"Hurrah!"

That sporting suggestion was hailed with delight by the juniors. Fatty Wynn was a master hand at anything connected with the preparation of grub, and they knew the breakfast would be left in good hands.

"You sure you don't mind?" asked Kit.

Fatty Wynn shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd like half an hour on the lake as much as any of you chaps," he said. "But I'm looking forward to brekker, too, you know. Chap can't go all day without any grub."

"Well, you'll find plenty of grub in the pantry," said Wildrake. "The servants did us the favour of leaving that if they did take themselves off without any warning."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Right, then," said Fatty Wynn. "You chaps cut off for half an hour and leave brekker to me."

"Good old Fatty!"

The juniors streamed towards the door to get their caps and scarves and skates. Suddenly Kit Wildrake pulled up short.

"Where's Gussy?" he inquired.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the most elegant member of the St. Jim's party, was missing.

Jack Blake chuckled.

"I left the silly ass in the middle of his seven trunks sorting out fancy waistcoats."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors knew their Gussy. To him the choice of a fancy waistcoat was a matter far transcending in importance anything else in the world.

The cut of a coat, the set of a tie, the crease in his trousers—these things occupied Arthur Augustus' noble mind to the exclusion of all else. Indeed, they presented

such necessary adjuncts to his existence that he had thoughtfully brought seven suitcases along with him.

"Let's go and root him out?" suggested Kit Wildrake.

"We'd better," assented Blake. "Otherwise the silly dummy will never be ready until it is time to go to bed again."

"Come on, then!"

In a chattering, laughing group, the chums surged up the massive oak staircase and finally halted outside the bed-room which their elegant chum occupied. The door was open. An extraordinary scene met their gaze.

In the centre of the room stood Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, wrestling with a tie and a collar. Strewed on the floor were half a dozen collars and ties in various stages of dilapidation—apparently they had failed to satisfy the immaculate and fastidious taste of his noble lordship. At one end of the room were seven trunks, all of which had been opened and their contents turned over. Spotless trousers, well-cut jackets, waistcoats rivaling in colour Joseph's celebrated coat, silk socks, and cambric handkerchiefs were scattered about in great profusion. Evidently Arthur Augustus' toilet had troubled him more than ever that cold morning.

"Bai Jove!"

He turned a crimson face from the looking-glass as he saw his grinning chums crowding in at the doorway.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

"Weally, deah boys, I see nothin' to laugh at!"

"Well, you ought to," chuckled Monty Lowther. "You've been looking in that glass long enough!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus screwed his celebrated monocle in his eye and treated the humorous Monty to a frigid stare.

"Weally, Lowthah, I considah that wemark out of place. If I were not a guest in this house I should be undah the painful necessity of givin' you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed Monty Lowther, with mock gravity.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, how long are you going to be?" demanded Blake.

"I sha'n't be half a jiffy," replied Arthur Augustus. "But I must get this tie to hang wpopahly!"

"You'll hang properly if you don't get a move on," grunted Blake. "We're going on the lake to do a bit of skating before brekker."

"That's a wippin' notion, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, giving a final hitch to the refractory tie. "Count me in!"

"We'll count you out, if you're not ready in one minute," said Herries.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy started.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed suddenly. "If I accompany you fellows on the ice I shall have to change—"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"A chap can't disgwace his host by dwessin' carelessly," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "I cannot possibly turn out for skatin' in this clobbah!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Isn't he the limit?"

"Weally, deah boys, it is up to one membah of the partay at least to show a wpopah wespert for his host. If I go skatin' I must change into my Swiss sports' suit—"

"Your whatter?"

"My Swiss sports' suit," said Arthur Augustus firmly. "An Eton collah and jacket are entiahly out of place. I won't keep you long—"

"You won't keep us at all," growled Blake. "If I were not dead against slacking I should leave you to your giddy Swiss sports' suit. As it is, I'll give you a hand," he added, with a wink at Herries.

"Weally, Blake— Yooop! What are you doin'?"

"Helping you to dress, fathead!"

Blake's offer, doubtless, was well meant, but Arthur Augustus failed to appreciate it. Before he knew what was happening he was being rammed into his jacket. A cap was thrust over his noble head, a scarf was flung round his throat with almost sufficient force to choke him, and next minute the two ends of the scarf were gripped by Blake and Herries respectively.

"Yoooop!"

Arthur Augustus gasped as he found himself being led to the door like a horse from a stable. Really there was no arguing with that choking scarf tightening round his neck. It was a case of move or be throttled!

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the juniors, making way for Blake and Herries' charge.

"Yawoooooh! Stoppit!" wheezed Arthur Augustus. "I'm chokin'!"

"Well, step it out, then you won't choke!" said Blake, relentlessly hauling in on the scarf.

In a spluttering, gasping heap Arthur Augustus was drawn out into the passage and down the stairs, Tom Merry and the rest of the party following behind. In the spacious hallway a picturesque figure greeted them.

"Mornin', buys!"

Buck Whipcord smiled genially at the chums. He was a tall, loose-limbed Westerner with a mahogany-coloured face and a pair of twinkling grey eyes, and he looked as much out of place in that magnificent house as a tiger would in a drawing-room. A red scarf, tied loosely, hung at his neck, his broad chest was covered by a red flannel shirt, and his trousers, of coarse, rough homespun, ended in a pair of raw hide knee-boots. But perhaps the most picturesque point about him was the broad belt buckled over his hips, and the two holsters from which peeped the butts of two ugly-looking revolvers.

That picturesque apparel was the everyday garb of the men on the Boot Leg Ranch in British Columbia, and doubtless it fulfilled all the requirements a vigorous, out-door life, principally spent in the saddle, demanded. But it looked strange enough in the heart of England. Still, Tom Merry & Co. had grown accustomed to it, for they knew beneath that rough red flannel shirt beat a heart of gold. Behind that fierce exterior was a gentleness and kindness that endeared all who came in contact with that breezy man of the plains.

It was Buck who had taught Kit Wildrake to ride, to round up stray cattle—everything that was part and parcel of the daily routine at the Boot Leg Ranch where Kit had spent his early days. And a great bond of affection existed between the rugged plainsman and his young pupil. Christmas with Nunks and Buck again was something Kit Wildrake had dreamed of ever since he said farewell to the Boot Leg Ranch, and here it was coming to pass.

Kit greeted Buck joyously.

"Top of the morning, Buck! We're just off for a skate on the ice."

"Good for you," grinned Buck. "You'll be ready for breakfast, I guess, when you've sampled the mornin'. It's real snappy."

"Talking of brekker," said Kit, "we've left Fatty Wynn to prepare it."

"So I saw for meself," said Buck.

"But I kin see that breakfast doin' the disappearin' trick if I don't keep an eye

on Fatty. He's a rare sampler!"

"Eh?"

"I jest dropped in to take a squint round," grinned Buck, "and there was yore Fatty tasin' this an' tasin' thet. Beats me where he stows it all."

"Ha, ha, ha!" The juniors knew Fatty Wynn better than Buck did—knew his weakness for "sampling" everything. "Which reminds me," drawled Buck, running his eye over the party. "Where's that fat clam Grumble?"

"Trimble!"

"Aw! Trimble, then. Don't see him 'bout. Leastways, he wasn't in the kitchen."

The juniors started.

"He hasn't wisen yet, deah boy," volunteered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who had managed to loosen the knot of the scarf.

"Slacker!" growled Blake. "I didn't see him when we came to rout you out, Gussy."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Never mind, Trimble," said Kit Wildrake. "He'll sleep the clock round."

"A jolly good job, too!" grunted Manners. "He wedged himself into the party, but I'm sure we sha'n't mind if he stays in bed all the hols."

"Hear, hear!"

Nobody pined exactly for the fascinating society of Baggy Trimble. He was the self-invited guest, so to speak.

"Waal, you'd best be gettin' 'long," drawled Buck. "Thet breakfast'll be ready in twenty minutes, 'cos I'm goin' to give Fatty Wynn a hand."

"Good!"

The juniors tramped out of the house, Herries and Blake still dragging on the scarf round Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's neck. His expostulations fell on deaf ears, and he was not released until the party had reached the ornamental lake, which was only a short distance from the house.

"You waffians!" roared Arthur Augustus. "Hewwies, Blake, I am shocked at your behaviour. I—"

**GRAND
OFFER
OF
HANDSOME
BICYCLES**

(See Page 13.)

"Do you want us to shove your skates on, fathead?" demanded Blake.

"Weally, Blake—" began Arthur Augustus. But apparently he was in no further need of any assistance from his two chums; for he fixed his skates unaided.

Then the chums enjoyed an exhilarating twenty minutes on the ice. It was a large lake, and there was plenty of room for the ten juniors. Arthur Augustus was soon as cheery and radiant as any of the party. He cut an elegant figure, for, with all his faults, Arthur Augustus could certainly skate well.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed, coming to a graceful stop in front of Tom Merry and Kit Wildrake. "This is wippin'! I'm jolly glad I came along."

"You had better thank Herries and Blake for that," grinned Kit. "Guess you wouldn't have been here at all but for them."

"Weally, Wildwake—"

Arthur Augustus did not stop to argue the matter further, much as he wanted to. Kit was his host, and Arthur Augustus was very particular over such matters as etiquette due to a host. He skated away hurriedly.

"Hi! Buys!" It was a hail from Buck Whipcord. "Who says brekker?"

And the "buys" with one accord, yelled: "Brekker!"

Skates were taken off, and the party trooped back to the house. A big log-fire crackled in the dining-room. The table was laid, and Fatty Wynn, with an apron round his waist, brought in a dish of steaming sausages, grilled bacon, and fried eggs. He had done his work well, judging by the appetising odour that permeated the room, and he grinned broadly at the hungry, ruddy-faced juniors.

"Peckish, what?" he asked.

"Rather!" chorused the juniors.

"So was I," said Fatty Wynn. "I sampled one or two sosses, and I found them prime. And the eggs are top-hole. None of 'em broken, you know."

To fry an egg without breaking it was a feat that the St. Jim's juniors had attempted many a time and oft and had failed at miserably. But there was not a single broken egg in the big dish.

"Bravo, Fatty!"

"And I've grilled some tomatoes," said Fatty Wynn. "They're done to a turn. Nunks is bringing them in."

At that moment the door opened, and Malcolm Wildrake, a middle-aged, broad-shouldered man with a kindly face, came in.

"Mornin', boys!"

"Mornin', sir!"

Nunks' brown eyes twinkled. He had been troubled over this question of a breakfast without a servant in the house, for he was the host. But he had soon found out that the St. Jim's boys were capable of filling the gap, as it were.

"Reckon ye've got a useful pard in Fatty," he said, with a grin. "Where's the tea, Buck?"

"Comin', boss!"

Buck appeared carrying two large teapots, with a jug of boiling hot water balanced between them.

"Guess that's the lot!" he remarked. "Now we'll fall to, I reckon."

The juniors needed no second bidding. They fell to with avidity, and Fatty Wynn's excellent breakfast disappeared at a healthy rate.

CHAPTER 2.

The Butler Returns!

CLANG! Clang!

A vigorous summons on the door-bell broke in upon the after-breakfast chatter of the St. Jim's party.

"Who in the name o' thunder is that?"

Buck rose to his feet and withdrew. His heavy tread echoed along the hall floor.

The big front door was swung open, revealing a tall man muffled up in a greatcoat. Buck's jaw was thrust forward challengingly as he beheld the visitor.

"Jumpin' snakes!" he ejaculated. "Why, it's Blenkiron, the durned butler!"

The visitor nodded.

"I—I felt that I simply must come back and—explain," he began in a faltering voice.

Buck's eyes widened.

"I should jest say so," he drawled. "Of all the blamed funny things you an' those goldurned servants are the funniest. Come inside!"

The butler picked up the bag at his feet and followed Buck into the dining-room. Nunks started to his feet as he beheld the butler he had engaged in London the day before.

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"G-good-morning, sir!" said the butler, with a nervous smile.

Nunks disregarded the greeting.

"Waal, what are you doin' here?" he demanded. "Why did you vamoose? An' where's all your blamed pals?"

The butler fidgeted with his hat.

"It's like this, sir," he began. "The servants and I arrived yesterday morning—"

"We know that!" broke in Buck gruffly. "Didn't I leave the whole blamed crowd o' you gettin' the house in order?"

"Exactly, sir. But after you had gone the servants got scared."

Nunks drummed a large fist on the table.

"Scared, did they? And what scared 'em?"

The butler licked his lips.

"We had all heard the story that this house was haunted," he said nervously. "The cabman at the station told us all about it."

"And what in the name of thunder did he tell you?" asked Nunks.

"Why, that Drere Manor was haunted by the ghost of a former owner of the place," said the butler. "I believe the—ahem—gentleman's name was Hawk—Captain Hawk."

He paused.

"Waal?"

"According to the inhabitants," continued the butler. "Captain Hawk was a pirate who gave up piracy, and with his ill-gotten spoils came to live in this house which he had built for him."

Nunks appeared interested. He made a gesture for the servant to continue.

"But in order to do this," resumed the butler, "he had to get rid of his plundering band of pirates. So he fired and scuttled the ship, and all aboard her, with but one exception, perished."

"The skunk!"

"The bo'sun was the man who escaped," said the butler, gaining more confidence. "And he forced an entrance into the house and came to grips with his old captain. According to the story as it was told to me, the pirate captain and his bo'sun were seen struggling on the battlements. Then they pitched to the foot of the cliffs below, locked in each other's arms."

"Very interesting," drawled Nunks. "An' what next?"

"Well, they say that the ghost of Captain Hawk haunts the place—has haunted the place for two hundred years or more," said the butler, with a fearsome glance over his shoulder. "People at Murrnhurst swear that they have seen the ghost on the battlements at night—a terrible figure wielding a cutlass in his right hand. And the hook—"

"Eh?" ejaculated Nunks.

"The captain lost a hand in a skirmish with Spaniards," continued Blenkiron. "And he wore a steel hook in place of it. With this hook he is said to mark all those he strikes down."

"An' you believe all that tommy rot?" asked Buck scornfully.

"I was not prepared to believe it," said the butler earnestly. "Although anyone in the village will tell you that the last man actually to live in this place—he was a descendant of the pirate captain—died a violent death seven years ago. They found his body at the foot of the cliffs, and there was the mark of the hook on his forehead."

The juniors listened in rapt attention. They had heard the legend of Drere Manor before, but it always bore repetition. And the butler was impressive in his slow, respectful manner of address.

"And do you mean to tell me that that funny story frightened you and the servants out of the place?" inquired Nunks.

The butler shook his head.

"Not the story alone, sir," he made answer. "Although in addition to what I have just told you, sir, we learnt that an American gentleman who had bought this property a few days ago, and who held no fear of ghosts, only stayed here half an hour. He was scared out of his wits—"

"Waal," drawled Buck, "I bought the property after that 'Merican feller got tired of it, an' I ain't seen no ghost."

The butler made an expressive gesture with his hands.

"I wish I could say the same, sir!"

"What do you mean?"

Blenkiron coughed and cleared his throat.

"It was barely ten minutes after you had gone yesterday, sir," he said, turning to Buck, "when Jelks, the footman, came rushing in to me with the tale that he had seen a ghost on the third floor landing. He was so scared that he positively refused to go back to the room he had been tidying."

"Gammon!"

"It's true, sir. But if you will pardon me for another few moments I may be able to convince you that there was



"Ungrateful rotter!" hooted Trimble, as Wildrake walked away. "Yah! I won't buy his beastly old uncle and that hooligan Buck a present now! Yaroooooop!" A finger and thumb closed on Trimble's fat ear like a vice. "So you won't buy that hooligan Buck a present, eh?" said Buck Whipcord grimly. "Waal, I'm durned pleased to hear it!" "Yow! Leggo!" roared Trimble. "I—I—I didn't see you, Buck!" (See Chapter 3.)

sufficient reason for the state of terror that seized hold of the servants."

"Go on!"

"I myself went up to the room where Jelks had been working," continued the butler. "I don't—or, at least, I didn't then—believe in ghosts. But I hadn't been at work more than a couple of minutes when I was startled by a nerve-racking laugh that came in through the open door."

"What did you do then?"

"I picked up the poker from the grate," said the butler, "and rushed out on to the landing. I was just in time to see a strange shape, wielding a cutlass, disappear into the wall itself."

"You must have bin seein' things!" said Buck, with a grin.

But the grin found no response in the butler's serious features. He shook his head, and the juniors hung on his next words.

"I was not seeing things, begging your pardon, sir. I searched the whole landing, but I found nothing. And then another of the servants came rushing to me with a tale that there were ghostly messages appearing on the windows of the kitchen."

"Oh!"

The juniors looked at Kit Wildrake, for they remembered he had declared seeing a similar sort of thing when he had visited the house before. But Kit's face expressed nothing more than interest.

"By this time," resumed the butler, "the servants were in such a state of nerves that they wouldn't stay in the house another moment. I tried to stop them, and had almost

talked them into reason when that horrible laugh rang through the house again. That did it. They collected their luggage and departed on the spot."

"The skunks!" exclaimed Buck. "And what did you do?" "I stayed for a little while longer," explained the butler, "for the purpose of—ahem—giving you my notice. I felt it was up to me as butler—"

"Yes, yes," broke in Nunks, who was thoroughly interested now. "But why didn't you?"

The butler licked his dry lips.

"Because that laugh echoed through the house again," he said. "Even then I was not too scared, for I rushed out into the hall and searched everywhere, but I found nothing. And still that maniacal laugh went on." He paused and drew breath. "It was dusk then," he continued, "and the whole thing so got on my nerves that I hadn't the courage to stay in the house any longer. I'm sorry, sir, but that's how it was. The note I left for you—"

"The what?"

"The note," remarked Blenkiron, "explained my feelings, although I'll admit it was hurriedly written."

Nunks and Buck looked at each other grimly.

"Note!" exclaimed the former. "I've had no note!"

"Well, I left one, sir," said the butler earnestly. "I pinned it to the table napkin in front of your chair."

"Waal, this fair beats the band!" drawled Buck. "I s'pose the next scared gossip'll say that the blamed ghost took the note!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Buck's remark broke the tension that had gripped the

juniors as the butler unfolded his story, and at that moment Baggie Trimble rolled into the dining-room.

"You rotters!" he exclaimed.

"Eh?"

"Why didn't you call me?" hooted the fat junior. "I'm starving! Mean I call it," he added, turning to Kit Wildrake, "to leave a guest without telling him the time for breakfast!"

The juniors grinned, and Nunks and Buck exchanged winks. They were beginning to see now why the chums of St. Jim's never showed any enthusiasm for Trimble's company.

Baggy Trimble sniffed as he eyed the breakfast-table.

"Hum! Don't think much of this for breakfast!" he remarked.

But, whatever he thought, he sat down to the table and began liberally to help himself to the sausages and eggs and tomatoes that were left. The juniors eyed him with expressive glances. Suddenly Arthur Augustus started.

"I believe I've got it!" he exclaimed.

"Got what?" exclaimed Blake. "The note?"

"Weally, Blake, I twust you don't think I am capable of purloinin' othah people's pwoperty!" said Arthur Augustus warmly. "But I think Twimble should know somethin' about it."

"Trimble?"

It was a regular chorus, and it nearly made the fat junior choke.

"Yaas," continued Arthur Augustus. "You chaps wemembah that Twimble was here in the house before we awwived?"

"That's so!"

"An' he helped himself to the food that was here," added Arthur Augustus, fixing a gleaming eye on the fat junior. "I shouldn't be surprisid if he took the note, deah boys!"

The juniors started. Really, it seemed that Arthur Augustus' mighty brain had solved the fate of the missing note.

"Did you take the note, Twimble?"

The fat junior laid down his knife and fork, and eyed the accusing faces levelled at him nervously.

"Really, Gussy," he said, "I don't know anything about a note! It wasn't of much importance, anyway—"

"Bai Jove! Then you did take it?"

"Nothing of the sort!" hooted Trimble. "As if I'd take a note addressed to Mr. Wildrake. I hope I'm above that sort of thing. Anyway, there was nothing for the servants to get scared about, you know. The chap who wrote the note was a funk—"

The juniors and Nunks and Buck eyed the fat junior sharply, and the butler smiled a knowing smile. It was pretty obvious now what had happened to the note—the note that would certainly have helped to clear up the mystery which had greeted the juniors the moment they had arrived at Drere Manor.

"You fat pilferer!" roared Tom Merry. "Then you did take the note?"

Trimble blinked at Tom indignantly.

"Don't I keep telling you that I haven't had the note?" he hooted. "I never saw it pinned to the serviette. And I never read it, anyway. Chap like you might have done, Tom Merry, but I hope I'm above that sort of thing!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The egregious Trimble fairly took the juniors' breath away.

"If you didn't see the note pinned to the serviette how do you happen to know that it was pinned there?" asked Tom Merry. "The butler—that's this fellow here—has only just told us about it, and you weren't in the room then!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Trimble's fat face fell. In his eagerness to deny all knowledge of the note he had as good as admitted taking it.

"Really, Tom Merry," he stammered, "I think you're very mean. It's narrow-minded to be suspicious of a pal. I never saw the rotten letter, and I never read it! Anyway, the fire was the best place for trash of that sort—"

"The fire?"

"Not that I chucked it in the fire," added Trimble hastily.

But the juniors had heard enough. It was obvious now what had happened to the note.

The chums rose to their feet and advanced on Trimble. The fat junior eyed them warily, and then picked up his knife and fork again.

"Now I've told you about the rotten note," he said loftily, "I prefer to let the matter drop!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Tom Merry & Co. paused. The sheer cheek of it nearly took their breath away. Nunks signalled to them.

"Let it drop, too," he said, with a twinkle in his eyes.

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"Your fat friend is nearly as interesting as the ghost of Drere Manor." And then he faced the butler again. "I am sorry that your letter of explanation did not reach me. It places your behaviour in a much better light."

"Thank you, sir," said the butler.

"I am sorry, too, that you personally were scared by this confounded ghost!" added Nunks. "Deuced sorry, because I am now placed in the very unenviable position of being a host to a big party of schoolboys without a servant in the place."

"That is partly the reason why I came down from London this morning, sir," said the butler. "I realised on my arrival in town last night that you would be left in a very awkward predicament. You see, sir, there is now no hope of securing any servants, for the employment agency is closed until after Christmas. So I determined to come and see you and ask you to re-engage me—"

"Waal, that's right down decent of you!" said Nunks. "I like a man! You're willing to have another go at this ghost, eh? So you shall. And you can count your salary doubled."

"You are very kind, sir," said the butler. "I might add that I can cook passably well, and—"

"If you can cook," boomed Nunks, "then your salary is trebled! Gosh! I was getting fair worried to think of Christmas without any turkeys and puddings for these boys of mine!"

The butler smiled suavely. His courageous resolution to return to the employ of the man he had deserted looked like panning out very well for him. But he was destined to place more value on the ghost of Drere Manor than the trebled salary Nunks had promised him, before many hours had passed.

CHAPTER 3.

Christmas Presents for Trimble!

"I SAY, old chap!"

Baggy Trimble tacked himself on Kit Wildrake after breakfast as that junior picked up his skates and prepared to follow Tom Merry & Co. to the

lake.

Kit halted.

"Well, you fat clam?"

"I find myself rather short of cash just at the moment," said Trimble.

"That's nothing new, is it?"

"Really, Wildrake. But you remember I left my luggage at the station. Well, my wallet was inside, and there was some money in it."

"How much? About twopence?"

Trimble-blinked.

"Much more than that," he said warmly. "My Uncle Thomas sent me a whacking remittance just before we left St. Jim's—"

"Can it!" growled Wildrake, and he started for the door of the house.

Trimble broke into a trot.

"You know it's rotten to be short of cash!" he panted, his fat little legs going like clockwork.

"Well, you've only to fetch your suitcase!" grunted Wildrake. "The walk down to the station will do you good, anyway."

"Brrrrr!"

A walk to the railway station didn't appeal to the fat junior at all. He had a great desire to keep as far away from Murranhurst Station as was possible. There was a certain irate station-master there on the look out for Trimble for dodging through the barrier with a ticket which had ceased to be useful, so to speak, at Wayland Junction. At the time Trimble had thought it rather clever to dodge through the barrier with that useless ticket when the station-master's attention was riveted elsewhere. But the knowledge that he had left his suitcase behind him in his haste came as a shock to him. Certainly, it didn't entice Trimble to meet the station-master so soon after having fooled him.

"But I must have some money, you know!" panted Trimble, as Kit quickened his stride.

Wildrake stopped.

"What do you want any money for?" he asked shrewdly. "There's everything a fellow can possibly want in the house. And there's not a shop within a couple of miles of the place. Why do you want money?"

Trimble blinked.

"It's Christmas Eve to-day!" he exclaimed.

"And Queen Anne's dead!"

"I simply must have money to do some shopping, Kit old chap!" said Trimble.

"Shopping! What for?"

"Don't I keep telling you that it's Christmas Eve?" hooted

the fat junior. "I want to buy some present for—for Nunks and Buck, you know!"

"My hat!"
—Kit Wildrake eyed the fat junior keenly. Trimble's stated intention quite took him by storm. When Trimble ever possessed any money, which was very seldom, that money was expended invariably on Baggy Trimble. Certainly, even in his wildest fits of generosity, Trimble had never been known to buy anyone a present.

"So you want to buy Nunks and Buck a present do you?" asked Kit grimly.

"Yes, old chap!"
"Then go and try that yarn on Gussy. He may fall for it. But I won't, my fat pippin."

And Kit walked on, leaving Trimble spluttering with wrath.

"Mean beast!" muttered the fat junior. "Ungrateful rotter! Yah! I won't buy his beastly old uncle and that hooligan Buck a present now! Yarooooop!"

A finger and thumb closed on Trimble's fat ear like a vice.

the word. Reckon a few more o' 'em would do you a power o' good!"

"Groooooough!"
Baggy Trimble scrambled to his feet and rolled towards the lake. The juniors were skating at one end of it. The other end of the lake Buck had declared to be unsafe as the ice was under an inch thick.

"I say, Gussy, old chap!" bawled Trimble, as Arthur Augustus whizzed past.

"Wun away, Twimble!"
"But I say!"

Arthur Augustus turned skilfully and came back. He drew to a standstill by the bank.

"Your wallet——" began Trimble.

"Eh?" Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's hand went to his coat. "Where?"

"I mean my wallet," added Trimble, "is in my suitcase, you know."

"Well, what about it?"

"I'm hard up," continued the fat junior. "Would you advance me a small sum until I can get my wallet?"

CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE.

Ghosts from the Past!

*'TIS Christmas Eve! a witching hour,
The clock has struck eleven;
Solemnly stands the old school tower
Rearing its head to heaven.
The wind is waiving in the trees,
The snow is softly pattering;
And mournful moanings in the breeze
Announce that ghosts are chattering!*

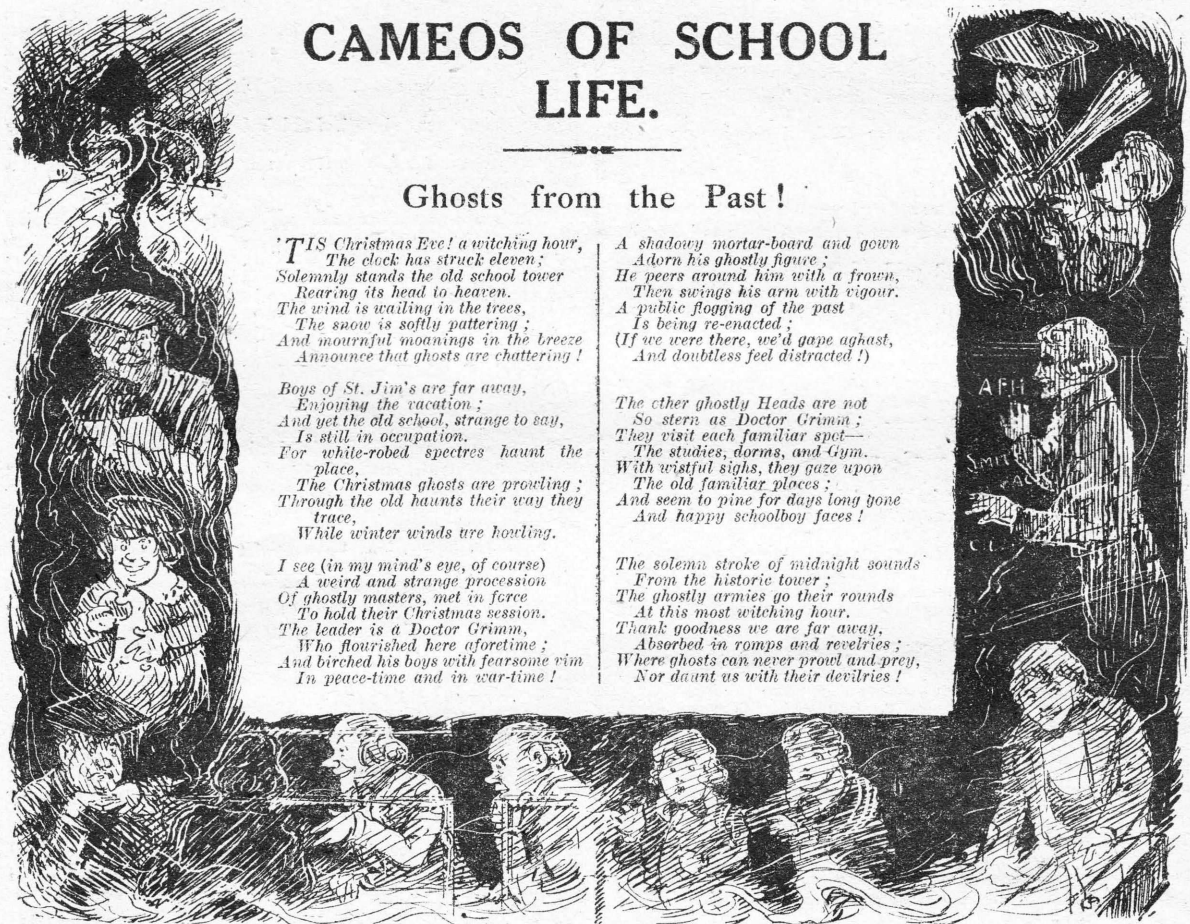
*Boys of St. Jim's are far away,
Enjoying the vacation;
And yet the old school, strange to say,
Is still in occupation.
For white-robed spectres haunt the place,
The Christmas ghosts are prowling;
Through the old haunts their way they trace,
While winter winds are howling.*

*I see (in my mind's eye, of course)
A weird and strange procession
Of ghostly masters, met in force
To hold their Christmas session.
The leader is a Doctor Grimam,
Who flourished here aforetime;
And birched his boys with fearsome rim
In peace-time and in war-time!*

*A shadowy mortar-board and gown
Adorn his ghostly figure;
He peers around him with a frown,
Then swings his arm with vigour.
A public flogging of the past
Is being re-enacted;
(If we were there, we'd gape aghast,
And doubtless feel distracted!)*

*The ether ghostly Heads are not
So stern as Doctor Grimam;
They visit each familiar spot—
The studies, dorms, and Gym.
With wistful sighs, they gaze upon
The old familiar places:
And seem to pine for days long gone
And happy schoolboy faces!*

*The solemn stroke of midnight sounds
From the historic tower;
The ghostly armies go their rounds
At this most witching hour.
Thank goodness we are far away,
Absorbed in romps and revelries;
Where ghosts can never prowl and prey,
Nor daunt us with their devilries!*



"Yow-wow! Leggo! Yoocoop!"
"So you won't buy that hooligan Buck a present, eh?" asked Buck Whipcord. "Waal, I'm durned pleased to hear it, Grimble. But Buck'll make you a present, sonny. A present of his boot!"

And, as he spoke, Buck's right foot swung back.
"Yow! I didn't see you! Leggo!" roared Trimble. "I didn't mean I wasn't going to buy you a present. And—and I didn't call you a hooligan. Really, I didn't. I was referring to that beast Tom Merry."

Buck tightened his grip on Trimble's fat ear.
"You shore beats all the liars I hev met out West," he remarked grimly. "An' that's saying somethin'."

"Whoooooop! Leggo!"
"I'm lettin' go!" growled Buck and, as he did so, his right foot came in violent contact with the seat of Trimble's trousers.

"Whoooooop!"
Trimble shot away like a stone from a catapult, and he landed on his hands and knees in the snow, roaring.

"Just let that be a lesson to you," said Buck, turning on his heel. "And if ye want any more presents jest say

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shook his head.
"If your wallet is in your suitcase, Twimble, you had better twot along to the station and get it."

"Really, Gussy, old chap, I thought you would be the first to help me out," said Trimble. "You see I want to buy Nunks and that beast—I mean Buck a present for Christmas."

"That is vevy cweditable of you, Twimble!"
"Yes, I know. But you see I haven't any money."

"Then I'm afwaid you won't be able to buy the pwsents until you get your suitcase."

And Arthur Augustus was about to skate on when Trimble's next action stayed him, so to speak. The fat junior had dived a hand into his pocket and brought to light a wallet.

"Bai Jove!" roared Arthur Augustus. "That's my wallet, you boundah!"

"I know that," said Trimble. "I saw it lying about in the bed-room so I brought it along. To save you the journey, you know. I sha'n't want more than a couple of pounds and——"

"You wottah!"

Arthur Augustus suddenly reached out and caught the fat junior by the sleeve. Baggy Trimble squirmed.

"Give me that wallet, you cheeky wottah!"

"But—but—"

Trimble dragged himself clear and started to run. In his haste he didn't pay any attention to direction, for he headed straight out on to the frozen lake. But he knew the next minute for he found his feet shooting from under him.

Bump!

The fat junior hit the ice with the force of a battering ram. He sat there roaring, too astonished even to pick up the wallet that had dropped from his fingers.

Arthur Augustus came up with a rush.

"You pilfewin' wottah!" he exclaimed, pouncing on the wallet. "Do you know there's a lot of money in that wallet?"

"Yow! Twenty pounds!" gasped Trimble.

In his kind endeavour to save D'Arcy a journey, the fat junior had apparently investigated that wallet pretty thoroughly.

"Bai Jove!" roared Arthur Augustus. "You weally are the limit, Twimble."

"Hallo, hallo!" sang out Blake, skating up to the scene. "What's the trouble, Gustavus?"

Arthur Augustus explained.

"The fat fraud!" exclaimed Blake. "Nothing appears to be safe where Trimble is."

"Yow! I only wanted Gussy to lend me a couple of pounds until I got my suitcase," wailed Trimble. "I—I—I thought I'd save him the trouble of getting his wallet, you know, by bringing it to him."

"What do you want a couple of pounds for?"

"To get some presents for that beast—I mean old Nunks, you know."

"A couple of pounds," said Blake thoughtfully. "I'll give you a couple of pounds and presents, too!"

"Oh, good!" exclaimed Trimble, scrambling gingerly to his feet.

"Weally, Blake—" began Arthur Augustus, in astonishment, but he caught Blake's covert wink in time.

"You're what I call a good sort," said Trimble, with a friendly smile. "Nothing mean about you. Not like that rotter Wildrake, or Gussy— Here, I say! Whoop! Wharrer you doing?"

"Giving you a couple of pounds," chuckled Blake. "Presents you know?"

"Yaroooh!" roared Trimble. "Stoppit!"

"And here's a couple more," said Blake generously.

But Trimble did not stop to receive the "couple more." He made a rush for the bank, his feet flying out like the legs of a crab as he tried to maintain his balance. Before he knew what was happening he was sprawling on his back and being borne along over the icy surface of the lake at a great speed.

"Oh, my hat!" roared Blake. "The human slide!"

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, fixing his monocle in his eye. "That's wathah clevah of Twimble!"

The fat junior did not think so, however. He was sliding along at a greater speed than ever, and was unable to pull himself up. His yells floated out on the cold morning air, and they brought Tom Merry & Co. from the other end of the lake hot foot on the scene.

"Look at Trimble!" chortled Blake.

The chums laughed heartily as they beheld Baggy Trimble's impromptu turn on the ice.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Manners suddenly. "He's heading for the thin ice at the other end."

"My hat! It'll be a ducking for Trimble if he goes through," said Kit.

"But he may—" began Manners.

"No fear of drowning," said Kit, cutting in. "The water's only about two feet deep there."

"Oh!" The juniors were relieved. A ducking wouldn't do Trimble any harm, they considered. In fact, they opined that it would do him good.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Trimble.

Somehow or other he managed to check that headlong flight across the ice. But the next move was to get to his feet—rather a difficult task for a fellow of Trimble's bulk and clumsiness.

"Hallo! He's pulled up!" exclaimed Blake. "Let's go after him!"

"Good egg!"

The juniors set off in Trimble's wake. The fat junior saw them coming, and thinking they were bent on vengeance he hastened to scramble to his feet.

It was Trimble's unlucky morning. No sooner had he drawn his right foot up to his left than his left persisted in shooting off due south, so to speak, whilst the right—not to be denied—described a tangent due north.

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

"Stick it, Trimble!"

"Yow! Oh, crickey!" gasped Trimble.

For quite five minutes the fat junior performed these weird and wonderful evolutions, and his plump figure smote the ice as many times. Then, by great judgment and care he managed to get to his feet.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble shook his fist at the grinning juniors.

"Yah! Rotters!" he panted. "I— Yooooop!"

That sudden wave of the fist had the unhappy effect of sending his feet slithering in opposite directions again.

Bump!

The ice shook to the loud concussion as Trimble went down with a crash. Then, once again, he started to slide.

This time he was not so fortunate. Each time he tried to stop his career across the ice it only served as an extra propulsion. There was an ominous, cracking noise as he almost reached the stonework bordering the lake.

"Ow!" wailed Trimble.

Crack!

The ice, thinner at that end than at other parts of the lake, was not equal to the strain put upon it. It parted suddenly, and water gushed through the crack. The crack widened, and Trimble, with a gasping yell, disappeared within it.

"Oh, my giddy aunt!" roared Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums roared as Trimble's head and shoulders, then his waist, appeared above the gaping hole in the ice. He was in no danger, for the water barely reached his knees. But his roars were enough to suggest that he was dying.

"Help! Rescue! I'm drowning!"

"No such luck!" commented Monty Lowther, at which there was a fresh chuckle.

"Groooough! I'm drowning!" roared Trimble lustily, as yet unaware that he was within arm's length of the stone balustrade skirting the lake, and scarcely up to his knees in water.

"Well, don't make such a beastly noise about it!" shouted Figgins.

"Yah! Beasts!" roared Trimble, now becoming aware of the near presence of the balustrade and grasping it.

"Yah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors watched the fat junior clamber out of the icy water and draw himself up on the balustrade. For a moment Trimble stood there, dripping with water and shaking like a fat jelly. Then, shaking his fist furiously at the laughing juniors, he turned on his heel and raced off towards the house, leaving a watery trail behind him.

CHAPTER 4.

The Mystic Message!

"TRIMBLE'S had his wash for the day," chuckled Monty Lowther. "Didn't seem to like it over-much, did he?"

"No fear!"

The juniors resumed their skating, what time Baggy Trimble was rolling up to the house as fast as his fat little legs would carry him. His one thought was to rid himself of his dripping clothes. Squelching water at every step, he dashed into the house and panted up the stairs.

"Groooough!"

He began to wrench his clothes off the moment he had reached his bed-room. A match put to the gas-fire sent out a comforting heat. Then he seized a towel and rubbed himself down.

"Oh, lor'!"

An ejaculation of dismay escaped his lips as it dawned upon him that he had no second change of clothes. More than ever now he wished that he hadn't barked the railway company. But trouble never worried Trimble for long. There were other clothes. Arthur Augustus had brought seven suitcases along with him. He would be certain to find a spare change amongst those seven bags. It never occurred to Trimble's obtuse mind to ask permission to search those bags, or to don the clothes that he found to his liking therein. Such things were mere trifles, unworthy of Trimble's consideration.

What Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would say when he discovered the fat junior in his best silk underwear, carelessly hacked with a pair of scissors in order to fit their new owner; when he perceived his best pair of trousers and a fancy waistcoat—also split up the back to allow of Trimble's ample girth—and his best jacket almost bursting at the seams on the unwieldy carcass of Bagley Trimble, never occurred to the fat junior, or if it did he dismissed it as something of no account.

A pair of D'Arcy's fancy silk stockings were jammed on Trimble's podgy feet, and an elegant pair of patent leather

shoes kept them company, so to speak. Then Trimble, in his usual haphazard fashion of dressing, began to don one of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's collars and ties.

He had almost completed his dressing, and was brushing his sleek head with D'Arcy's silver-backed hair-brushes, and oiling it lavishly with D'Arcy's very special brilliantine, when something else beside the reflection of his own podgy features in the dressing-table mirror almost caused him to drop the brushes and run for his life. But curiosity, blended with a certain amount of paralyzing fear, held him rooted to the spot.

On the mirror, as if traced by an unseen hand wielding a pen that left a trail of crimson ink behind it, appeared the following legend:

"WARE THE MARK OF THE HAWK AT MID-NIGHT, YE DISTURBERS OF MY PEACE!"

"Oh!"

That tense ejaculation left Trimble's quivering lips in a long drawn-out whisper. He gazed as if fascinated at that threatening message which had appeared as though by magic.

Then his senses came back to him with a rush.

"Help!"

His shriek echoed all over the house as he rushed to the door of the bed-room and flew down the stairs.

"Hallo! What's up now?"

It was Jack Blake's voice. And behind him was the rest of the St. Jim's party, their faces ruddy with the glow of health, their skates slung over their arms.

"Help!" roared Baggie Trimble,

"What is it?" asked Tom Merry, seizing the fat junior by the arm and steadying him.

"The ghost!" howled Trimble. "It's in my room!"

"Wha-a-at?"

The juniors' faces tensed, and they looked at Baggie Trimble sharply. He was shaking like a fat jelly. Obviously something had frightened him out of his fat wits.

"In your room?" said Blake incredulously. "In my room?"

Baggy Trimble nodded vigorously, and mopped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"This wants looking into," growled Figgins.

Already he was racing up the stairs, with Tom Merry & Co. and Kit Wildrake close at his heels. The chums swooped into the bed-room occupied by Blake, Herries, Digby, and Baggie Trimble.

Save for themselves, it was empty.

"Spoofer!" growled Blake.

"That fat rotter was pulling our legs!"

But Tom Merry shook his head.

"Something scared him clean out of his wits, whatever it was," he remarked. "He wasn't pulling our legs. I know Trimble better than that!"

The juniors were silent.

"Is—is it there?"

Baggy Trimble's quavering voice brought all the juniors up sharply. The fat junior, feeling less terror with Tom Merry & Co. about him, had screwed up enough pluck to re-enter the room.



It was the work of a moment to open the window. Cautiously Arthur Augustus' noble head peeped through. Swoooosh! "Yawoooooh!" A billposter's brush met him full in the face, and a stream of slimy paste disported itself down his neck, in his ears, in his mouth. "Wow! Oh, owikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus. (See Chapter 6.)

But his eyes nearly jumped out of their sockets when he looked at the dressing-table mirror again.

"Oh, great Scott!" he exclaimed. "It's gone!"

"What's gone, old fat man?"

Trimble pointed a shaking finger at the mirror.

"While I was brushing my hair," he said, "a message in crimson appeared on that glass. Oh, it was horrible to see it! And now it's gone!"

The juniors looked at the mirror and then looked at Trimble. But they were convinced that Trimble wasn't pulling their legs, despite the lack of evidence that a ghost had been in the room.

"You remember the butler's story of how one of the servants was scared out of his wits because he had seen a message similar to this?" said Blake quietly.

The juniors nodded. They remembered, too, Kit Wildrake's story of what he had seen in the way of a ghostly message on a former occasion, and were strangely silent.

"You're not spoofing?" asked Kerr at length, eyeing the trembling fat junior searchingly.

"Honour bright I'm not!" gasped Trimble. "It's—it's uncanny!"

"What was the message?"

Trimble got a grip on his fat wits.

"Ware the mark of the Hawk at midnight, ye disturbers of my peace!" he said in a dramatic whisper.

"The mark of the Hawk," muttered Manners. "At midnight!"

"Wow!" gasped Trimble. "I'm not sleeping in this room to-night. Wish I'd never come near the place!"

"You invited yourself, you know," Kit Wildrake reminded him.

But that failed to comfort Baggie Trimble.

The chums were silent. Kerr, whose Scotch breed made him chary of believing in the supernatural, moved across to the looking-glass and examined it carefully. Kit Wildrake went with him. But the rest of the party stayed where they were. None of them professed an open belief in ghosts. Yet it was hard to account for that mysterious message. Most of them, too, were casting their thoughts back to the previous night when Trimble, who had set out

to raid the pantry while the rest of the household was asleep, had awakened everyone by his piercing cries for help.

The fat junior had been found at the foot of the stairs leading to and from the hall in a state of terror. Arthur Augustus, who had been the first to reach him, had given a certain amount of colour to the strange story Trimble had to tell by bearing him out in saying that he had been awakened at first by a horrible laugh that echoed through the house. He was half-convinced, too, that he had seen some phantom shapes just prior to the moment when he had switched on the electric light.

Tom Merry & Co. had been prepared to put down Trimble's tale of a buccaneer ghost, complete with cutlass and hook, according to the legend of Drere Manor, as the result of a disordered stomach resultant upon over-eating. But D'Arcy's evidence could not be dismissed in the same light way.

The horror of the night came back to them with more vividness than ever. Of the whole party perhaps Arthur Augustus was the most troubled. He was sensitive to a degree, and all this talk of ghosts and mysterious writings that came and went was getting on his nerves.

"I'm beginnin' to think that there is somethin' in this stow of the pirate captain," he said quietly. "We can't dismiss every scrap of evidence as bunkum an' tommy-wot, deah boys."

Kerr turned a gleaming eye from the dressing-table.

"Ring off, Gussy," he said with a grim smile. "I tell you there's some trickery going on here. I've felt so all along. I'm not believing in any ghost if I come across a thousand evidences of one at close quarters."

"That's illogical, deah boy," protested D'Arcy. "If you met one face to face, would you still be of the same opinion as you are now?"

The juniors waited for their Scotch chum's reply.

"I should be of the same opinion as I am now," he replied slowly and distinctly.

"Bai, Jove, Kerr, I admiah your self-contwot and native obstinacy!"

There was a titter of laughter, but it speedily died down as Buck and Nunks came up the stairs.

Buck put his head round the door.

"You buys fair make a bit o' noise round the house," he grinned. And then, catching sight of the juniors' serious faces: "Why, what's the matter with you all? You look that scared—"

Kit hastened to explain what Baggy Trimble had seen.

Buck growled when the story was finished.

"I'm gettin' that cross with this ghost feller," he rumbled, "thet him an' me'll be at it hammer-an'-tongs fairly soon!"

"Then you don't believe in the supernatural, Buck?" said Figgins.

"Aw! Soopernat'ral fiddlesticks!" scoffed Buck. "It's darned trickery somewheres, an' I'll stake my best hoss that I git to the bottom o' it before thet goldurned ghost gits me!"

They were brave words, and Nunks added his "Bravo" to that of the juniors. He had listened to the story without saying a word. Now he stepped forward.

"I'm right down sorry that you boys are coming up against this trickery," he drawled. "Because you're my guests, an' it ain't exactly a nice way of entertaining. But if you care to pack an'—"

He completed his sentence with an expressive gesture.

Kit looked round on the juniors, and tried to read their thoughts.

"We're staying," said Kerr stoutly. "I'm with Buck. It's trickery all the way through. But we'll get to the bottom of it. St. Jim's chaps are not in the habit of backing out of a little bit of trouble."

"No fear!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "I'm keen to stay on and see it through!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

It was a regular chorus.

"As long as this ghost rotter doesn't sneak our grub," said Fatty Wynn, "I'm prepared to stay—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Fatty Wynn's concern about his inner man provided the turning point in the conversation. For the moment all thoughts of ghosts were dissipated in that hearty burst of laughter. Even Trimble joined in, for he was a bigger trencherman than Fatty Wynn. Added to which his obtuse mentality, although easily scared, was not capable of remembering anything unpleasant for long when there was a talk of grub. Indeed, had it been possible to read the thoughts of the juniors present there and set them out on paper, it would have been discovered that "ghost" had been registered and erased on Trimble's fat memory to

make room for the word "grub" in half the time it had taken the rest of the juniors to forget—for the nonce at least—that unpleasant incident of the mysterious message.

CHAPTER 5.

Kerr's Discovery!

"WHO'S coming for a stroll into the village?" Kit Wildrake asked that question of his guests after dinner that day. It was hailed with unanimous delight. Even Trimble, for once, showed a disposition to take a little exercise.

"We'll go down the steps of the cliff," said Wildrake, "and—"

"Good egg!" exclaimed Manners joyously. "I'll get my camera. I've been wanting to explore those hundred steps ever since I've been here."

And Manners dashed off for his precious camera.

"And trot along to the village via the sands," continued Wildrake. "The tide's out. I believe it is possible to walk in the shelter of the cliffs along the foreshore even when the tide's in, anyway."

"Jolly good notion," agreed Blake; and the rest of the chums nodded their heads in assent.

There was a general rush to secure hats and coats and scarves. Buck and Nunks were invited to join the party, but they declined.

"We've got a little business to do in the village," said Nunks. "Reckon we'll pick you up there, sonnies."

"Right-ho!"

Nunks and Buck watched the juniors swarm out of the house.

"Good plucked 'uns, aren't they, boss?" commented Buck.

"Sure," drawled Nunks. "Can't say I like that fat clam Grimble, or Brimble, or whatever his name is; but reckon the rest is bonnie."

"And young Kit," said Buck, "ain't he jest dandy, boss? Don't it take you back to old days on the Boot Leg when he was just a wee nipper?"

"It does that," assented Nunks, with a proud look in his kindly eyes. "This would be the happiest holiday in my life, Buck, but for that blamed ghost. Don't think I shall go back to the ranch."

Buck's face fell, but he offered no objection to that statement. For himself, next to his love of the Wildrakes was that for the cattle and the ranch out in far-away British Columbia. But if the "ole man," as he affectionately termed Nunks, chose to stay in England, then Buck would stay with him just as long as the "ole man" wanted him.

A silence fell between them for a few moments. Each was thinking of the story of the buccaneer ghost. Not for one moment would either of them have admitted extraordinary concern over the strange things that happened at the manor in front of their guests. Yet they were concerned—over-concerned—in their anxiety to put paid to the story for keeps. Nunks had thought it something of a jest to buy a house with a ghost legend attached to it, doubtless thinking that it would sell at a small price in the market on that account. Thus it was, hearing the story of Drere Manor, he had commissioned Buck to purchase it. Buck had bought it cheaply enough, but if the Christmas holidays were to be spoiled by what he termed "goldurned trickery," the manor had been expensively bought.

"Reckon you an' me'll give this house a look round while the buys are away," said Buck, breaking the silence. "We'll take that butler guy with us, 'case he gits scared being left below stairs on his lonesome."

"We sure will!"

The butler was called, and the tour of inspection was explained to him. He readily agreed to join in the search. Together the three of them went over every interior portion of the house, sounding the walls, the floors, the ceilings. But nothing rewarded their efforts, and at last the trio gave it up in disgust.

Meantime, Kit Wildrake and the rest of the party were descending the hundred steps carved in the rock itself that led to and from the foreshore eighty feet below to the east wing of the manor.

It was a wonderful feat of workmanship, and the juniors could not help feeling a certain admiration for the dead-and-gone buccaneer who had designed it.

The juniors were half-way down, when Manners, who had been taking snaps, suddenly uttered an ejaculation that brought every eye down upon him.

"Have you chaps noticed anything peculiar about these steps?" he asked eagerly.

"Nothing, except that they are calculated to give you an attack of dizziness if you're not careful," chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I don't mean that, fathead," grinned Manners. "But you've noticed that there is a peculiar character of some sort on the right-hand side of each step?"

"Bai Jove!"
"Great Scott!"

The juniors looked at the steps, and there, even as Manners had said, was a peculiar mark, like an Egyptian character, chiselled out in the rock itself on the right-hand side of every step.

"That's old Egyptian!" declared Kerr, with conviction. "My dad is always messing about with ancient parchments and mummies and things. I've seen characters like that when I've been home scores of times."

"What do you think they were put here for?" asked Manners.

"Blessed if I know!" grunted Kerr. "May be a motto, or something."

The party recommenced their descent, taking note of each different marking, what time Manners endeavoured to photograph that huge stairway in sections, by the process of overlap photography.

Only Trimble was disinterested. He had accompanied the chums on that excursion because he felt sure that a visit would be paid to the local tuckshop. In any case, he was determined to visit it, once he had squeezed a loan out of his host, or one of Kit's chums. Added to which there was the question of the suit-case. D'Arcy had forgiven Baggy Trimble for purloining his clothes, but he

The juniors clambered off that gigantic stairway, and gazed about them with interest.

On each side of them rose a towering cliff, the twenty yards of sandy beach between them making an ideal cove. At the foot of the steps leading to the manor was a cave, dark and gloomy.

"Let's have a look in here," said Kit, leading the way.

The juniors followed, Kerr and Tom Merry striking matches once they had entered its cavernous depths.

"Quite dry!" commented Kit Wildrake, touching the walls of the cave. "Made a rare old smuggler's cave in the old days, what?"

"Rather!"

A thin layer of sand covered the floor of the cavern, and Kerr, who was observant to a degree, noted with some surprise several imprints of footsteps in it.

"Hold on!" he said suddenly. "Don't move, any of you!"

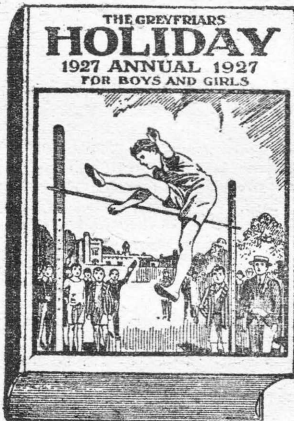
"What's the game?"

Kerr did not answer. He struck another match, and peered closely at those imprints. They ended abruptly against the very wall of the cave. Kerr's eyes glittered as he noted that significant fact.

"Well?" demanded Tom Merry, as the Scottish junior came back to the main party.

"I wanted to look at some footprints I saw in the sand before you silly chumps trampled them out," he remarked carelessly.

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had insisted that Trimble should get his suit-case that afternoon.

Baggy Trimble was determined that Arthur Augustus should get it. It remained to be seen who would get it. Certainly Trimble could not live in the clothes he had extracted from Gussy's wardrobe indefinitely, for they made a ludicrous fit on his ample figure. As it was, the jacket would be useless once he had discarded it, likewise the waistcoat, for it had been slit up the back, the two pieces now being held in place by a couple of pieces of string.

Arthur Augustus as yet did not know of that slight alteration in his best fancy waistcoat, neither did he know that Trimble had thoughtfully cut the back of his trousers to give greater room and comfort to his extensive waist-line. Neither did Arthur Augustus know that his best silk underwear had been treated in much the same fashion. These discoveries were pleasant surprises in store, so to speak.

"Hallo, we're nearly at the bottom!" called out Kit Wildrake, who was in the lead with George Kerr.

"Only a dozen more steps," added Kerr. "By Jove, Kit," he added, "the last four steps have crumbled away!"

Only a third of each step was to be seen of the bottom four. The rest had crumbled and fallen away.

"Careful, you fellows!" sang out Kit. "The steps at the bottom are a bit wonky!"

He reached the bottom step and sprang into the crisp, firm sand. About a quarter of a mile away the swirling flecks of white foam indicated that the tide was on the turn.

"Oh! Expect they have been here for years," said Tom Merry. "No water ever reaches this cave, I should say."

"You're right there," agreed Kerr.

Wildrake gave him a keen look.

"You've discovered something?" He hazarded the question.

Kerr lowered his voice to a whisper.

"Tell you about it later on!"

Wildrake nodded and joined in the general conversation. What time Kerr eyed the wall of the cave against which the footprints had so suddenly terminated with considerable interest.

"Let's get out now," suggested Monty Lowther. "This blessed darkness doesn't suit me."

The juniors crowded out into the open again, and Kit Wildrake noticed that Kerr paid especial attention to the stretch of sand that approached the cave. But nothing in the immediate vicinity of the cave held his attention, for the sand was a mass of footprints the St. Jim's party had made.

Kit cottoned on to what was passing in the Scottish junior's mind, for he, too, began to foster an interest in the appearance of the ground.

"Looking for shells?" asked Kerr carelessly.

"Looking for the same thing that you're looking for," replied Kit Wildrake. "And I guess I've struck something here."

The two were in advance of the main body. Kit stopped and pointed to a regular track that wound its way between

huge boulders at the foot of the cliffs. Embedded in the soft layer of chalk and sand were two distinct tracks of footsteps, although they intermingled—one approaching, the other leaving the sheltered cove that lay at the foot of the manor.

"That's a find!" muttered Kerr. "The sea doesn't wash up as far as this, you say?"

"No!" said Kit Wildrake.

"Therefore this cove is always approachable at high or low tide?"

"It looks like it."

Kerr was silent, and Kit Wildrake had much to occupy his mind. The same thought was dawning on both of them.

"These tracks may have been here undisturbed for years," said Kerr at length.

"Just what I was thinking," replied Kit. "Except that Phillips' rubber heels weren't exactly fashionable when Captain Hawk had the place."

Kerr scratched his chin.

"But one mustn't assume that no one has trod this path since that old pirate lived here," he remarked thoughtfully. "And, anyway, the wind and the moisture would have obliterated tracks made here, say two years ago."

Kit nodded.

"You're right," he agreed. "This chalky stuff on the track would be carried away by any ordinary wind that was blowing—especially in places," he added, pointing to a stretch of the track that was entirely exposed to wind and rain.

"Which goes to prove that someone was in the habit of treading this path, we'll say during the last two years."

"But no one's lived here during that time," said Kit eagerly. "The place wouldn't sell in the market. Until that American johnny took it a few days ago the house hasn't been occupied. And he was only at the manor half an hour."

"Exactly!" murmured Kerr. "We've certainly discovered something interesting. First I find a number of footprints leading into the very wall of that cave we just had a look over—"

"So that's what started you tracking!" exclaimed Wildrake. "Into the wall of the cave?" he added. "But that's impossible."

Kerr grinned.

"It seems so," he replied. "But the seemingly impossible often has a natural explanation. You and I, Kit, will take a squint over that cave on our own. Footprints that bump straight into a cliff wall, as I saw them, ought to tell us a story."

"What-ho!" said Kit admiringly. "You're a thumping observant chap, Kerr."

"Yes, I pride myself on keeping my eyes open!" chuckled the Scotch junior. "But keep mum about what we've seen. Too many cooks, you know—"

Kit chuckled.

"Sure!" he ejaculated. "This will be our little stunt!"

The party drew level with Kit and Kerr.

"What are you two chaps chinwagging about?" asked Tom Merry breezily. "You look as solemn as boiled owls!"

"Oh, we were just talking about these cliffs!" said Kerr, with a wink at Wildrake that passed Tom Merry & Co. unnoticed.

"Thumping impressive, aren't they?" chimed in Manners, who had expended his rolls of films already. "I wish I could get a boat out and take a snap that would focus the entire height of them."

"Fathead!" retorted Monty Lowther. "If you want to get them in whole you've only to walk out a hundred yards. The tide's out; what the thump do you want a boat for?"

"I hadn't thought of that," said Manners, with a start, and the chums laughed at the expression of dismay on his face. "Still, I can do that to-morrow. No more films left now."

The party tramped on, their shrill voices and laughter thrown up against the towering cliffs and magnified thereby, causing no little sensation amongst the seagulls that made those walls their homes. They fluttered out to sea in squalling families, amazed and annoyed at this molestation of their domain. There were some fine specimens amongst them, too, and Manners once again mourned the haste in which he had "shot" the films he had brought with him.

"Here we are!"

Kit Wildrake indicated a little used track about a quarter of a mile from their starting-point that wound its way in spirals to the summit of the cliffs.

It was a tedious climb, and none of the party wondered why that tortuous path was little used. It certainly tested the powers of the St. Jim's juniors. Baggy Trimble declared that he couldn't keep it up—that he would have to rest. But Tom Merry & Co. had politely told him to please himself, whereat Baggy Trimble took on a new

lease of energy, and came panting and gasping in the wake of the party.

But all the juniors were glad of a breather when they stepped out on the cliff top.

"Phew! That's a hefty climb!" remarked Kerr.

"Hefty's not the word for it, deah boy!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Grooooooh! Beastly, I call it!" grumbled Trimble.

"And that's what we call you sometimes!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "But it doesn't make any difference."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble glared. He hadn't enough breath to make a suitable retort.

"And now for the village," said Kit. "I want to do a bit of shopping there."

"Hear, hear!"

The party chimed in to a man. Uncles and aunts and nieces and cousins, to say nothing of fathers and mothers, had to be written to. With the exception of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was very punctilious over such matters, none of the juniors had despatched these seasonable greetings to their relations. It was suggested that the party should fill in an hour attending to these neglected duties and then adjourn to the local teaslop.

The chums tramped off in the direction of Murranhurst at a swinging stride, their footsteps scarcely making a sound in the snow. Baggy Trimble exerted himself to great lengths, and drew level with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"I say, Gussy, old chap," he panted, "would you do me a favour?"

"Hem!" Trimble had touched Arthur Augustus on a weak point, for he was polite and good-natured to a fault.

"What sort of favour, Twimble?"

"I want someone to collect my suitcase at the station," said the fat junior meekly. "You see, I've a heap of letters to write to my people and—er—people. I know I ought to have written them before—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wagged an admonishing finger at the fat junior.

"Quite wight, Twimble. One should neva neglect their people. I am glad to see you realise that."

"And if I go to the station I shall lose a lot of valuable time. I'm rather slow at writing letters, you know."

"Yaas!" Arthur Augustus did not quite like the idea of carting a suitcase about for Baggy Trimble, but his good nature got the better of him. "I'll call in at the station, Twimble, an' collect your suitcase."

"Thanks, old chap! You might tip the porter handsomely for me, will you?"

That was just like Trimble. But he made no attempt to reimburse Arthur Augustus in the carrying out of that request.

Arthur Augustus frowned, and almost repented of offering to collect Trimble's bag. But he said nothing, and only quickened his pace.

Trimble took it leisurely after that. Now that someone had been prevailed upon to collect his bag, the fat junior viewed life with a fat smirk peculiar to the Trimbles. An unpleasant task had been shirked—that was sufficient reason for Trimble to feel satisfied with himself. Whether Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would feel equally satisfied in the performance of that task remained to be seen.

The chums reached the village and dispersed to do their shopping and their letter-writing, Baggy Trimble using his remarkable powers of persuasion upon Kit Wildrake to advance him something against the time when he would recover his wallet containing that fat remittance from his Uncle Thomas, alleged to be part of the contents of the suitcase at the station. And it said either a lot for Trimble's powers of persuasion or else Kit Wildrake's goodness of heart that Trimble parted company from his youthful host the richer by two pounds.

And Trimble's destination was a bee-line for the nearest bunshop.

CHAPTER 6.

Hard on Gussy!

"CAN I do anything for you, sir?"

That kindly remark reached the noble ears of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy as he sauntered into the small station at Murranhurst.

"Can I do anything for you, sir?"

The porter was evidently a charming and obliging fellow, for he smiled quite benevolently upon the illustrious figure of the swell of St. Jim's, and repeated his remark.

Perhaps this additional kindness on the part of the Murranhurst porter was due to the fact that it was Christmas Eve, the time when the purse-strings of human nature are easily played upon, for in private life Ebenezer Hobbs was a surly individual, who looked upon the arrival and departure of travellers as trespassers upon his leisure.

Still, there was no suggestion of that everyday self in his

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he thundered. “I distinctly told you to come away with a rush from that corner!” The unfortunate jockey shuffled his feet uneasily. “Well, sir,” he said, “I did my best, but I didn’t like to come away without the horse!”—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Wm. Burniston, 102, Atbara Road, Teddington.

ALL TURNS!

First Sailor: “How do you like life in the Navy? Quite a few turns for a fellow to get used to, aren’t there?”
Second Sailor: “I should say so! At night you turn in, then just as you are about to turn over somebody turns up and shouts: ‘Turn out!’”—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to Miss B. Magaisner, 77, Wentworth Road, Golder’s Green, N.W. 11.

HIS ENCUMBRANCE.

The final race had just been run, and as the jockey led in the last horse—which had never won a race, and never would—the irate owner rushed up. “Why didn’t you obey my instructions, my lad?”

THAT IRISH QUESTION!

There was a dispute in progress in the cemetery between two of the sextons, who were both Irishmen. “No, Michael,” said one, “I don’t like this cemetery a bit, I don’t!” “Och,” said the other, “’tis a moighty foine cemetery.” “No,” persisted the first, “I don’t like it. Never did; and phwat’s more, I’ll never be buried in it as long as I live!” For a moment Michael pondered over the other’s dictum, then he shook his head. “Ye’re an onreasonable fule, to be sure, Pat!” he remarked slowly. “Why, man aloive, ’tis a foine cemetery, and if me loife should be spared, why, then I’ll be buried in ut, too!”—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to G. Williams, 73, Ambrose Street, Hiral, Bangor, N. Wales.

OPEN TO CHOICE!

The Basham Rovers were annoyed that quite a crowd of small boys were getting on the ground without paying. The secretary considered the matter, and then had the following notice posted up in a prominent position: “Notice! There are two kinds of Kick-Offs—one can be seen, the other can be felt. To see one and avoid the other, please pay as you enter!”—A Tuck Hamper, filled with delicious Tuck, has been awarded to J. Hynard, Turn Moss, Little Clacton, Clacton-on-Sea, Essex.

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Below you will see the first Special Coupon for a Great New Joke Competition, the first prize in which is a HANDSOME “MEAD” BICYCLE (gent’s or ladies). All you have to do is to send in the best joke you know—not necessarily an original one, but it must be funny!

Instead of a Tuck Hamper the sender of the winning joke in this new competition will receive a magnificent bicycle made by the well-known cycle manufacturers, MEAD, of Birmingham. The list price of this bike is £7 12s. 6d.

The winning joke in the First “Bicycle” Joke Competition will be published in the GEM No. 988, on

sale Wednesday, January 19th, 1927. In addition there will be ripping consolation prizes of Football Games awarded for every joke published each week in this competition.

Every attempt must be accompanied by a separate coupon as printed here. Next week a coupon for the Second Special “Bicycle” Joke Competition will appear—look out for it!

Send in your jokes to-day, chums! All efforts must be addressed “Bicycle Jokes” No. 1, Gough House Gough Square, London, E.C.4. (Comp.), and must reach that address not later than Monday, December 20th. The Editor’s decision will be final.



“Bicycle” Joke Competition.

SPECIAL COUPON No. 1.

The GEM Library.

No attempt will be considered unless accompanied by one of these coupons.

(Don’t forget to put your full name and address on your joke.)

“THE MARK OF THE HAWK!”

(Continued from previous page.)

face as he advanced upon Arthur Augustus D’Arcy, noting at a glance the outward show of prosperity that literally oozed out of Gussy’s expensive clothes and the general air of superiority that surrounded him.

“Bai Jove, you are vewy kind!” said D’Arcy, screwing his monocle in his eye and giving the porter a friendly smile.

“Not at all, sir! Always ready to oblige a gentleman, sir!”

“I am lookin’ for the stationmaster,” said Arthur Augustus.

“Well, sir, he’s hayin’ ’is tea just now,” replied the porter. “This ’ere is a small station, you see, and the two of us work it in shifts-like.”

“Oh! Then pewwaps you can help me,” said Arthur Augustus. “I have called for a bag—a suitcase that was

inadvertently left on this platform the othah night. The initials on it are ‘B. T.’”

“Ho!”

The kindness flew from the porter’s face in a flash. The stationmaster had informed him of the cute trick a school-boy had played on him the day before. Of how he had nipped through the barrier, leaving a ticket which ought to have been given up at Wayland; of how the young “bilk,” as the stationmaster termed him, had left his luggage behind in his haste to be off. This evidently was the “bilk,” the porter reflected—the bilk he had been detailed to keep an eye open for should he return to claim the suitcase bearing the initials “B. T.”

Arthur Augustus, not knowing the sad circumstances attached to the suitcase, so to speak, or the thoughts that roamed their way through the porter’s brain, coughed discreetly, intimating that it was time for the porter to produce the bag.

"You young bilk!"

Arthur Augustus nearly jumped off the station platform as the porter, having drawn a deep breath, pronounced that unfavourable description of him.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Are you addressin' that remark to me?"

"I ham!" exclaimed the porter wrathfully. "We've been waiting for you, young feller-me lad! You jest come along of me!"

And to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's amazement and intense discomfiture he found a gnarled hand fastening on the back of his collar.

"Welease me, you wottah!"

"Not likely!" jeered the porter. "You've come for a bag, have you. Well, you can wait until the stationmaster has had his tea."

"But I have no desiah to await the arrivah of the stationmastah," gasped Arthur Augustus. "An' pway take your hand f'rom my collah! This is monst'wous!"

"Monstrous, is it?" laughed the porter, beginning to "run" the unwilling junior along the platform. "Well, you ought to know about that, you young raskil!"

That was more than the flesh and blood of the D'Arcys could stand.

"Welease me!" roared Arthur Augustus. "Othahwise I shall be compelled to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Oh, would yer!" growled the porter, as the St. Jim's junior struggled in his grasp. "I'll clip yer ear for you! Perhaps that'll learn you!"

Smack!

His disengaged hand struck Arthur Augustus a sharp blow over the ears. In a moment Arthur Augustus, who was entirely in the dark as to the rights and wrongs of the case, squirmed in that strong grasp, and his bunched fist caught the porter a terrific clip under the jaw.

"Yaroooh!" The porter staggered, and an earsplitting yell escaped him, but he didn't relinquish his grasp of the junior's collar.

"Now, you wottah!" roared D'Arcy. "Let me go or I'll give you anohtah! You must be mad! Yawoooooh!"

This time it was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's turn to yell as the porter, recovering somewhat, boxed the junior's ears soundly.

"Yow! Gwooooough! Stoppit! He's mad! Yawoooooh!"

Ebenezer Hobbs did not waste any more words on Arthur Augustus. In his wrath he imagined that he had a hard case to deal with. This was no ordinary bilk, with his swanking airs and expensive clothes. The porter fancied he knew how Arthur Augustus managed to run to such finery. He was a professional bilk. And he was evidently desperate at close quarters and a rough handful.

"Whooooo!" roared Gussy, as he was propelled along the platform in a whirl. "Leggo, you wuffian! I'll call the police—wow!"

Another vigorous box on the ears interrupted his discourse, or, rather, it changed its note. Then, before he hardly knew what was happening, the swell of St. Jim's found himself flung into a room.

Thud!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the shining light of the Fourth at St. Jim's, landed on all fours, with a roar.

"Yawooooh!"

He caught a glimpse of the irate porter as he stood in the doorway, heard the door slam shut, and the key turn in the lock.

He was a prisoner!

"Bai Jove!" gasped the hapless junior. "Have I wun into a madman?"

He scrambled to his feet and looked around him. He was in a waiting-room, that was obvious from the fact that the fire was out—a not unusual occurrence at small railway stations—that the seats provided were as uncomfortable as seats possibly could be, and the presence of a bottle of water capped by a glass that stood in solemn majesty in the centre of a varnished table.

There was only one window to the room, and that was small—in keeping with Murranhurst and its local station.

Arthur Augustus settled his damaged topper on his head, flicked the dust from his elegant trousers, and surveyed his position once again. Why he had been treated in this violent fashion he hadn't the slightest idea. But he was exceedingly annoyed, and already quite a long speech had materialised in his brain for the especial benefit of the stationmaster when he did arrive.

"This is awful!" he gasped, sinking down into one of the uncomfortable seats.

Then he got to his feet and began to pace up and down the small room very much like a lion in his den. He tried the door and found it, as he had expected, locked.

"Bai Jove!" His eyes returned to the window. It was small enough in all conscience, but it would allow of the

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passage of Arthur Augustus, undignified as such an escape would be.

It was the work of a moment to open the window. Cautiously Arthur Augustus' noble head peeped through.

Swoosh!

"Yawooooh!"

A billposter's brush met him full in the face and a stream of slimy paste disported itself down his neck, in his ears, in his mouth.

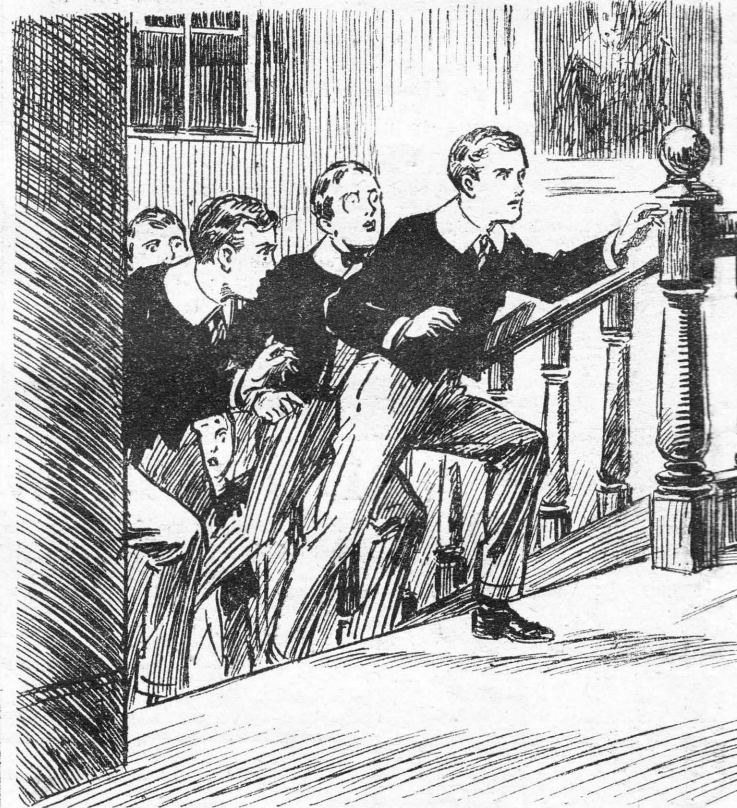
Thud!

Arthur Augustus descended from his perch at the window in about a tenth of the time it had taken him to get there. He sprawled in the middle of the floor a sticky, dirty, wrathful mass.

"Oh ewikey!" he gasped, gouging paste from his eyes and transferring it to his clothes. "Oh cwunbs!"

A raucous laugh floated in at the open window.

"Try it again, my lad, an' you'll get an extr' dose!" came the porter's voice. "If you take my tip you'll jest lie quiet until the stationmaster has had his tea!"



The chums of St. Jim's raced up the broad oak staircase until they came to a dead end. "Heavens!" There was Buck, supporting the limp figure of Arthur Augustus, where a glowing circle of crimson stood out on his forehead. "Hawk!" (See

"Gwoooooough!"

Arthur Augustus was beginning to wish that he had waited for the stationmaster to have his tea. That attempt to escape had proved a costly and a painful failure. His clothes were ruined, and great daubs of sticky, slimy paste clung lovingly to various parts of his features.

Still seated on the floor, the unhappy junior endeavoured to clean himself with his pocket handkerchief. But the result was merely the ruination of the said handkerchief. And in utter dismay D'Arcy groaned.

How long he remained there he couldn't say. He did not attempt to escape via the window again. One acquaintance with that terrible billposter's brush was enough for him.

Suddenly came the heavy tread of footsteps on the station platform, then the sound of voices.

"You git ready to hit him, Eb, if he tries any tricks when I open the door."

The key turned in the lock, and the porter, accompanied by the stationmaster, entered warily. The latter took one glance at the prisoner.

"Eb!" almost screamed the stationmaster. "That ain't the bloke!"

"Wot!" Ebenezer Hobbs' face was a study rivalling that

of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Not the bloke wot dodged through the barrier?"

The stationmaster shook his head vigorously.

"No, he was a fat chap—like a pig!"

"My heye!" Ebenezer Hobbs thought it high time to make himself scarce, and he dodged out of the waiting-room like a shadow. "My heye!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming angrily.

"Are you the stationmastah?" he demanded.

"I am, sir!" And for once in a way that glorified official was beginning to wish that he didn't fill so eminent a position.

"Then will you kindly explain what this assault means?" demanded Arthur Augustus warmly. "I have been bwutally assaulted and detained against my wish by a portah of this station. Look at my clobber, sir! Wuined! Look at my face, sir!"

The stationmaster looked, and he felt his position sliding away from him, so to speak.



they came to the third landing. Then they stopped in horror-stricken
mp figure of Blenkiron. The butler's face was deathly white, except
head. "The mark!" gasped Tom Merry. "The mark of the
k!" (See Chapter 8.)

"I'm awfully sorry, young gentleman," he apologized.

"But there's been a dreadful mistake—"

"Dreadful isn't the word for it!" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"It's scandalous!"

"I believe you called for a bag, sir?" ventured the stationmaster.

"That is cowwect," answered Arthur Augustus frigidly.

"And that bag was left here yesterday by a fat young rascal who bilked the railway company—"

"I don't undahstand," broke in Gussy. "That bag belongs to an acquaintance of mine who requested me to collect it for him."

The stationmaster smiled grimly. He was on better ground now.

"Then he's the chap I want to see," he remarked. "He dodged past me last night with a ticket that ought to have been given up at Wayland Junction. I thought he was a bilk when I saw him hanging about. The young rascal wasn't so clever as he thought, though, because he left his bag. And I knew he would come for it, sooner or later."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus breathed hard. He was beginning to

see things in their proper proportion. No wonder Baggy Trimble hadn't been keen to call and collect his suitcase.

"You see, my porter didn't know what that young rascal looked like," explained the stationmaster. "And I suppose he jumped to a hasty conclusion."

"He certainly did!" exclaimed the junior warmly. "I was given no chance to explain. I was suddenly attacked and marched off in here like a gaolbird!"

"I repeat I'm awfully sorry, sir," said the stationmaster. "But it was a ghastly mistake due—ahem—to the bad habits of your—ahem—acquaintance in the first place, and the zealous regard for duty on the part of my porter, in the second."

The stationmaster's explanation served to placate the enraged Arthur Augustus. After all, if Trimble had bilked the company, as he appeared to have done, it was easy to see where the zealous porter had blundered. Arthur Augustus wished that he hadn't been so zealous, but he was sporting enough to see that it had been a general misunderstanding.

He moved to the door.

"I was goin' to make a weport of this affaiah to the police," he said. "But I think it's best to let the mattah dwop. In any case, I am the injured partay. This fellow Twimble, whose bag I came to collect, is a schoolfellow of mine, but he has no claim to my fwendship. Still, as he is a guest ovah the Chwistmas hols, at the same house where I am stayin' I would pwefer to settle the mattah beah and now!"

"The matter is settled, sir," said the stationmaster—"leastways, as far as I'm concerned."

"But the excess fare—"

"We will forget that, sir. After all, you've—ahem—been put to a lot of inconvenience, and—"

"Yaas!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, with a grin. "Then I pwesume I may collect that beastly bag?"

"You may, sir. Glad to get rid of it."

The stationmaster tramped out of the waiting-room, and Arthur Augustus followed him. The bag—the bone of contention, as it were—was duly handed over.

Arthur Augustus looked thoughtful.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured. "The vevy thing!"

He turned to the stationmaster.

"I would ewave the loan of that beastly paste-bwush—the one your portah jabbed in my face, you know, Twimble—I mean my acquaintance—would—ahem—like to see it!"

The stationmaster looked at D'Arcy knowingly.

"It's against the company's rules for anything belonging to them to be taken off the station premises," he remarked. "But in the circumstances we'll waive that. You can borrow it with pleasure, sir."

The fearsome-looking brush was handed over, the stationmaster thoughtfully dipping it in the large can of thick paste beforehand.

"You might give him one for me, sir!" he grinned.

"Wely on me!" said Arthur Augustus grimly.

And he caused no little sensation amongst the villagers as he strode fiercely up the main street, a suitcase in one hand, and a dripping bill-poster's brush in the other.

But for once the elegant D'Arcy was not mindful of his appearance; he was looking for Baggy Trimble, the cause of all the trouble, and it boded ill for the fat junior when they met.

CHAPTER 7.

Wintringham Volunteers!

"O H, my hat!" Jack Blake uttered that ejaculation, and Herries and Digby, who were with him, uttered similar ejaculations.

"Great Scott!"

"My hat!"

The chums were on the pavement just outside the village teashop when Blake caught sight of a familiar figure rushing towards them. Herries and Digby, following their leader's gaze, saw Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, waving a large pastebrush and carrying a suitcase.

"Is he gone mad?"

"Gussy—"

Arthur Augustus panted up. His monocle streamed at the end of its ribbon, his clothes were sadly rumpled and soiled.

"What the thump—" began Blake.

"Twimble—" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Eh?"

"Twimble! Where is the fat wottah!"

Blake jerked his thumb towards the door of the teashop.

"He's just gone in with the other chaps. But what's the giddy caper, Gussy?"

Arthur Augustus waved the brush and shook the suitcase, and his eyes gleamed with anger.

"You know that fat wottah asked me to go to the station to fetch his bag?"

His chums nodded.

"Bai Jove!" hooted Arthur Augustus. "I'll bag him!"

And he explained what had happened to him at the station.

Blake and Herries and Digby had the greatest difficulty to restrain their mirth.

"The fat toad!" exclaimed Blake, with a faint grin.

"And they locked you up for a bilk?" said Herries. "Oh, my hat!"

"Yaas! As if I look like a bilk!" roared Arthur Augustus. "Why, I'll bwain that wottah Twimble!"

"But what are you doing with that thumping brush?" demanded Blake.

"I'm goin' to give that cad Twimble a taste of it!" retorted Arthur Augustus fiercely. "Look at my clobber! Wained! An' all that beast Twimble's fault!"

And without waiting for further comment from his chums, the elegant junior jerked open the door of the teashop and asked the commissionaire to inform Baggy Trimble that someone wanted to see him outside. It was not hard for the commissionaire to single out Trimble from the crowd of St. Jim's juniors in the teashop, for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had described him as a "fat little beast, with a turned-up nose."

In less than two minutes Baggy Trimble, wondering who on earth desired to see him, rolled out of the door of the teashop.

Then he jumped as he saw the enraged Arthur Augustus—and the dripping pastebrush.

"What—"

And that was all he had time to say; for the brush took him full in the mouth, and thick daubs of paste mingled unpleasantly with the jam-tarts the fat junior had consumed.

"Mmmmmmmmm!"

"There, you wottah!" roared Arthur Augustus, dancing round Trimble like a dervish, and jabbing him at intervals with that fearsome brush. "Take that!"

"Whoooooop! Mmmmmmmmm!"

"And that!"

"Groooooooh! Yoooooooh!"

Trimble took them all—on his face, on his neck, on his ample waistcoat—everywhere, in fact. And his howls and gurgles brought Tom Merry & Co. racing on the scene. They stared in dumbfounded surprise at Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he pranced round with the dripping paste-brush; but they took good care to keep out of the line of fire, so to speak.

"What the thump is this?" gurgled Tom Merry.

Blake explained, and a chorus of laughter went up when it became known that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been "run in" for bilking. But Trimble did not join in the laugh. He was fairly covered in paste by this time, and his roars echoed high and low.

"You wottah!" roared Arthur Augustus. "I'll teach you to play those beastly twicks on me! Now I know why you didn't want to go to the station."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

"Gussy always sees things too late!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mmmmmmmmm!"

Baggy Trimble dodged that sweeping brush at last, and he rolled off down the street as if a thousand demons were at his heels. Arthur Augustus threw his suitcase after him, and then paused to take breath.

"I fancy that will teach the fat boundah a lesson!" he panted. "He's had a little of the wotten expewience I went through."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You seem to forget that Trimble is wearing your clothes!" chuckled Monty Lowther. "I rather fancy they are done for now!"

"Bai Jove! I forgot that—"

The expression on Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's face when he realised that most of the paste from the brush had been swamped over the clothes Trimble was wearing was, as Blake expressed it, worth a guinea a box. The little circumstance that the clothes in question belonged to his noble self came home to Arthur Augustus rather late in the day.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see anythin' to laugh at!" growled D'Arcy, with a furious blink after the retreating Trimble.

But Tom Merry & Co. did, for they roared. The roars

ceased, however, as their elegant chum flourished the paste-brush. There was still sufficient paste on that brush to spoil several more suits.

"Hem!" coughed Tom Merry. "Let's get back to tea. Come on, Gussy old chap!"

And Arthur Augustus allowed himself to be led into the teashop. The brush was handed over to a small boy, who did duty as a page, and who promised to return same to the station-master at Murranhurst for a consideration. The consideration being forthcoming, he disappeared in double-quick time for the station, and Arthur Augustus quite forgot his untidy appearance and his temper in the sumptuous tea that was soon served up.

Half way through the meal a fat and forlorn figure poked its head round the alcove that sheltered the St. Jim's juniors.

It was Baggy Trimble.

He looked an awful sight, despite the fact that he had wiped the "top" daubs of paste from his face and clothes. His woebegone appearance raised a laugh.

"I say, you fellows—" began Trimble plaintively.

"Oh, come in!" sang out Kit Wildrake good-naturedly. "And squat down!"

Trimble needed no second bidding. He plumped into a seat and started to pile in with great gusto.

Arthur Augustus treated him to a frigid stare.

"I hope this will be a lesson to you, Twimble," he said severely. "Bilkin' is dishonest."

"Mummmmm!"

Trimble's only reply to that was a mumbling grunt. And Arthur Augustus, doubtless thinking that he had made an impression on Trimble's fat mind, proceeded to deliver himself of a little homily on the virtue of honesty—which was like pouring water on a duck's back in so far as it affected Trimble, for his attention was taken up solely with the dish of jam-tarts before him, which he was doing his utmost to demolish before anyone around him developed a fancy to sample them.

"Hallo!" said Kit suddenly. "That sounds like Nunks and Buck!"

"Reckon we'll find 'em here," came Nunks' voice.

"Bet your bottom dollar!" said Buck.

A moment later the two came into sight.

"We're sure right, boss," grinned Buck. "Trust buys to remember it's teatime."

Nunks and Buck were loaded up with parcels, and the juniors gladly relieved them of their burdens.

"We're just finishing tea—" began Kit.

Trimble glared.

"Just starting, you mean," he protested. "Why, I've only had a dozen jam-tarts and half a dozen mouldy eclairs—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, don't hurry for us," said Nunks. "Buck an' I are goin' to hunt up that estate agent, to see if we can git any servants to run the house over the Christmas. I've been on the phone to London, but there's nothing doing there."

"Guess we trailed you buys to git rid of these tarnation parcels, too," grinned Buck. "I don't fancy me chances trailin' round with a load of crackers an' things."

Buck and Nunks seated themselves while the chums finished their tea. Kit settled the bill, and there was a roar of protest from Trimble.

"Here, I say!" he yelled. "Hold on! I'm not finished yet!"

"You are as far as I'm concerned," said Kit. "If you want to guzzle any more you can jolly well pay for it yourself."

"I call that mean," said Trimble.

"You can call it what you like," declared Kit. "But you've already eaten enough for six."

"Leave him to it!" growled Tom Merry.

But Trimble had no intention of being left to it. As long as someone else footed the bill he was prepared to stay in the teashop all night. But it was a different matter if he had to pay for all he consumed himself. He rolled to his feet and followed in the wake of Kit Wildrake and the rest of the party, grumbling.

In cheery spirits Tom Merry & Co. and Nunks and Buck made tracks for Mr. Redknap's office.

The estate agent stared in surprise as he saw Buck and Nunks and the crowd of schoolboys at their heels.

"This is a surprise visit," he remarked. "I was just about to close. I am only waiting for my clerk to return. But what can I do for you?"

"Reckon ever since you sold me the manor," said Nunks, "I've been hard put to it to git any servants—"

The estate agent looked sympathetic.

"I knew there would be that trouble," he remarked.

"There's no one in Murranhurst who would stay in that house—not for a thousand a year!"



"There, you wottah!" roared Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, dancing round Trimble like a dervish and jabbing him at frequent intervals with a fearsome pastebush. "Take that!" "Groooooogh!" spluttered Trimble. "Yooooooh!"
(See Chapter 7.)

"Aw shucks!" growled Buck. "Reckon there must be someone 'bout here who isn't white-livered."
The estate agent crimsoned.

"Well, my clerk used to be in the employ of Montague Hawk, who was found dead at the foot of the manor cliff seven years ago, but I don't think even he would go near the place now," he said.

At that moment the outer office door opened and the clerk came in. He started in surprise as he saw the crowd of schoolboys, and his gaze rested inquiringly on his employer.

"Mr. Wildrake, Mr. Buck Whipcord and his friends," said Mr. Redknap. "They're stayin' up at the manor, Wintringham."

"Ah, yes!" murmured the clerk. His glance dwelt on Buck. "I seem to remember this gentleman—"

"Sure!" drawled Buck. "I bought thet manor for the boss here—Mr. Wildrake."

The clerk smiled—the smile of a trained servant, respectful and distant.

"Mr. Wildrake tells me that he's landed up, at the manor," said the estate agent, "without any servants."

Wintringham looked surprised.

"Oh, but I heard that quite a number of servants, engaged in town, were taken up to the manor yesterday," he said.

"Thompson, the taximan, told me only this morning."

"Aw! They've beat it back for town," growled Buck. "Got wind up 'bout thet blamed ghost. Gee! I'll make yore Drere Manor ghost darned sorry he ever crossed Buck Whipcord's path," he added.

Wintringham eyed the stalwart Buck with an admiring glance that embraced his determined chin and honest eyes and finally the two six-shooters at his belt.

"I believe you would," he ventured. "If you can shoot straight!"

Buck laughed. "Shoot straight, bo! Why, I'd put an ounce of lead through a shilling, if you cared to spin it up in the air, without takin' my gun off my hip!"

Wintringham's eyes narrowed.

"I don't think I'll risk my shilling," he said, with an uneasy laugh. "But aren't you afraid of the Drere Manor ghost?" he added.

"Guess Buck Whipcord ain't afraid o' nothin', least of all spooks!"

"Do you know, sir, I wouldn't mind staying at Drere Manor myself," said Wintringham, "if I knew you were in the house, sir."

"Mr. Redknap was tellin' us thet you used to be employed there years ago."

Wintringham's eyes narrowed. "Ah, I shall never forget that house! It was I who—who found the master at the bottom of those steps." He shuddered, and the boys, although they disliked his suave air and his rather cunning face, felt sorry for him.

"Reckon thet ghost yarn is best forgotten," growled Buck. "Your master didn't die by no ghost's hand, take it from me."

Wintringham looked up, a queer expression in his face.

"Don't you think so, sir?"

"I'm powerful sure he didn't," said Buck scornfully.

Wintringham lowered his voice.

"I hope you won't be sorry for those words," he said. "They say the ghost of Drere Manor strikes down all who scoff and deride his ghostly wanderings."

Buck laughed wholeheartedly.

"Waal, guess he'll have a whole heap o' time to strike at me," he grinned. "'Cos I don't leave thet darned place until I've cleaned thet ghost up fer keeps."

"You mean that, sir?" queried Wintringham, eyeing Buck half admiringly, half challengingly.

"O' course I do!"

Wintringham was silent for a few moments. His gaze passed from the juniors to Nunks and thence to Buck again. Finally he looked up, and there was a new light in his eyes.

"If you're not afraid to stay on at the manor, sir," he said, "and you'll have me, I'll offer my services as a butler, or a footman, or a valet over the Christmas holidays. I'm keen to see this ghost business put to rout."

Buck and Nunks looked pleased, and the estate-agent looked amazed.

"Dunno what Mr. Redknap's got to say to that," drawled Nunks. "But if he can spare you for a bit I'd be mighty glad to have you, leastways until I kin get some folk down from London."

The estate agent rubbed his hands.

"I shall be only too happy to know that you are being

served," he said. "I shall not want Wintringham for a week, at least, and if he's courageous enough to live up at the manor again, after what he knows has happened there, I have no objections to offer. You'll find him painstaking and methodical, I can vouch for that."

"Good for you!" said Buck. "Reckon we did a bit of good when we came 'long here, boss."

Nunks nodded.

"We shall be able to manage now," he said jovially. "I've managed to retain one of the servants I engaged in town," he added, turning to Redknap. "Splendid fellow, Blenkiron—plenty of nerve."

Wintringham looked interested.

"And he's not afraid?"

"Lor' bless you no," chuckled Nunks. "Mark you, he was at first. But he's a sticker is Blenkiron. You'll like him, Wintringham."

"I'm sure I shall, sir."

Nunks and Buck moved to the door.

"When am I to commence my duties, sir?" asked Wintringham.

"Just as soon as you're free," said Nunks.

Wintringham turned to Redknap, and the latter made an expressive gesture.

"I am free now, Mr. Wildrake. Shall I collect my belongings and come along to the manor now?"

"Sure!" drawled Nunks. "There'll be a tenner waitin' for you at the end of the week!"

And with Tom Merry & Co. he and Buck strode out into the early dusk.

CHAPTER 8. The Mark of the Hawk!

"SHOW me the way to go home!"

Monty Lowther's voice rang out sharply in the frosty air as the St. Jim's party tramped through the snow to Drere Manor.

"I'm tired and I want to go to— Yaroooooh!"

Monty Lowther's burst into song ended abruptly as he stepped into a snowdrift and was almost lost to view.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry & Co.

"Grooooooh!" came Lowther's muffled voice. "Lend a hand, you silly asses!"

The chums gathered round the snowdrift, and several hands clutched at various portions of Lowther's anatomy.

"Here! Steady on, you idiots!"

The juniors dragged him clear with a long pull and a strong pull, and Lowther came up gasping.

"Yooooop!" he spluttered. "What are you cackling at, you silly chumps?"

"You, old top!" grinned Tom Merry. "You look like a snow man!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Monty Lowther did not attempt to burst into song again during the homeward trek. In the gathering dusk it required all one's attention to keep to the narrow track to Drere Manor. But the house was reached at last, and Buck soon had the key in the lock of the iron-studded door.

In a merry, chattering throng the juniors poured in and warmed themselves by the fire in the hall. Then they trooped into the library.

"Ring for Blenkiron, will you, Buck?" said Nunks. "I want to tell him that he'll have company in that fellow Wintringham."

Buck gave the bell-rope a vigorous pull.

The clanging of the bell could be heard all over the house.

But Blenkiron, the butler, did not put in an appearance. "Strange!" growled Nunks. "He's usually durned slick to answer a call."

Clang, clang!

Buck gave the bell-rope another vigorous pull.

Still the butler failed to appear.

"Aw, shucks!" growled Buck. "Guess Blenkiron wants a dose of dynamite behind him!"

He strode out of the room in search of the butler, and his heavy tread could be heard as he tramped from one room to another.

Then the juniors heard him mount the stairs and enter the rooms directly overhead; and again they heard him ascend the next flight of stairs.

The chums and Nunks waited patiently. It was a novel experience for a butler to be searched for on this wholesale plan when he was wanted.

Five minutes passed, and Buck had not returned. A sense of growing uneasiness began to settle on the party. Then, loud and clear as a bell, came Buck's voice:

"Boss! Buys! Come here—slick!"

There was a note of excitement in the voice that set everyone's nerves a-quivering. In an excited body the chums of St. Jim's rushed out of the library.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 963.

"This way!" roared Buck, and this time his voice bore an anxious note.

The chums raced up the stairs until they came to the third landing. Then they stopped in horror-stricken dismay.

"Heavens!"

There was Buck supporting the limp figure of Blenkiron, the butler. His face was deathly white, except where a glowing circle of crimson stood out on his forehead, and he was, it could be seen at a glance, unconscious.

"What's happened?" demanded Nunks anxiously, as he pushed his way through the party of juniors. "What— Oh, good heavens!"

Tom Merry & Co. eyed each other with tense faces. That ominous red circle of gashed flesh on the butler's forehead could only mean one story.

"The mark!" gasped Tom Merry.

"The mark of the Hawk!" panted Blake.

"Search this landing, quick!" rapped out Buck, as Nunks helped him to get the unconscious butler into the nearest bed-room. "An' if ye see anythin' go for it bald-headed!"

The juniors switched on the light of the landing and looked round them. All of them jumped as they came face to face with the realistic life-size painting of a buccaneer, wielding a cutlass, that graced practically the entire width of one wall. They had seen it before and admired its artistic qualities, but in the present circumstances it assumed a different aspect.

"Gave me a quite a turn," muttered Tom Merry.

"Same here!" gasped Blake.

Only Kerr smiled.

"Reckon it was only put there for that purpose," he commented grimly.

"What do you mean?"

But Kerr did not continue the subject. He darted to the extreme end of the landing and began to sound the walls. Tom Merry & Co. followed suit. But nothing came to light. The landing revealed nothing that it hadn't revealed at any other time of the day.

"Try the upper rooms!" panted Kerr, taking the lead, and leaping up the staircase that led to the top floor and thence to the battlements.

Each of the rooms was visited in turn by the juniors, but nothing out of the common met their gaze.

Clang, clang!

As the front door-bell echoed through the house the juniors jumped. Their nerves were on edge.

"What's that?" demanded Figgins.

"Keep cool," said Kit Wildrake. "That's the front door-bell."

"Expect it's Wintringham," remarked Kerr.

Kit nodded and descended the stairs.

He opened the front door and admitted Wintringham. There was a suave smile on the man's face that irritated Kit, but he put his irritation down to the nervous excitement of the last few minutes.

The new servant caught the strained expression on Wildrake's face.

"Nothing wrong, sir?"

Before Kit could make answer Buck and Nunks appeared on the staircase. They were carrying the inert figure of the butler between them.

Wintringham's eyes narrowed, and then opened wide in amazement.

He darted forward.

"What's wrong, gentlemen? Oh—"

Buck and Nunks jerked their heads in the direction of their human burden. Wintringham looked at the deathly pale features of the butler and the torn circle of flesh that left a crimson trail on the man's forehead. Then he jumped and something like a scream left his lips.

"The mark of the Hawk!"

Buck gritted his teeth and Wintringham followed him into the library. The new servant was shivering, but to Kit it seemed as if this show of terror was overdone. He had cause to endorse that belief in a few moments.

"Oh, I can't stay here!" said Wintringham, taking another glance at the inanimate figure of Blenkiron. "I can't! I can't! That's the same mark I saw on the head of the last master I served here—"

Nunks looked up quickly and scowled.

"Pull yourself together, man!" he rapped. "You're not going to back out?"

Wintringham was silent.

"Look here," said Nunks. "If you stay, Wintringham, there'll be twenty pounds for you at the end of the week."

Wintringham's shivering fit left him all of a sudden. Doubtless, reckoned Kit, twenty pounds was more than he earned in a month at Redknap's, the estate agent, and Kit, thinking on these lines, disliked the man more than ever.

"I'll stay—if you want me," said Wintringham. "If you'll protect me, sir."

Buck and Nunks nodded fiercely.

"We'll protect you," said Buck. "It's durned funny, but nothin' ever happens in the ghost line when I'm around. An' yet the moment me back's turned as 'twere, someone sees somethin' or gits laid out!"

An oath left his lips as he gazed at the stricken butler. Blenkiron was breathing, but he showed no signs of a swift return to consciousness.

"Is he all right?"

It was Tom Merry's anxious voice as he tramped into the room at the head of the St. Jim's party. But he knew the question required no answer, for he saw that inanimate figure stretched out on the carpet, almost as still as death.

"Where's the nearest doctor?" asked Buck, with a swift glance at Wintringham.

The new servant wrinkled his brows.

"Dr. Munroe, of Murranhurst Hill," he answered at length.

"Well, hustle an' fetch him!" growled Buck.

"Very good, sir!"

Wintringham turned on his heel and left the library. The juniors heard the door slam as he turned into the drive—heard his running footsteps as he thudded along the drive.

"Hope he won't be long," muttered Buck. "This pore feller looks as if he's going to cash in his checks."

The chums were silent. They stared in horror at the unconscious figure of the butler, while Buck and Nunks tried every known remedy to bring him round, and met with no success.

They began to think of that mysterious message Trimble declared he had seen earlier in the day. According to the fat junior's account, it was a warning that the ghost of Drere Manor would walk at midnight, and here it was barely six o'clock. Did that mean that worse was to follow? Was this a preliminary vengeance?

Kit Wildrake looked at Kerr, and the Scottish junior returned his glance. They drew apart from the rest of the party.

"Penny for your thoughts!" said Kit.

"I was thinking that it would be worth while to have a squint at that track at the foot of the cliffs," muttered Kerr.

Kit nodded.

"What do you make of this business?" he whispered, indicating Blenkiron's unconscious figure.

"Blessed if I know," admitted Kerr. "But I'm convinced that it's trickery somewhere."

"Wish I could be as deeply convinced as you, Kerr," replied Wildrake. "I'm not given to nerves as a general rule, but this is too creepy for words. I believe it's getting poor old Buck down now."

"Don't you believe it," said the Scotch junior. "Buck's thumping wild that he's not seen anything of this ghost."

"Hallo! He's coming round!"

The whisper came from Tom Merry as the butler stirred and the muscles of his face twitched. Then his eyes flickered and finally opened.

A piercing shriek left his lips, and his eyes nearly bulged from his head. Buck and Nunks tried to calm him. But their efforts were unsuccessful. The butler stared at them unknowingly. Specks of froth began to fleck the corners of his lips and he struggled convulsively.

"Gone off his head!" muttered Buck to Nunks. "Poor chap!"

And Buck was right. Blenkiron had paid dearly for his brave decision of the morning.

"Heavens!" breathed Tom Merry. "This is ghastly!"

"Can't we do anythin' for the poor chap?" inquired Arthur Augustus.

Buck shook his head.

"Kin only wait for the doc to arrive. He may be able to do somethin', but I'm almighty feared that this poor critter has gone clean off his head!"

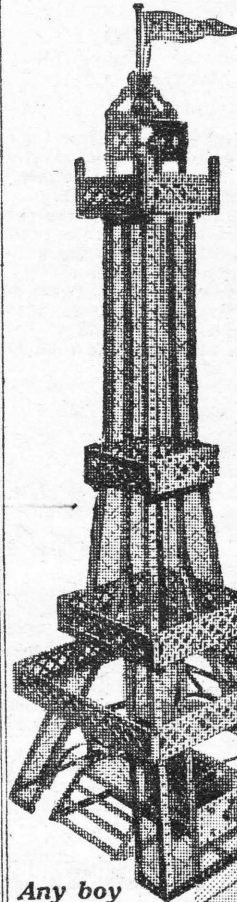
And unfortunately Buck's words proved to be true. Dr. Munroe arrived ten minutes later. He examined his patient critically, and at the conclusion pronounced that the butler was suffering from a severe shock to the nervous system that had turned his brain. The heart was affected, and Blenkiron's condition was very grave. He gave his opinion that the flesh wound in the man's forehead had been caused by a sharp-pointed instrument. The medico did not ask many questions as to how the man came to be in that condition, for he had attended two similar cases within the last seven years from the same house. The less said about the ghost of Drere Manor the better it was for all concerned, the doctor reflected, and he seemed in a nervous hurry to get clear of the place himself.

It was arranged that a private car should be hired to take the stricken butler to the cottage hospital, and from there he was practically certain to be sent to an asylum.

Dr. Munroe's report came like a douche of cold water on the spirits of the St. Jim's juniors, and it was hard for

(Continued on next page.)

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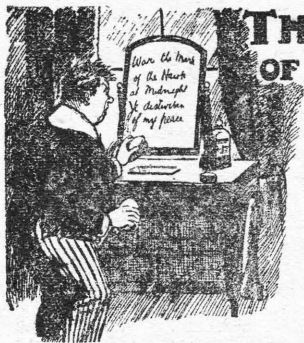
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THE MARK OF THE HAWK!

(Continued

from
page
19.)

them to believe, in view of all that had happened since their arrival at Drere Manor, that the legend of the ghostly buccaneer had no substance in fact. On the contrary, facts, it seemed, stared them in the face at every fresh turn.

Wintringham was as glum as any of them when the car came to take the butler away. Shriek upon shriek rang out on the frosty air as they bore the stricken man to the waiting car. He was, as Dr. Munroe had said, a bad case.

And his maniacal cries floated back to the silent group in the library even when the car—the first, let it be said, that ever penetrated beyond the iron gates at the end of the drive for seven years—had hummed out on to the road to Murranhurst.

CHAPTER 9. The Secret Panel!

IF you boys would like to go—” Nunks paused and looked round at the party of St. Jim’s juniors in the spacious library of the manor.

It was half an hour after the car had departed. Dusk had settled over the old house, and there was a promise of further snow.

Nunks and Buck were worried. If such strange happenings were to occur at Drere Manor continually, the prospects of the St. Jim’s juniors enjoying a good Christmas were very remote. Nunks had talked it over with Buck, and had arrived at the conclusion that it was up to him to talk plainly to his guests. If they wanted to leave the manor and its ghostly terrors they would be given every assistance in being conveyed to their homes, late as the hour was to break up a Christmas party.

“If you boys would like to go,” said Nunks slowly, “I shall be happy to make myself responsible for your speedy journey home. With all these strange things happening, Drere Manor is no place for boys.”

Kit Wildrake looked at his chums.

“Nunks thinks that it’s a rotten sort of Christmas for you chaps,” he said, colouring. “And he hates to think that he’s to blame.”

“But he’s not to blame,” said Tom Merry; and there was a general chorus of agreement from the chums of St. Jim’s.

“Needn’t be afraid to say you’d like to go,” said Nunks. But Tom Merry & Co. shook their heads.

“We’re staying on!” exclaimed Tom.

“Yaas, wathah!” ejaculated Arthur Augustus. “That is, if Mr. Wildrake will have us.”

“I’ll have you fast enough,” replied Nunks. “But it don’t look none too good for healthy schoolboys who make Christmas something to be remembered every year.”

“It’s durned worryin’!” growled Buck. “Still, these buys are rare plucked ‘uns!”

“We are going to lay this blessed ghost,” said Tom Merry grimly. “We’ve come to the conclusion that it’s up to us. St. Jim’s is not going to be scared by a ghost!”

“Rather not!”

Nunks and Buck brightened up.

“I say, Mr. Wildrake—”

Baggy Trimble paused in the act of eating a chunk of toffee and blinked at his host.

“Say on, sonny!”

“I—I’m not too keen to stay,” said Baggy. “These ghosts are gettin’ on my nerves.”

Nunks exchanged a glance with Buck.

“Well, Trimble, if you want to go to your home, I’ll arrange things for you.”

“But that’s the trouble, sir,” said the fat junior. “It’s late now, and I don’t suppose I could get a train home.”

Nunks waved his hand.

“Don’t let that worry you, Trimble,” he remarked. “I’ll engage a car for you. That’ll take you up to your door, I guess. I’ll do that whatever it costs me!”

“But Scotland is a—long way, you know, sir.”

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Tom Merry & Co. jumped. “Scotland!” hooted Wildrake. “You don’t live in Scotland!”

“No fear!”

Baggy Trimble blinked.

“Really, Wildrake, you are very ready to jump down a chap’s throat. I didn’t say that I lived in Scotland.”

“But you said—”

“It’s my aunt’s place, you know,” said Trimble. “She’s—she’s awfully keen to have me with her for Christmas. I wrote and told her that as I’d given my word to you to spend the vac at your uncle’s place, I wouldn’t be able to stay with her in Scotland.”

“Why, you fat frog,” hooted Wildrake, “you weren’t invited here in the first place!”

Trimble affected not to hear that remark.

“My aunt was very keen to have me, you know.”

“No accounting for tastes!” grunted Monty Lowther.

Nunks came over to Trimble and placed a kindly hand on the fat junior’s shoulder.

“If you want to go to your aunt in Scotland, sonny,” he drawled, “that’ll be O.K. I’ll get the fastest car available. Don’t you worry.”

Trimble grinned.

“That’ll cost you a lot of money, sir!”

“Oh, my hat!” muttered Blake.

Really, it was so unlike Trimble to worry about such things that his remark came as a surprise to all the party.

“Don’t worry about the money,” said Nunks easily. “It’s my fault that you’re placed in this position. It’s up to me, I guess, to make the best get-out I can.”

Trimble nodded.

“Of course, in your place I should think and do the same,” he remarked, at which there was a series of surprised ejaculations from Tom Merry & Co. “But I am a considerate fellow, I hope—”

“Oh, great Scott!”

“And in the circumstances,” continued Trimble, “I’m prepared to make an offer.”

Nunks looked at the fat junior inquiringly.

“Well?”

“I should hate to put you to a lot of trouble and expense,” said Trimble thoughtfully. “Suppose—suppose I don’t go home?”

“If you don’t go home I guess we’ll make things as pleasant for you as that blamed ghost will allow,” replied Nunks. “But if you want to go—”

“Well, I ought to go,” said Trimble. “My aunt will be awfully cut up, you know. Still, I believe in staying and facing things out. Suppose—suppose—”

“Well, suppose what?”

“You—you give me half the sum it would cost to hire a car to take me to Scotland,” said the fat junior brightly, “and I’ll stay. I can’t say fairer than that. Besides, you’ll be in pocket!”

“Gee whiz!”

“Oh, my sainted aunt!”

“The fat rascal!”

Trimble’s proposal fairly took the juniors’ breath away, and Nunks and Buck stared at him in amazement. The fat junior, however, seemed unperturbed by these glances. He had made a sporting offer, he considered, and he mentally patted himself on the back for thinking of that aunt in Scotland, for the cost of a car to Scotland would be considerable. Really, that was a brain-wave on his part to introduce that fictitious aunt living hundreds of miles away.

“Is it a go?” he asked.

“Waal, I swot!” ejaculated Nunks.

“Jumpin’ snakes!” gasped Buck. “Ain’t he the limit?”

Trimble blinked round on the company.

“You chaps will bear me out that it’s a sporting offer?” he said loftily. “If Nunks gives me, say, ten pounds—”

“Ten what?”

“Ten pounds,” resumed Trimble. “It’ll cost more than twenty quid to get a car to run to Scotland on Christmas Eve. I think I’m letting Nunks down lightly. ‘Tisn’t every chap who would stay in a rotten place where ghosts send people crazy. Still, I’m willing to stay—”

“He’s willing to stay—”

“For ten pounds down,” said Trimble firmly.

Blake snorted.

“You fat rotter!” he hooted. “Of all the blessed cheek! Why, I’ll—”

Words failed Blake at that moment, but actions didn’t. He made a grab at the fat junior. Next moment there was a bump and a roar, as Trimble’s bullet head smote the oak panels of the library.

“Yoopop! Stoppit! Whooopop!”

Bump!

“I’ll give you ten pounds!” roared Blake. “And you’re a St. Jim’s man—a member of the Fourth! You fat, money-grabbing barrel! Take that!”

Bump!

"Yaroooh!"

Trimble took it on the back of his head, and the library echoed and re-echoed to his roars:

"And that!"

"Yow! Wow! Groooough!"

"And that!"

Bump!

"Yoooop!" roared Trimble.

And then, above Trimble's bellowing roar of anguish, came a massed ejaculation of surprise from everyone in the library.

All eyes were turned to the panel which had been bumped so severely with the fat junior's head. It had disappeared suddenly, leaving an orifice about a foot-square.

"Oh, great jeminy!"

"A secret panel!" exclaimed Kit Wildrake.

"My hat!"

The juniors crowded round the opening in the wall in amazement. Nunks and Buck looked equally astonished. Only Trimble evinced little interest in that remarkable discovery, for he was busy caressing his damaged head, and groaning.

"What's in it?" asked Kit, as he caught a glimpse of something white that stood out from the blackness of that secret opening.

Next minute he had dived his hand into the cavity. He withdrew a long, foolscap envelope.

Tom Merry & Co. looked on breathlessly. The envelope was handed to Nunks, and he slit the edge with fingers that trembled with excitement. Then he withdrew a couple of sheets of paper covered in writing. The writing was arranged in two vertical columns. On the left column were reproduced the strange hieroglyphics that could be seen on the cliff steps leading down from the manor to the fore-shore, and which had interested the juniors so much. In the right hand column appeared a number of letters from the alphabet, which, when read from top to bottom of the column formed a message that sent a thrill through the hearts of the St. Jim's chums as Nunks read it out:

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

"Great Scott!"

"What is it?"

Nunks shook his head.

"Don't know what it means," he said. "Looks like the work of a lunatic."

"It isn't!" exclaimed Manners suddenly. "Those hieroglyphics on the left hand column are identical with those engraved on the hundred steps, or at least ninety-six of them. I paid extra attention to them this afternoon."

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus in great excitement. "Mannahs is wight!"

"Count the letters in that message," suggested Kit Wildrake. "We shall know then. You chaps remember that the bottom four steps had crumbled, and there were no engraved characters on them?"

"That's so!"

"The secret of the steps!" exclaimed Digby. "Great Scott!"

Tom Merry & Co., with the exception of Baggy Trimble, were getting excited now. The fat junior, however, sniffed scornfully and then rolled out of the room. Nunks placed the sheets of paper on the table with a grin.

Eagerly the juniors counted the letters on them.

Tom Merry looked up at last.

"A hundred exactly!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"I believe we've hit on some treasure!" said Blake. "King Philip—that must be the name of a ship old Captain Hawk loved! Oh, my hat!"

Nunks and Buck shook their heads.

"Guess it's a hoax of some sort," opined the former. "Why, this paper is fairly new. Nothing ancient about it, anyway."

Another inspection of the paper containing that strange legend satisfied the juniors that its age might be anything within ten years. Certainly its good condition did not suggest that it had been used in the time when Captain Hawk had lived.

"Beats me!" said Tom Merry, scratching his head in perplexity. "But I'm anxious to have a squint at that tomb, anyway."

The juniors nodded.

"Thumping funny place to bury a treasure," remarked Herries.

"Oh, I don't know," said Digby. "The Egyptians in the old days used to bury their treasures in the family vaults."

"But where is Captain Hawk's tomb, anyway?" asked Kerr.

Nunks jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Guess it's right at the other end of the paddock," he drawled. "Nearly crumbling to pieces with age. Bet there ain't no treasure there."

But the juniors would not relinquish their hold on that romantic find, so to speak. They were all for visiting the tomb mentioned in the message.

It was Kerr's practical mind that brought the juniors up sharply against facts.

"It's never occurred to you chaps," he said, with a grin, "that if there's any truth in this legend, the johnny who discovered the secret of the steps would have lifted the treasure himself."

"Oh!"

The face of the St. Jim's juniors fell. Kerr had succeeded in killing that romantic find in one fell swoop, as it were. It was only logical to suppose that the writer of that strange document would have tested the truth of it on the spot.

"I suppose Kerr's right," admitted Blake.

Nunks and Buck grinned.

"No doubt about that, sonnies," drawled the former. "Folk don't take the trouble of working out a thing like that and not putting it to the test themselves."

"But supposing the fellow who wrote that document died before he had a chance of putting it to a practical test?" Figgins' query revived falling hopes.

Nunks took another glance at the two sheets of paper. Then he shook his head.

"Guess this fellow was healthy enough," he remarked, with a faint grin. "See, his writing is bold and well formed. Not much of a sick man about him, you will agree."

And the juniors had to admit that Nunks was right.

Reluctantly, very reluctantly, they came to the conclusion that the document was a frost, although why it should have been secreted behind the panelling for so long a period was not so easy to account for. And thereafter they interested themselves in examining the panel secret. Its mechanism was simple, for it actuated on a spring which was released by pressing one of the decorative studs that graced the corners of every panel in the wall.

"Cute dodge," remarked Tom Merry, trying the spring for the third time. "Shouldn't wonder if this old house isn't full of similar gadgets."

"Neither should I," said Kerr, with such emphasis that Kit Wildrake, catching his eye, nodded meaningly.

CHAPTER 10.

Wintringham Wants to Know!

"I'M hungry!"

Wintringham looked up in some surprise as Baggy Trimble rolled into the kitchen.

The new servant was busily engaged in preparing an evening meal. A delicious odour of cooking assailed the hungry nostrils of Baggy Trimble, and made him smack his lips with great satisfaction.

"Hungry, Master Trimble?"

The fat junior nodded.

Wintringham shrugged his shoulders.

"Dinner won't be long now, sir," he answered.

Trimble glared.

"I'm jolly well not waiting for dinner!" he grunted.

"I'm starving. Give me something now—sharp!"

Wintringham's eyes gleamed. Doubtless he was thinking how pleasant it would be to give Trimble "something"—something in the way of a good kicking. But he conquered his feelings, and his face was quite respectful when he spoke to Trimble.

"I'm afraid that is impossible, sir," he replied. "You see—"

"Don't stand there arguing with me," hooted Trimble, who prided himself on having a short way with servants, "or I'll kick you, see? Give me something to eat!"

The servant breathed hard, but he crossed to the pantry and drew out a cold chicken.

"I'll carve you a portion of this, if you like, sir—"

Trimble darted forward.

"Portion be blowed!" he exclaimed. "That's only a scraggy chicken, any way. Not much more than an ordinary portion on it. I'll carve it myself!"

He snatched the chicken out of Wintringham's hands, and sat down at the table.

"Get me a plate and a knife and fork!"

The servant's eyes gleamed. He was not accustomed to being spoken to like this. Added to which he disliked Trimble intensely, and felt a great yearning to chuck him neck and crop out of the kitchen.

"May I remind you, sir," added Wintringham respect-

fully, "that this is the kitchen. If you would like me to lay a place for you at the dinner-table—"

Trimble waved a podgy hand.

"I'm having it here!" he hooted. "Get a move on! You're like a sheep's head, Wintringham, all jaw!"

The servant muttered something unintelligible, but he produced the necessary plate and knife and fork. Then Trimble fell to. It mattered little to him where he ate, so long as he ate. Besides, there was every chance of Tom Merry & Co. interrupting his "snack" before dinner if he had it upstairs.

Wintringham eyed him savagely for some moments. Then he moved to the table.

"Are the rest of the young gentlemen in the library, sir?"

Trimble looked up from his plate and scowled.

"Yes, the rotters! Messing about with some document or other they found in a secret panel—"

"What!" Wintringham almost bellowed the word, and the fat junior nearly choked as it thundered in his ear.

"What the thump do you mean by shouting like that?" roared Trimble wrathfully. "I've two minds to kick you! Teach you manners, you know!"

Wintringham's eyes glittered, but he conquered his feelings, and turned an apologetic glance on the fat junior.

"I'm sorry I startled you, sir," he said suavely. "But I was so astonished. A secret panel, sir? A document—"

Trimble nodded.

"May I respectfully ask what the document contained, sir?" Wintringham fairly oozed respect, and it pleased Trimble immensely. "You see, sir, I used to be employed here years ago, and anything connected with this house is—ahem—naturally of interest to me."

"Something about treasure," mumbled Trimble, busy with the chicken. "I think I'll have a little ham with this, Wintringham!"

"Certainly, sir!"

A helping of ham was placed before the fat junior.

"You were saying something about treasure, sir," said Wintringham meekly.

"King Philip's treasure," mumbled Trimble. "Don't know who the thump he was."

"Ah, that was the name of a ship!"

Trimble paused in his eating, and looked up sharply.

"How do you know that?"

The servant was taken aback.

"I—I—I'm only surmising, of course," he hastened to remark. "But did it say where the treasure was supposed to be buried?"

His eagerness made the fat junior look up from his plate again.

"You're jolly noseey for a servant!" he growled. "Mind your own business!"

Wintringham's face creased into a savage frown. But he recovered himself on the instant and stepped back a pace.

"I'm sorry, sir!" he said apologetically. "I—I forgot my place."

Trimble nodded and smirked. He felt that he was keeping this servant in his right place. At St. Jim's he delighted to tell the juniors how he kept the servants in hand at Trimble Towers. According to Trimble his father kept a whole army of servants, who rushed to obey his slightest command, who anticipated his every wish. The juniors, however, were apt to regard Trimble's tales of the glories of Trimble Towers as a joke—in much the same way as they regarded the egregious Baggy himself.

"That's right, Wintringham," he smirked. "Never forget your place. That's one thing I can't stand in a servant. I'll overlook it this time."

He did not catch sight of the ferocious expression on Wintringham's face, or he wouldn't have felt so lofty and superior.

"I know a man who would give a fair amount of money to look at that document for a few moments, sir," the servant ventured to say, after a pause.

"Oh, do you!" grunted Trimble. "More fool he! It's only tommy rot about a treasure lying within the hook of the Hawk, whatever that may mean."

Wintringham started, and a cunning glance shot into his eyes.

"Oh, that's the document, is it, sir!" he said, with a grin. "I've heard about it before. The treasure is supposed to be buried in the—in the hall, isn't it?"

Trimble laid down his knife and fork.

"You're wrong, Wintringham!" he snapped. "It's buried within—within—"

"Yes, yes!" said Wintringham eagerly, and a less obtuse fellow than Trimble would have wondered at his eagerness.

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"Within—" said Trimble, cudgelling his fat brains.

"Within?" suggested Wintringham helpfully.

Trimble shrugged his fat shoulders.

"Blessed if I can remember!" he growled.

Wintringham's face fell.

"It's all rot, anyway," said Trimble, recommencing his attack upon the chicken.

"Of course," agreed Wintringham, but there was a ring of disappointment in his voice nevertheless. "May—may I ask where this document is now, sir?" he added craftily.

"Mr. Wildrake's got it!" mumbled Trimble. "More ham, please, Wintringham—sharp!"

The servant affected not to hear that order. He turned to the big stove and busied himself with something therein. Trimble glared.

"More ham!" he roared. "D'you hear me, Wintringham?"

Wintringham heard all right. Indeed, Trimble's roar would have awakened the celebrated seven sleepers. But the servant shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't give you any more," he answered, and gone was his polished manners and suavity. "You're a young pig, Master Trimble!"

"What!" exclaimed the fat junior wrathfully. "Why, you cheeky rotter! I'll jolly well kick you—"

He pushed the chair aside and advanced on Wintringham. That individual eyed him grimly. It was extremely doubtful whether Trimble would have had the pleasure of kicking Wintringham. It was odds on Wintringham so far forgetting himself as to kick Trimble. But at the crucial moment Fatty Wynn rolled into the kitchen to give a hand with the dinner. He glared when he caught sight of Trimble.

"Outside, you fat barrel!" he hooted.

"Really, Wynn—"

"Outside!"

Fatty Wynn made a significant gesture with his foot, and Baggy Trimble, who had had occasion in the past to sample the weight that went behind Fatty Wynn's shoes, rolled out of the kitchen with alacrity.

Wintringham eyed Fatty Wynn closely.

"Master Trimble was telling me something about a treasure," he said gently.

"Oh, was he!" exclaimed Fatty Wynn abruptly. He didn't like the new acquisition to the Wildrake household, and he showed his feelings in his face. "Like his blessed cheek, that's all I've got to say!"

And Wintringham scowled but did not pursue the subject further.

CHAPTER 11.

A Fresh Mystery!

"READY, Kit?"

George Francis Kerr asked that question in a whisper.

"Ready, old scout!"

It was an hour after dinner and Kerr and Wildrake had managed to give the party the slip. Their intention was to visit the cave that lay at the bottom of the hundred steps—the cave that had contained the footprints of a human being, although it was well known that no one in the village of Murranhurst would come near the place. That remarkable discovery was in itself sufficient to arouse all Kerr's interest, for he was blessed with shrewd native common sense. The footprints had been made by somebody, that was obvious, and the same applied to the well-worn track he and Kit had discovered that led to and from the cave.

Yet who could be responsible for these footprints?

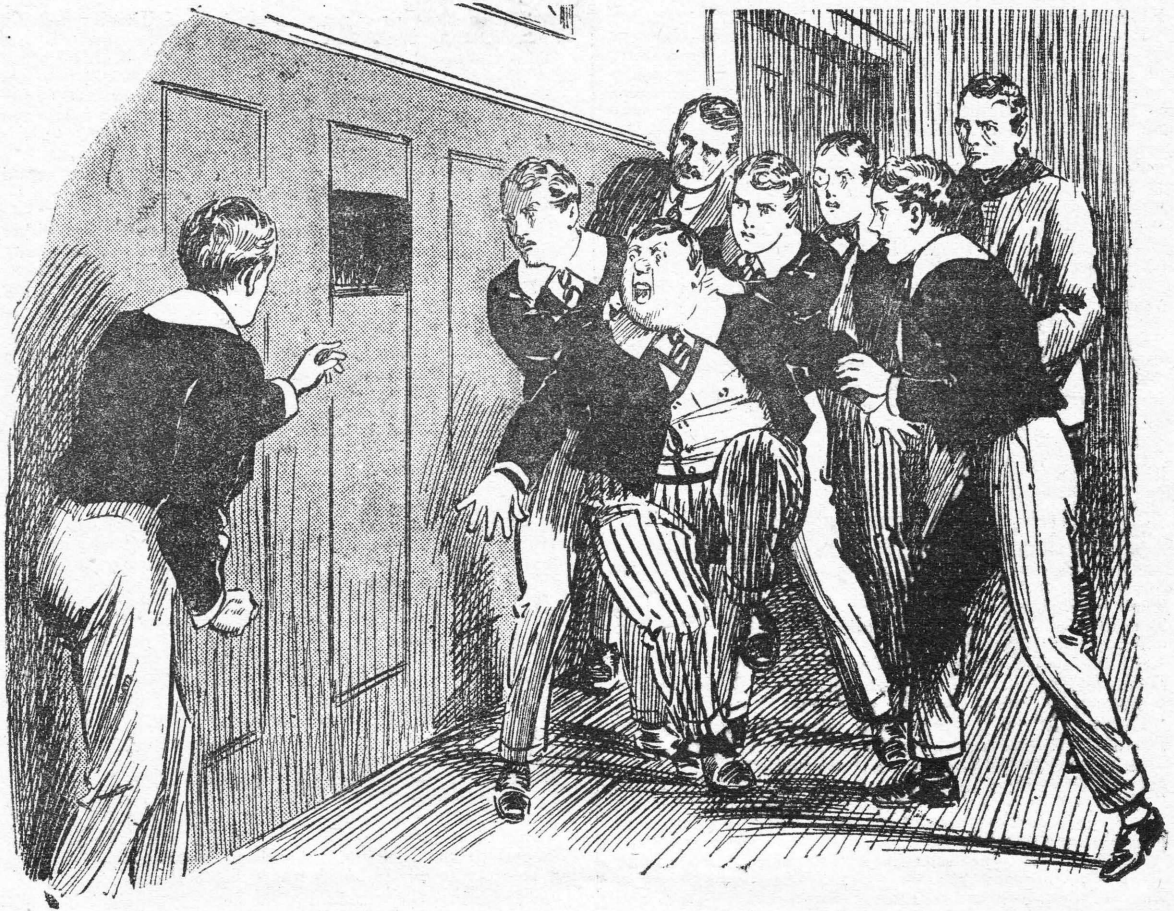
Who in that district of superstition would dare to walk habitually from Murranhurst Point to the cave at the foot of Drere Manor unless he had some very good reason? And what could be his reason?

Kerr and Kit Wildrake had given the matter much thought. Since their joint discovery in the early afternoon Blenkiron, the butler, had been found unconscious with that terrifying circle of crimson on his forehead. If this foul work was done by the hand of man and not by supernatural means, then it went to prove that someone had access to the manor. And as at the time Blenkiron must have been stricken down there was no other known person in the house, there was every good reason for Kerr to think that a watch on the cave and that mysterious well-worn track approaching it would be fruitful of results.

"Ssssh!" muttered Kit, as he swung open a door at the back of the house. "We don't want anyone to spot us."

Kerr nodded.

The two juniors passed through the door and made for the steps that led down through the cliff to the foreshore below. It was bitterly cold, and the juniors shivered and pulled their coats about them tightly.



"Yoooooop! Stoppit! Whooooop!" Trimble's yells rang crescendo through the library as Blake bumped his bullet head on the oak panelled wall. And then, above the fat junior's roars of anguish, came a massed ejaculation of surprise from everyone in the room, "My hat!" All eyes were turned to the panel which had been bumped so severely with the fat junior's head. It had disappeared, leaving a dark orifice about a foot square. (See Chapter 9.)

Kerr switched on his pocket torch
 "Be careful of those last four steps," muttered Kit, as he sprang on to the sand.
 "Don't worry, old bean!"
 Kerr jumped down beside Kit. Then they made their way to the cave, Kerr dumping a big package he had carried out of the house against the wall.
 "Now look at these tracks," he said, switching the light on the sanded floor. "Oh, my hat! They're gone!"
 "Great Scott!" ejaculated Kit Wildrake, peering at the sanded floor. "Why, even the tracks our chaps made this afternoon are obliterated!"
 The two juniors eyed each other triumphantly.
 "That proves what I've been saying," said Kerr grimly. "Some blighter is in the habit of entering this cave. And seeing us nosing about here this afternoon put the wind up him. That's why these footprints have been obliterated."
 "I believe you've got it," said Kit Wildrake.
 "I'm sure of it!" exclaimed the Scotch junior confidently. "We've proved that someone has been in this cave since we were here this afternoon, anyway."
 "And that may account for poor old Bienkiron being laid out," said Kit Wildrake.
 "I think it does," remarked Kerr grimly. "Now we'll get busy with the man-trap I've brought along. The chap in the antique shop looked quite surprised when I asked for it this afternoon."
 Wildrake grinned.
 "Schoolboys are not in the habit of buying such curios, it's true."
 Kerr nodded grimly.
 "It's a rough method," he said, "and it's against the law to use a man-trap nowadays. But we are dealing with a scoundrel, and the occasion calls for rough methods. Once he gets his foot in that blessed man-trap I defy him to get loose."
 "Where do you propose to set it?" asked Kit.
 Kerr jerked his finger over his shoulder.
 "We've seen the track this ghost merchant follows every time," he said. "Well, there's a very narrow stretch between a couple of boulders a few yards from here which

he must pass in his coming and goings. I'm setting the trap there."
 "Good!" exclaimed Wildrake. "Kerr, you're a marvel!"
 "Don't be too keen to hand out compliments, Kit," grinned Kerr. "Remember, old chap, we have ruled out the likelihood of the strange happenings at this house being the work of the supernatural and are laying out trap for a human being. But if we are wrong—"
 His words trailed off.
 Kit nodded.
 "We neither of us believe in ghosts," he exclaimed. "We've decided on that! Well, then, let's get this trap set. If there's going to be any further dirty work before midnight we shall have to get a move on."
 Kerr was not listening. He was examining intently the wall of the cliff against which the tracks as he had seen them earlier in the day had ended so abruptly.
 "This side of the puzzle does beat me," he muttered. "It's impossible for the heel-print of a shoe to end against the wall as if the toe of the shoe had been pushed through the solid cliff itself. What do you make of it, Kit?"
 "Only one thing," said Kit Wildrake, examining the cliff wall. "That a section of the wall is movable—movable just above the heel-print of the shoe you said you saw this afternoon."
 Kerr nodded.
 "That seems to be the only logical conclusion, old scout. If this wall were moved I rather fancy I should see the other half of the footprint that caught my eye this afternoon."
 That really seemed a logical conclusion, but as the juniors stared at the massive wall of rock they wondered how on earth it could be possible to move it.
 "This wall will be well worth exploring in the daylight," said Kerr at length. "We can't do anything now, except set the trap by the boulders I spoke of."
 They were about to set off when Kit caught Kerr by the arm.
 "But supposing the ghost—I mean the rotter is in the house now? You'll never catch him in that trap."
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Kerr smiled.

"I've thought of that," he said. "The tracks show us that this mysterious merchant is in the habit of coming and going pretty frequently. If he's in the house somewhere now the trap will still serve us, for the rotter won't stay in the house indefinitely. He's got to come out some time or other, and I should imagine that he makes his journeys at night or early morning when it is dark."

"To avoid being spotted after he has played his part?" said Kit.

"Exactly, old scout!"

"There's another thing," said Wildrake, as the two juniors walked along the sand. "While you are theorising on the possibility of that cave wall being movable, you must also include in your theory that it provides a secret entrance to the manor."

The Scotch junior nodded.

"I've counted that in," he remarked shrewdly. "And I've counted in the prospect of there being umpteen giddy secret panels in the house as well ready to the hand of the mysterious merchant who plays the ghost of Drere Manor."

Kit looked at him doubtfully.

"I suppose we are not letting our imagination run away with us, are we?" he jerked out. "Now I piece your theory together it does seem rather a tall story!"

Kerr shrugged his shoulders.

"It's tall, I'll admit. We can only wait and see, Kit, old man. It's far more pleasant, anyway to theorise on these lines than to get scared out of our wits by the supernatural."

They walked on in silence.

The narrow strip of pathway that led between the two boulders soon came in sight.

Kerr dumped his man-trap there.

Then, by the light of the torch they set it, heaping a few pieces of seaweed over the apparatus to camouflage it.

"That'll do!" said Kerr at length. "Now let's get back! And, mind, Kit, not a word, old scout, to the other chaps, in case we've followed a false scent."

Wildrake nodded.

"I'll be as mum as an oyster."

The two juniors hastened back to the foot of the steps. They climbed them in silence, and finally entered the house by the same door through which they had passed earlier without encountering anyone except Wintringham.

The servant eyed them queerly for a brief space, and then he smiled.

"Been out for a walk, young gentlemen?"

Kerr nodded.

"Just to blow the cobwebs off, Wintringham," he said genially. "Where are the fellows?"

"In the reception-room, sir," said Wintringham.

"Thank you!"

Kit and his chum doffed their coats and caps and made their way up to the reception-room.

"Hallo! Where have you two chaps been?" asked Tom Merry breezily.

"Oh, Kerr and I were having a squint at the cave at the foot of the steps," said Kit Wildrake truthfully.

"Must have wanted a job on a night like this," said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Shall I wing for coffee for you chaps?"

"Good idea!" said Kerr. "I could do with something warming to drink."

"Same here!" exclaimed Kit.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy rang the bell, and Wintringham appeared. He seemed to have anticipated Arthur Augustus' order, for he carried two cups of steaming coffee on a silver tray.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You must be a thought reader, Wintringham!"

"I saw the young gentlemen come in," he said, with a smile. "And I thought they would be glad of a cup of coffee."

Kerr and Kit nodded vigorously.

"You're a brick!" said Kerr.

"A regular trump!" exclaimed Kit Wildrake, and Wintringham, with these pleasant compliments ringing in his ears, bowed himself out.

"Ah, that's better," said Kerr, when he had drained his cup.

"Hear, hear!" agreed Kit.

And the two juniors joined in the merry chapter of conversation. Nunks and Buck were the life and soul of the party. Games which they had forgotten in their youth were re-introduced to them so to speak. Postman's Knock, Hunt the Slipper, Musical Chairs—all the old Christmas games were brought into commission to celebrate that Christmas Eve. And then, finally, the juniors fell to singing carols. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in his

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element in this direction, for his "tenah" voice was in much demand, whilst Herries obliged at the piano.

Thus the hours passed pleasantly enough, and all thoughts of ghosts were drowned in the healthy pleasures of youth.

But the party were mindful of that mysterious message which Baggy Trimble claimed to have seen in the afternoon as the hour of midnight approached.

Would the ghost of Drere Manor show itself again?

The minutes crept by. Two more, and midnight would have come and gone. Christmas Day—

"Ho, ho, ho!"

The St. Jim's juniors jumped in alarm as that mocking laugh, which they had grown to know so well, rolled eerily through that vast house.

"The ghost!" gasped Trimble, his eyes almost starting from their sockets.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

Rising to a shrill crescendo that terrible laugh sent a shiver down the spine of all who heard it. Even Buck Whipcord's hand tightened on his six-shooter as it echoed weirdly through the house. Then he jumped into action, and Nunks was not a second after him.

Together they rushed out into the corridor, the juniors swarming at their heels.

"Ho, ho! Ho, ho!"

The laugh enticed them to an upper floor. With beating hearts the party surged up the staircase, some of them carrying pokers, fire-irons—any weapon that came to hand.

Then suddenly, without any warning, the lights on the various landings went out.

"Fused, by thunder!" growled Buck.

"Tarnation take it!" exclaimed Nunks. "Keep behind us, boys!"

Regardless of the darkness, Buck and Nunks charged up the stairs in the direction of the mocking laugh. But they found nothing. No ghostly form met their straining eyes—no dreaded cutlass or terrifying hook.

"Waal, thet's durned funny!" growled Buck. "I s'pose we ain't been dreamin'?"

Tom Merry shook his head. There was no fancy about that horrible laugh they had heard. And yet it had ceased as mysteriously and suddenly as it had started.

Valiantly Nunks rushed down to the cellars below and attended to the fuse-box. Another fuse-wire was speedily put in and the whole house was a blaze of light.

Once again every room in the house was visited, every corner inspected. But there was no sign of a ghost. Only one discovery was made before the juniors swarmed back into the reception-room, and that was the terrified figure of Wintringham huddled beneath a table in the library.

"It's all right, Wintringham!" growled Buck, as he helped the shivering servant to his feet. "The blamed ghost's gawn! Git a grip on yerself, man!"

"I heard the laugh!" gasped Wintringham. "It all came back to me—my master, that laugh! Oh!"

He covered his face in his hands.

Then came another shock, for Buck, running his eyes over the party, nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw that Kerr and Kit were missing.

"Where's Kit?" he demanded, in a hoarse voice. "And where's Kerr?"

Tom Merry & Co. started, and their jaws dropped.

"They were with us when we came out of this room," said Tom Merry, in astonishment.

"Give 'em a yell, buys!" said Buck, with a peculiar feeling gripping at his heart.

"K I T!"

"K E R R!"

Again and again those two names went echoing through the house. But they brought no response. And neither did another search of the house. Kit and Kerr appeared to have vanished completely.

Nunks and Buck eyed each other in horror.

"They're not here!" gasped Buck hoarsely. "Gawn!"

"Heavens!" Nunk's face was white, ashy white, and his words came in a gasp. His outstretched finger pointed shakily to the mirror over the sideboard. "Look!"

There, in spidery, crimson letters, ghostlike for all their colour, were the words:

THE MARK OF THE HAWK!

and beneath that terrifying message appeared a crudely-formed circle of crimson.

Next moment the message had vanished from sight as mysteriously and as suddenly as it had appeared. The ghost of Drere Manor had kept its word!

(Make sure you read the concluding story in this splendid Christmas series, entitled: "THE SECRET OF THE HUNDRED STEPS!" by Martin Clifford, which will appear in next week's bumper number of the GEM.)

HEROIC MADNESS! Somewhere 'midst the raging prairie fire is a helpless girl, a dog, and a horse—all that Tom Holt loves most in the world! And although it seems certain death for Tom, he dashes into the raging furnace to seek his friends!

WHITE EAGLE!



A Powerful Story of a Young Britisher's
Adventures in New Mexico.

By
ARTHUR PATTERSON.

(Introduction on page 26.)

To the Rescue!

WHITE CAT remounted his horse and turned squarely to the colonel. There was a strange air of leadership now about the lad which made the old foreman quiver with disgust and several cowboys curse inwardly.

"Some must go to camp for news; others where Hunks cry. But no use all ride one way. Warriors in camp can tell something. They sure to have heard Hunks. Will you go camp?" He touched the colonel with a finger. "And your boys? Warriors know you and tell everything. You follow us if they say; or find other way."

The colonel's brow drew together.

"I want to go with you."

White Cat shook his head.

"Yellow Flower may not be there. Warriors much best. They put you much wise."

The colonel sighed sharply and yielded.

"Well, you may be right. I trust you now. Boys, to the camp with me!"

He turned and went off at a gallop, and his men followed.

White Cat grinned at Tom.

"Yellow Flower must be with Hunks. But me no want white men. Colonel great chief. But the rest—skunks!"

The contempt with which he spoke of Sandy and the other boys would have made Tom ask sharp questions at any other time. But at the moment he only noticed it half-consciously. His mind was fixed on other things.

White Cat, without more words, started off at a bound, the colt being fresh and very much excited. Tom followed at a hard gallop.

It was not easy going, for the fire was nearer, and now cattle as well as many horses blundered across their path and had to be avoided. But a welcome change had taken place—one of the merciful happenings which sometimes prevents a prairie fire from doing the terrible damage of Bush fires in Australia.

The wind had dropped from a fresh breeze to a mere breath. This gave no immediate hope. White Cat had carefully located the place where he had heard Hunks howl, and it seemed to be in the centre of the rolling mass of smoke which rose now sharply on their right hand as they rode. But the cessation of wind would enable them to get nearer to the place.

The prairie, which had been more or less undulating hitherto, and had, therefore, hidden the actual line of the fire, now began to flatten out again, and the boys could see clearly the flames in the grass, a fringe of wicked red and yellow, and occasionally a burst of red light rush up as the fire struck an old tree or plantation of young ones. The fumes of the smoke entered their nostrils, and began to affect their throats with great dryness.

A desperate intensity of anxiety now oppressed Tom. Up to this moment he had vaguely cherished hope; but it seemed impossible now, that if things were so bad here, before the fire was reached, there could be the least chance for those within the circle of that burning hell.

There came a sharp rise in the ground. The soft, rich soil gave way to hard, tuft grassland. White Cat pulled in and pointed with his right hand. He need not have troubled. Tom heard clearly now the sound he sought—a hoarse bark, then a howl, and then another bark. How well he knew Hunks' voice! Half a dozen barks followed, and then a howl, as plaintive and appealing as the cry of a child in pain.

Tom's heart throbbed as if it would burst. He was not fully strong yet, and, with the excitement and pressure of anxiety, he was nearly worn out.

"They are right in the middle of it!" he exclaimed. "I am going straight there!"

And he would have done it if he had been alone, though directly in his path there was a thick patch of burning undergrowth. But White Cat seized the bridle of his horse.

"You want die?" he said violently. "What good that to Yellow Flower? Look aside north. No fire that place. We find way round. Ah!" He gave a hoarse, chuckling cry. "Someone there already—see? Warriors!"

He put his hand to his mouth, for Tom had yielded to his urgency, and above the crash of falling trees, the cries of frightened animals, and the never-ceasing crackling of burning bush and grass, his war-cry rang:

"Ough, ough, ough! Oo-oo-ee! Ough!"

And back came the answer. How they spurred their horses, and how those horses flew! The poor beasts had been getting very restive and uncomfortable, though, having an experience of prairie fires, they were not yet in danger of stampeding. Now, under direction, and feeling, as horses always will, the excitement of their riders, they answered bravely to the spur, and dashed forward regardless of the heat and smoke around them. The knob of hard ground quickly ended in a long slope downward of grassless alkali deposit—a shaft of darkness in between two lines of burning grass.

The boys were taking a risk now, and knew it, for the fire was still advancing, though much more slowly, and they had no proof that they might not presently be surrounded and cut off, as they believed Sadie had been. But White Cat led the way. The men were somewhere near. Whatever danger there might be was shared by others. As for Tom, he did not care at all. Very soon they saw figures in front of them. There were a score of these. In their hands they held sheepskins and sacks made into heavy

bags with grass and sand, and with these they were beating out the fire foot by foot, advancing in a long line towards a place where could be heard, quite clearly at intervals, Hunks' howl.

They were on foot, these Indians, and wore nothing but breeches and moccasins, and the moonlight above and the dull glow beneath struck upon bare arms and backs and shoulders as they strove with the flames. As the boys rode up one figure detached itself from the line and came to them. It was Black Hawk, though Tom could hardly recognise him. No hawk's feathers now. He wore nothing but shoes and breeches like the rest, and the sweat poured off his body in streams. His hard face was so gaunt and haggard in the dim light that it looked like a grim goblin's.

"Huh!" was his greeting. "Yes, all are there—Malinka, the girl, and Hunks. Girl not living, likely. She make no cry for some time. Belt of fire round them, red hot." He pointed to the place where the men worked. "But get through soon. You take their place. Warriors very tired. Where cowboys? Ah, that good!"

He turned sharply, for out of the night now came a stream of horsemen, Colonel Chapin leading, and every man bore upon his saddle sacks of sand or sheepskins, like the Indians. It was the strangest sight to see these boys leap off their horses, and to hear a gruff shout from Sandy urging them on, and watch them hurry to the front, and side by side with the half-naked Apaches, start furiously beating out the fire. Tom and White Cat were with them in a trice, but the latter drew his friend off to a place some short distance away.

"Quieter here," he whispered. "Me listen—tell you something."

Again, as he had done near the river, the boy flattened himself on the ground, while Tom stood waiting, his heart scarcely beating.

"Yes." White Cat sprang up with a bound. "Yellow Flower live. I hear her cry once. But all very near up."

Now came a sound which startled everyone, the sharp shriek of a horse in mortal pain.

"Malinka!" White Cat hissed into Tom's ear. "Fire strike her. That mean death for all in a minute!"

He went madly to work with his sheepskin; and as if the same thought had struck the rest, there was a furious onslaught all round the flames, cowboys and Indians fighting side by side like demons.

One person only did not move—Tom. Malinka's cry seemed to pierce his soul. A sudden chill came over him, and every muscle hardened like stretched wire. The only part which seemed alive was his brain, in which the one word "death" echoed and re-echoed. He looked at the flames in front, and seemed to see a streak of open space in the very furnace. It was fancy, but he knew it not. One idea, and one only, possessed him; and, binding a handkerchief over his mouth, and drawing on gauntlet gloves he had thrust into one of his pockets, he buttoned his coat to the neck, and, before anyone knew what he was about, he charged directly at a swift, straight run into the midst of the advancing flames. It was the impulse of a creature maddened by desperation, and a universal yell of "Come back!" rose from the boys.

But they might as well have shouted to the wind. Though he perished, roasted alive by inches, Tom would not have turned now. All he loved most were crying for help beyond that fire, and he must go to them.

His madness was not without its method. He ran in long, agile leaps on the tips of his toes. He wore thick-soled riding-boots beyond the knee. His breeches and jacket were of thick untanned buckskin—a new suit he had put on that day. He had battened a thick felt hat down upon his head, its brim protecting his forehead and eyes, and not only had he the handkerchief over his mouth to intercept the worst

smoke fumes, but he had drawn a very long breath as he started, and filled his lungs with air.

As he went on the heat bore through his boot soles and scorched his feet and legs. The air he inhaled—for now he had to draw another breath—was half smoke, and burnt his throat and lungs like scalding steam. But he only went on faster. He had caught the sound of a glad yelp from Hunks, and knew that the dog was aware of his approach. Malinka, too, gave a soft neigh of welcome.

At last, with a plunge that nearly sent him on his head, Tom trod down into something soft and wet—a marsh. There was no fire here, only a dull pall of smoke overhead that nearly choked him and an acrid smell of smouldering wood. Now he saw in the light of the moon, faintly shining through the haze, the mare herself lying on the ground, Hunks close by her, and between them something white.

Tom was nearly spent. His limbs were like lumps of lead; the mud which was now clinging to his feet, though it stopped the burning there, held them down like living hands. His sight was blurred, and breathing had become an agony. Only the intensity of his love for those creatures awaiting him and for her whom they were protecting could have given him strength to toil on to the end. But he did it, and when he staggered up and saw that behind the mare the root of a tree-stump had caught fire and was burning her flesh, he held himself together still and tearing off his coat beat out the flames and crushed it under with his feet.

Then Tom began to fail, and in trying to turn round to Sadie fell limply on his knees. Hunks' hot tongue was upon his cheek now, and Malinka's soft nose nuzzled into his neck. This roused him and he leant forward, reached out eager fingers, and touched Sadie's face and hands. She was alive; the heart was beating, and her breath fell softly on his cheek.

"Hunks!" he cried. "Give them a yell! Speak to them, lad!"

Then from the belt of fire and smoke into which Tom had disappeared the fighting crew heard a glad sound ring out—a whole hurricane of barks, telling that all was well.

The Colonel is Grateful!

HUNKS' signal that Tom had reached his goal was answered by the most extraordinary yells ever heard out of Bedlam. Cowboys and Indians joined in a united shout of congratulation and greeting, and an Apache war-whoop and a Texan yell mixed is to be compared to nothing but an orchestral symphony of mad tom-cats.

But whatever the sound was like, it registered the birth of a fellowship between these men which was to bear strange fruit in time to come. The din had hardly subsided before three men sprang away together after Tom, running neck to neck—White Cat, the colonel, and Black Hawk. They all reached the goal safely, the colonel winning by a head. He took Sadie in charge, while the two Indians beat out the fire for a wide space round the place of refuge, and then devoted their attention to Tom, who had been badly "gassed" by the smoke.

Sadie, in her father's hands, soon recovered, and was able to say brokenly, after she had received a stimulant, that she lost her way, and before she knew what had happened found herself in a circle of fire. She owed her life, it appeared, to Malinka. Confused and terrified, the girl had tried to force the mare straight into a belt of fire where they must both have perished. But Malinka had taken the bit between her teeth, and by stepping carefully, nosing like a dog, had found the marsh, gone into the centre of it, and, deliberately lying down there on the windward side,

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE!

A stranger in New Mexico, TOM HOLT, a sturdy young Britisher of seventeen, in company with his faithful terrier, Hunks, joins up with a wandering tribe of Apache Indians. BLACK HAWK, their chief, who cherishes a hope of wiping out the "whites," offers to take Tom on the trail and show him how to become a successful rancher, his motive being to collect certain information before a successful raid can be made on the white settlements. Knowing nothing of the sinister motive underlying all this, Tom acquits himself well, and becomes the fast friend of WHITE CAT, Black Hawk's son. Arriving in Servita, Tom falls foul of MICK MANDER, a bullying desperado, by publicly declaring his friendship for the Redskins amongst whom he has been living. Mick attempts to shoot the young Britisher, but before he can pull the trigger, White Cat knives him, with the result that the Apache is arrested and charged with attempted murder. Realising that the cowboys' bitter hatred of the Indians will prejudice White Cat's chances at the trial, Tom seeks the aid of

COLONEL CHAPIN—a big power in those parts. Accompanied by the colonel and his daughter, SADIE, to whom he is very much attached, Tom arrives at the courthouse. White Cat's life hangs in the balance, but thanks to Hunks, who plays an important part in the trial, he is eventually acquitted. Anxious to show their gratitude, the council of the Apache nation offer to bestow upon Tom the title of White Eagle, a chieftainship.

Tom is tackling the colonel on the subject when White Cat dashes in the room with the startling news that the prairie is burning fiercely and that Sadie, riding Tom's mare and accompanied by the faithful Hunks, has ridden out to see the sight. Fearful that his daughter may run into danger, the colonel, together with Tom, White Cat, and a party of mounted men, set out on the girl's trail. After travelling some distance without coming across Sadie, White Cat springs from his horse to lie down flat, his ear to the ground, listening.

"I hear Hunks," he says, "but long way off and much near fire!"

(Now read on.)

had protected Sadie with her body as well as she could from the heat and smoke and flying sparks which pressed upon them from all sides.

In this protection Hunks had taken his full share, and out of their love and intelligence the faithful animals had saved the life of the child. Malinka, whose hide, luckily, was extremely tough, bore the brunt of the flying sparks which might otherwise have set Sadie's dress on fire, and at the last endured the agony of the burning stump which had touched her flank. Hunks set himself another task altogether. This cool spot, the only place of safety for a long distance, attracted a crowd of animals of all sorts and sizes, and in their dread of the common danger they had lost all fear of one another, or of human beings. When the rescuers arrived they found a young antelope, a wild-cat, a coyote, two hares, and a badger crowded close together, and upon Hunks had fallen the responsibility of keeping this queerly assorted happy family from crowding Sadie out; or, should their natural instincts return, from harming her.

Malinka was of no use in this police service. Probably, if there had been a life-and-death struggle, she would have intervened; but the mare was as terrified as the other animals, and just retained the instinct of protection for her rider which made her shield the child from fire.

In a few minutes half a dozen of the men reached the place, to be quickly followed by the rest. The fire was dying everywhere, thanks to the dropping of the wind and the efforts of the beaters; and as soon as Sadie and Tom were able to move the cavalcade prepared to return to Calumet.

But the colonel had something to say to the Indians first. He felt, rightly, that to them he owed Sadie's life. This knowledge broke down utterly the barrier which his prejudice and previous experience had raised in his mind against Red men; so when all was over, and Sadie and Tom had been carried to the horses, Chapin, before his men, not only shook hands with Black Hawk and with White Cat, but individually with every Indian there. Then he made a speech, Black Hawk translating to the Apaches.

"I want to thank you, chief, your son, and every one of you for what you have done to-night. Though I am known to you, I have never been your friend. Your brothers, four years ago, killed someone very dear to me, and I killed many of your nation. But to-night you have washed away the bloodstain by saving the life of my daughter. To-morrow I shall ask Black Hawk, your chief, to tell me some way by which I repay this service. To-night you need food and rest. Among white men it is the custom to invite to their house friends who have served them. I invite you to mine. It is a few miles away, but if you will come and eat and drink and rest yourselves at Calumet Ranch you will be very welcome. Chief, I have spoken!"

Black Hawk's translation was terse and vigorous and, as Tom was able to tell the colonel afterwards, correct. He put the last words in the form of a question, and there was a unanimous response of affirmative grunts.

Upon this the colonel lifted Sadie on to his own horse and mounted him; Tom, with White Cat's help, mounted also, and invited Black Hawk to ride Malinka. The Indians, piling the sheepskins they had used for the fire, began to prepare to follow on foot, when a brilliant brain-wave came to Sandy Bowker.

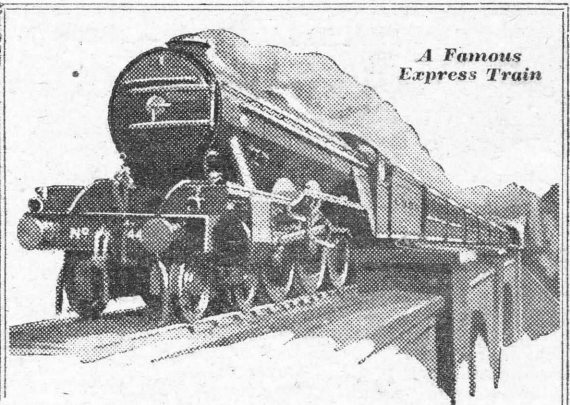
"Say, boys!" he called out, in his most rasping tone. "What about us? You've heard the boss give tongue. Guess we all have kind of similar ideas. Leastways, they're mine; and so, if any Apache here would like a lift to the ranch, he's very welcome to slip across my old cayuse and hold on to me. Black Hawk, spit out my meanin', will ye, to your bucks?"

Black Hawk obeyed, and when he had finished, and an Indian with some diffidence accepted Sandy's invitation, a score of offers from the cowboys followed, with the result that every pony carried an Apache Indian as well as its own master.

When the ranch was reached, Black Hawk and White Cat were invited to the house, while the rest of the men were royally entertained by the boys at their quarters. It appeared that these Apaches were the hunting-party with whom Tom had lived all the summer, and it was not long before White Cat was taken away and coaxed by the cow-punchers into telling stories of the adventures of the trip, which kept the company amused and interested till the small hours.

The people at the house did not spend the night in this gay spirit. Chapin knew very well the reward Black Hawk would name for his services.

(What reward is Black Hawk likely to ask? Look out for some startling developments in next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful adventure serial, chums.)

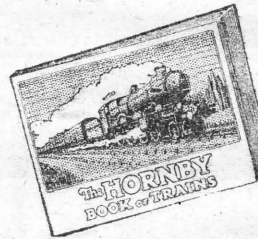


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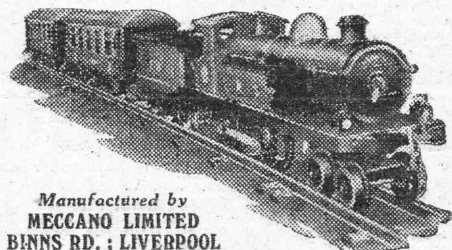
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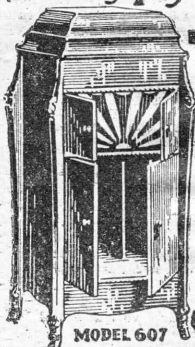
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