

"THE CURSE OF THE D'ARCYS!"

This week's special Christmas story of
Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's.

The

GEM

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EVERY
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LIBRARY

**A BLOW FOR ARTHUR
AUGUSTUS!**

*(A humorous incident from the seasonable story of
the chums of St. Jim's—inside.)*



A STIRRING TALE OF CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY ADVENTURES—

The Curse of the D'Arcys!



Ghosts! Spooks! Spectres! The more the merrier! That's how Tom Merry & Co. feel at the prospect of a ghost hunt during their Christmas holiday at Eastwood House. But the mysterious and sinister happenings in the ancient home of the D'Arcys are enough to send a shiver down the spine of the most sceptical junior in the party!

CHAPTER 1. A Protector for Gussy.

"O H, bai Jove!" There was surprise and a touch of startled alarm in the voice of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of the Fourth at St. Jim's was standing at the landing window at the top of the stairs leading to the junior quarters. He was reading a letter, and it was obviously something in the letter that occasioned his sudden exclamation.

It was breaking-up day at St. Jim's, and a good many fellows had already left the school for distant corners, though breakfast had not long been over. The Christmas holidays had come at last, and it looked like being a very seasonable Yuletide. Through the landing window the quadrangle gleamed white with snow, drifted deep against the trunks of the old elms. A keen wind, giving promise of frost, whistled round the towers and battlements of the School House.

Blake & Co. had only just come indoors, having been engaged since breakfast in winding up the term with a terrific snow-battle between rival forces of School House and New House. Now, ruddy, breathless, and snow-covered, they had halted by the landing window whilst Arthur Augustus opened the letter he had found waiting for him in the Hall rack.

It was from his father, Lord Eastwood, and Blake, Herries, and Digby watched him open it rather anxiously.

Their anxiety increased at their noble study-mate's exclamation.

"Well?" demanded Blake in some apprehension. "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, bai Jove!" repeated Arthur Augustus. He scarcely heard his chum. He stared at the letter, and then he gazed unseeing out through the snow-lined windows, his aristocratic features a trifle pale.

"Anything wrong at home?" ventured Herries.

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"Don't say we can't come home with you for the vac after all, for goodness' sake, old chap!" added Digby.

"Oh, bai Jove!" mumbled Gussy.

"Can't you answer, you silly chump?" said Blake, in great exasperation. "What's the matter? You look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

"Gweat Scott!" Arthur Augustus gave his chum a startled look. "That is vewy stvange of you to make that remark, Blake. The fact is—well, the fact is that it is a ghost, deah boy."

"A ghost?" stammered Blake. "What—"

"I think I had better tell you fellows aftah all!" said Arthur Augustus, eyeing his chums gravely through his monocle. "I did not want to frighten you youngstahs, though I am quite suah the feah of ghosts would not prevent your comin' home with me, Blake."

"Fathead!"

"Weally, Blake—howevah, you had better wead the lettah," said Arthur Augustus. "It is vewy remarkable, and vewy annoyin' indeed! I do twust it will not interfere in any way with our Chwistmas enjoyment, deah boys."

And Arthur Augustus handed over the letter to Blake. That mystified youth read it, Digby and Herries also reading it over his shoulders.

The letter read as follows:

"My Dear Arthur,—Your mother has mentioned to me that you propose to bring several friends home with you for the Christmas holidays, and I am writing to say that they will be very welcome at Eastwood House. I feel, however, I ought to warn you that the atmosphere at home is not, at the moment, very conducive to a cheery Christmas. You have heard, of course, of our 'family ghost'—that of Sir Ralph D'Arcy, your ancestor—and of the absurd legend connected with the story? Several of the servants now claim to have seen the 'ghost' during the past few

BY
Martin
Clifford

—STARRING TOM MERRY & CO., THE FAMOUS ST. JIM'S CHUMS!

days, and the matter has disturbed the household very much. I would have kept this from you, my dear boy; but as the story has, to my great annoyance, been reported prominently in the Press, and caused no little commotion in the neighbourhood, I fear that is now impossible. I feel sure that you and your friends will not take the matter seriously, nor allow it to interfere with the enjoyment of your Christmas holidays.

"I am enclosing a little money which you may possibly need on your journey home.—Your affectionate

"FATHER."

"Phew!"

Blake, Herries, and Digby whistled in unison as they read Lord Eastwood's letter. Then they looked at Arthur Augustus a trifle curiously. That youth looked very disturbed in mind.

"Wathah wotten, isn't it, deah boys?" he murmured.

"Rather a joke, if you ask me!" grinned Digby. "My hat! We nabbed the giddy spectre of St. Jim's last week, and now it looks as if we shall have some fun hunting the

ghost of Eastwood House—if there is one."

Augustus hesitatingly handed over the letter. The Terrible Three read it, and their comments were almost the same as those of Blake and Herries.

"Your giddy pater seems a bit waxy!" chuckled Tom Merry. "But that's ripping, Gussy! If the servants have seen a spook, then we're the men to hunt him down! But who is Sir Ralph, and what's the yarn, old chap?"

"It—it is all wot, of course!" said Arthur Augustus, flushing uneasily. "I—I would wathah not discuss it, deah boys. You fellows would scarcely undahstand— Oh deah! Here is that feahful nuisance Twimble again! Bothah!"

"A real live ghost this time!" chuckled Lowther. "He's been haunting you for days, Gussy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a laugh, and grinning glances met Baggy Trimble as he came rolling along the passage. Baggy seemed unaware even of the existence of anyone but Arthur Augustus. Trimble knew that Gussy was taking a party of fellows home for the vacation, and Trimble's complaint in regard to the arrangement was, that Bagley Trimble had not been included in the list.

He was determined to point the omission out to Arthur Augustus—daily, hourly, and even every minute, if necessary.

"Hallo, here you are, Gussy, old fellow!" said Trimble affectionately. "My dear chap, I've been hunting everywhere for you!"

"And I've been dodging you ewevy minute of the day, Twimble!" said Arthur Augustus, with a groan. "Do wun away, deah boy, and leave me alone!"

"Oh, I say, Gussy," protested Trimble reproachfully. "After being such a pal to you—"

"You have nevah been a pal to me, Twimble—only a wretched nuisance!" It wasn't often the good-natured Gussy spoke so frankly as that; but Arthur Augustus, for once, really was "fed-up" with Trimble. "Cleah off!"

"Gussy, old fellow—"

"Wats!"

"But it's really important, Gussy," explained Trimble earnestly. "The fact is I've got rather disappointing news for you, old chap."

"Wubbish!"

"It's a fearful nuisance!" said Trimble, unheeding. "But I shan't be able to take you with me to my uncle's—the admiral, you know—after all, for the vac."

"Weally, Twimble—"

"He's been ordered to sea, you see!" said Trimble calmly.

"I'm sorry for your sake, Gussy—but there it is. I'm sorry."

"Bai Jove! I do not wemembah your askin' me, Twimble—"

"An awful nuisance!" went on Trimble hurriedly. "It's put me in rather a hole, as I've already told my people I shan't be going home for the hols. Well, there's only one thing to be done. I shall have to accept your invite to Eastwood House, after all, Gussy."

"Bai Jove! I have not invited you, Twimble—"

"Still, it's just as well," went on Trimble. "I don't like the thought of you facing that fearful danger alone, Gussy. Some fellows say they don't believe in ghosts. But I do.

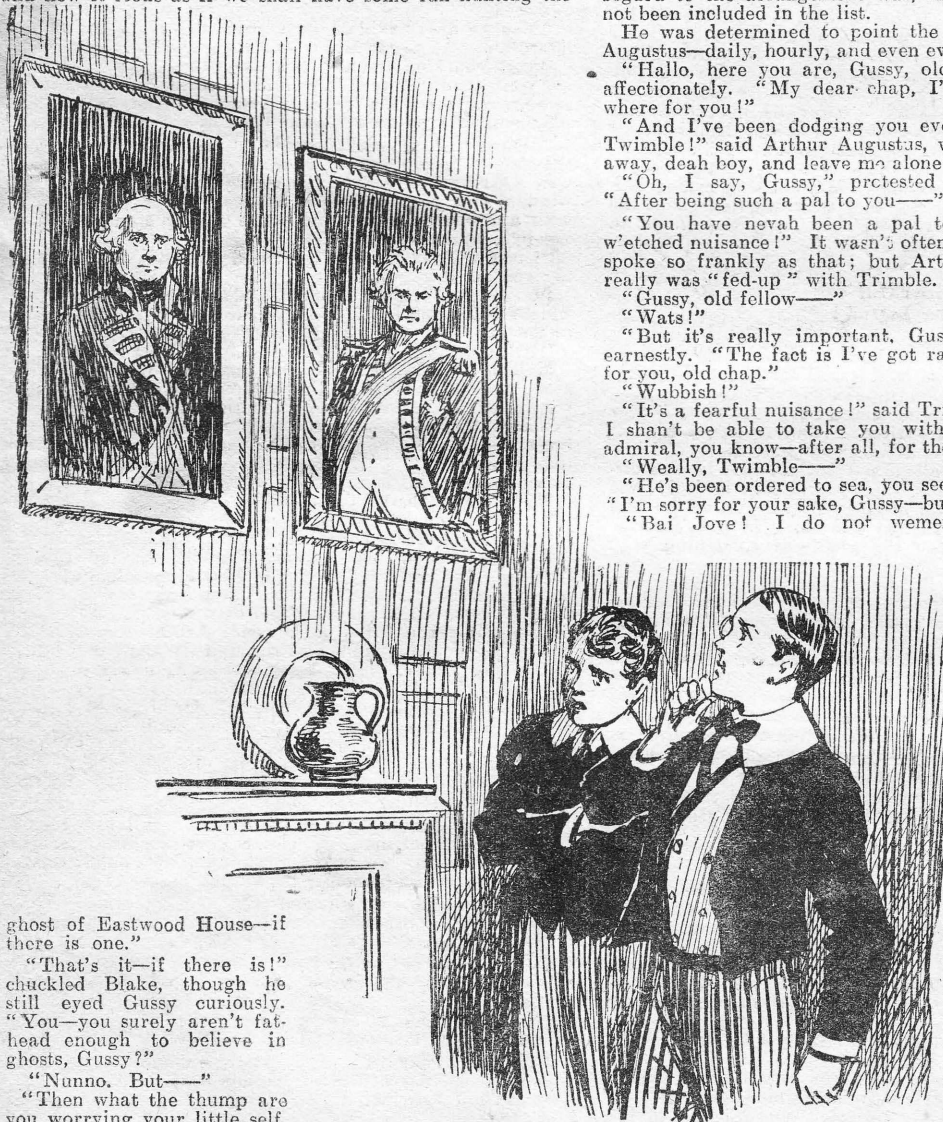
I'm not afraid of them, though—not me! If you're looking for a stout-hearted pal to stand by you and protect you from the peril of the unknown, then—I'm your man! Leave it to me!"

Arthur Augustus stared at Trimble.

"Weally, Twimble," he said, "how did you know—you can't have wead my lettah—"

"I know all about it!" said Trimble, with a fat grin. "I know all about the ghost of Sir Ralph and the legend. That's why I refuse to allow you to face the unseen peril alone, old

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ghost of Eastwood House—if there is one."

"That's it—if there is!" chuckled Blake, though he still eyed Gussy curiously. "You—you surely aren't fat-head enough to believe in ghosts, Gussy?"

"Nunno. But—"

"Then what the thump are you worrying your little self about?" said Blake, staring. "It'll make the hols at Eastwood House all the jellier. Christmas isn't Christmas without a giddy ghost! What beats me," added Blake, with youthful frankness, "is why your pater is troubling about it at all—even to warn us. Ghosts are all rot!"

"Tommy-rot!" grinned Herries. "If the servants have seen a ghost, then it's someone spoofing. We're the chaps to bowl the spoofer out, Gussy."

"Hear, hear!" said Tom Merry, coming along the passage with Lowther and Manners just then. "What's this about ghosts, Herries?"

Herries grinningly enlightened them, whilst Arthur

follow. I'm coming—to protect you from the terrible curse that hangs over your head this Christmastide.”

“Oh, wreat Scott!”

“These fellows are no good!” said Trimble, with a disdainful glance at the grinning chums. “They'd fall in a fit if they spotted a ghost. But that's not my style. No supernatural agency would ever make my hair rise on my scalp or send an icy chill down my spine.”

“Well, let's see if something natural will, then, Baggy!” said Monty Lowther.

“Eh?” Trimble had his back to Lowther, and he turned his head. “What's that, Low— Here— Yarroooogh! Yooooop!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Even as Trimble turned his head, Lowther crammed a handful of snow down the back of his neck. While Trimble was rattling on, Lowther had softly raised the lower sash of the landing window and scraped together a big handful of snow. He brought it into use at the right moment.

With snow slithering and trickling down his back, Trimble ducked and wriggled and howled. The chums roared.

“Hold on!” said Lowther, scraping more snow from the window-ledge. “If that hasn't done it, Baggy—”

But apparently it had. Trimble did not wait for more—he flew. Arthur Augustus frowned after him uneasily.

“Bai Jove! I cannot undahstand how that fat wottah has got hold of the stow,” he said quietly. “Howevah, my clobbah is drenched with snow, and I weally must change and get on with my packin'. Pway do not allow this w'otched ghost business to wowvy you at all, deah boys. I weally wish the patah had not mentioned it in his leitah.”

And Arthur Augustus led the way along to the Fourth Form dormitory. But his chums could not help eyeing him rather wonderingly. Whether they were worried about the matter or not, it was fairly clear that Gussy was unable to banish it completely from his mind.

CHAPTER 2. The Legend!

“WOTTEN!”

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stood on the steps of the School House and stared across the gleaming, snow-covered quadrangle.

Despite his injunction to his chums not to “wowvy” over the contents of his father's letter, Arthur Augustus himself could not help worrying—a little. That Lord Eastwood had mentioned the matter at all served to show that he was disturbed somewhat as well as annoyed. His lordship was scarcely likely to take the matter seriously unless he had satisfied himself that there was something in the servants' claims that they had seen the ghost—or something very unusual.

Gussy's chums were inclined to take it as a joke—something that might help to liven up things at Christmas. They certainly did not believe in ghosts. Arthur Augustus himself did not, yet—

The swell of the Fourth frowned as he remembered the story of the swashbuckling Sir Ralph, and the legend—which was only too familiar to him. He shivered a little as he stood on the steps of the School House now. Somehow he could not help but feel a strange feeling of foreboding.

“Wotten!” repeated Arthur Augustus to himself. “It's bound to wowvy the matah, and that is why the patah is wowwied, I suppose. I twnst it will not spoil the fellows' holiday. Howevah, I had bettah wun ovah to see Figgy now—”

“Hallo, here you are, Gussy, old pal—”

“Oh, bothah!”

It was Baggy Trimble again. As Arthur Augustus heard his voice behind him he did not wait—he just ran down the steps and made a beeline through the snow towards the New House.

Baggy rushed out of the hallway and would have followed, but just in time he sighted three Third Form fags snowballing half-way across the quad. Baggy was not fond of snow.

“Oh, dash it!” grunted Baggy. “Now— Hallo! Oh, good! The little beasts have spotted Gussy.”

They had. The “little beasts” happened to be Wally D'Arcy, Frank Levison, and Reggie Manners, and as they sighted Gussy three snowballs left their youthful fists in his direction. One caught Gussy under the left ear, the second missed his nose by an inch, and the third sent his silk hat sailing from his head.

“He, he, he!” sniggered Trimble. “Now, watch—”

But Arthur Augustus was wise in his generation—for once. Instead of returning the snowy compliments, he snatched up his hat and bolted at a great rate for the New House doorway.

“Serves the mean rotter right!” grunted Trimble, his grin fading suddenly. “Never mind, I'll catch him when he comes back. Time's getting short, and I've got to wangle

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an invite somehow. I'm not jolly well going home, anyway. If I could only get round him—show him what a pal— Oh!”

A sudden brain-wave came to Trimble as his eyes scanned the quadrangle.

At that moment Percy Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, came scudding up to the steps, a volley of snowballs rattling round his head from the cheery Wally & Co. He scowled at Trimble's grinning face. Like Trimble, Mellish was an unhealthy youth who hated snow. Like Trimble also, Mellish had not been asked anywhere for the Christmas vacation. Mellish was not a popular fellow, and his society was never yearned for by anyone.

“He, he, he!” chortled Baggy. “Go back and lick 'em, Mellish.”

“You fat beast! Why, I'll—”

“Here, hold on, Mellish, old chap!” said Baggy hastily. “I say, how'd you like to get your own back out of that cad, D'Arcy—old Gussy, I mean?”

“Look here—”

“I mean it!” said Trimble, blinking about him cautiously. “Look here, he rammied some snow down your neck this morning, didn't he—just because you called him a tailor's dummy!”

“Yes, he did!” said Mellish, scowling again, but looking interested. “You fat ass, what's the game?”

Baggy chuckled and told him the game.

“Well, it might work!” grunted Mellish, his eyes glinting as he remembered the feel of wet snow down his neck. “But supposing D'Arcy doesn't come back by the path?”

“Bound to!” grinned Trimble. “He won't cross through the snow if he can help it, in case he gets his giddy trousers wet. All you have to do is to lean out of the box-room window and push the snow off the roof of that outhouse with a broom or something while I keep him talking on the path underneath.”

“Quite a good wheeze!” grinned Mellish. “But supposing you get it as well?”

“Catch me!” jeered Trimble. “I'll watch that! Just you whistle when you begin to shove the snow over, and I'll see to the rest.”

“All right!”

Mellish vanished indoors, grinning, and Trimble hurried along the path towards the outhouse. Wally & Co. had vanished into the tuckshop by this time, and the fat Fourth-Former took his stand on the path just round the corner of the outhouse. He had scarcely done so when the sound of the window of the box-room up above being cautiously raised came to his ears. Then he heard Mellish's voice.

“You down there, Trimble?”

“Yes, old chap! Mind you—”

“Look out! Here he comes!” hissed Mellish from above. Peeping round the corner, Trimble sighted Arthur Augustus just emerging from the New House doorway. As he anticipated, the swell of the Fourth came walking along the path from which the snow had been cleared. With snowballs rattling round his noble head, Arthur Augustus had been obliged to plunge across through the snow on his way to the New House. There was no necessity now.

Trimble chuckled and braced himself.

He had not explained the “game” truthfully to Mellish. It was simple enough in Trimble's view. Mellish would send the mass of snow swooping over the edge of the roof. But Arthur Augustus would not get it. In the nick of time Trimble would gallantly push him out of the way and save him from the falling avalanche!

That was Trimble's game. After being gallantly rescued from half a ton of snow—his clothes saved from utter ruin—Arthur Augustus would be grateful. He could scarcely refuse to take him home for the vacation after that!

There were footsteps round the corner, and Trimble emerged from concealment and faced Arthur Augustus.

“Oh deah!”

There was no escape for Gussy—Trimble had grabbed him affectionately by the coat-sleeves in the objectionable way he had.

“Gussy, old man, I've just thought of a splendid idea for the vac!” said Trimble. “Look here—”

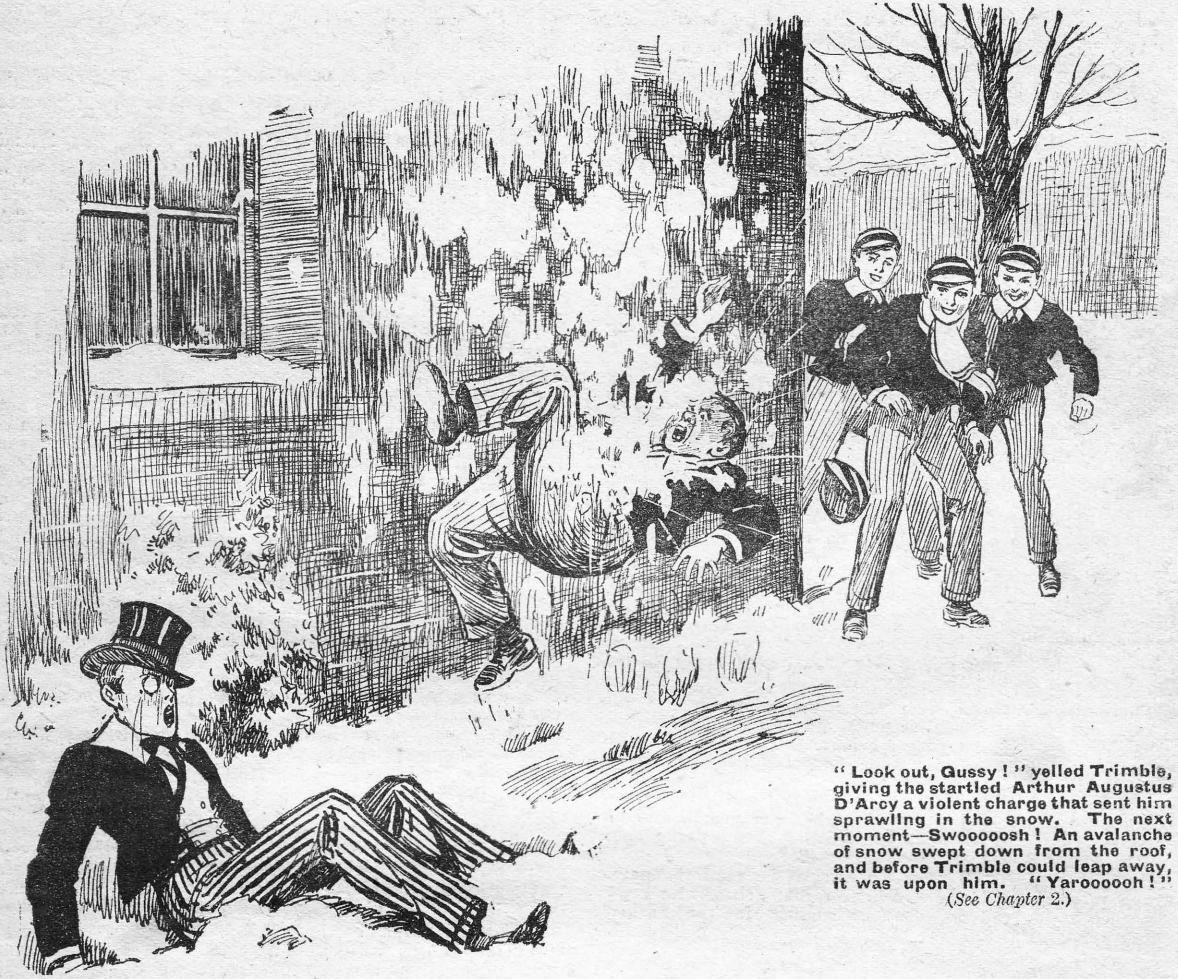
That was as far as he got. At that moment came a soft whistle from the box-room window—much earlier than Trimble had anticipated. The fat Fourth-Former hesitated, and then—

“Look out, Gussy!”

Trimble yelled, and gave the startled Arthur Augustus a violent charge that sent him sprawling away into the snow—a charge from Trimble was no joke! The next moment—

Swooooooosh!

The avalanche of snow swept down from the roof. It came with a rush. Taggles had a stove going in the outhouse, and the snow, piled thick on the tiles, was already melting fast. It swept over the edge, and before Trimble could leap away himself it was upon him. That moment's hesitation had been fatal—for Trimble.



"Look out, Gussy!" yelled Trimble, giving the startled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy a violent charge that sent him sprawling in the snow. The next moment—Swoooooosh! An avalanche of snow swept down from the roof, and before Trimble could leap away, it was upon him. "Yarooooooh!"

(See Chapter 2.)

"Yaroooooo—" Baggie's wild yell ended in a muffled gurgling, followed by silence as he vanished beneath the avalanche of snow.

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus scrambled up and stared blankly at the piled-up snow from which Trimble's fat legs were waving frantically. That was all there was to be seen of him. At the same moment three juniors came plunging up, roaring with laughter. They were the Terrible Three, who had been lucky enough to see the "accident."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Merry. "Quick! The fat ass will be smothered if we don't get him out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! It is nothin' to laugh about, deah boys!" protested Arthur Augustus, eyeing the heaving bank of snow in alarm. "Twimble is a hewo—he sacwificed himself to save me. Quick, deah boys! Help me to wescue him!"

The "deah boys," nearly helpless with laughter, grabbed at Trimble's waving legs and dragged him from the snow. Trimble lay where they had dropped him, looking like an enormously fat snowman. He lay and gasped and gasped.

"Ow! Groooogh! Ooooooooch! Groooogh! M-mmmmm! Help!"

"Twimble, old fellow, that was jolly pluckay of you!" panted Arthur Augustus, helping the fat youth to his feet.

"It is wathah unlike you, but— Oh, bai Jove!"

"Look out! Ratty!"

Tom Merry saw Mr. Ratcliff approaching at the same moment that Arthur Augustus did. Mr. Ratcliff was Housemaster of the New House, and he was a very unpopular gentleman indeed. He stamped up, his angular features pinched, his nose red with the cold.

"Scandalous!" he snorted, glaring about him. "Trimble, are you seriously injured, my boy?"

"Ow-ow! Groooogh! I'm half-smothered, and I think my back's—ow-ow-ow!—dislocated, sir! Ow, ow!"

"Scandalous! No New House boy would have been guilty of such a trick!" snorted Mr. Ratcliff. "Merry, will you hasten into the School House and bring that wretched boy, Mellish, here?"

"M-Mellish?" gasped Tom in surprise.

"Yes. Fortunately, I happened to be looking through my

window at the moment, and I distinctly saw Mellish push the snow from the roof with the aid of a broom. The boy was at the box-room window, and— Ah! Here is the wretched youth now!"

Percy Mellish appeared suddenly round the corner of the outhouse. He had rushed downstairs and out into the quad, eager to see the fun. His grin faded abruptly as he sighted Mr. Horace Ratcliff on the spot.

"Oh!" he gasped; and would have retreated, but the Housemaster called to him.

"Mellish, come here this instant, sir! How dare you play such a dangerous trick upon your schoolfellows?" he thundered.

"Oh dear!" Mellish trudged up—there was nothing else for it. "I—I don't understand you, sir. What trick?"

"You are well aware of what I am alluding to!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff, his nose assuming an almost scarlet tinge. "I distinctly saw you up at that window a few moments ago. You pushed this snow from the roof with the aid of a broom."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"You will follow me to my study, Mellish!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "As Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom have already left the school, I will take it upon myself to punish you. Come!"

Percy Mellish paled, and gave Trimble a vicious glare. Mellish had not earned the title of sneak for nothing, and he had no intention of being punished alone.

"It—it was only a joke, sir!" he mumbled. "And it was Trimble's idea—he paid me a bob to do it."

"What?"

"It's all Trimble's fault!" said Mellish. "He paid me a shilling to push the stuff over while he kept D'Arcy talking underneath."

"Nonsense! Trimble himself has suffered—"

"He didn't get out of the way quickly enough!" scowled Mellish. "I know what his game was; he wanted to save D'Arcy from the snow—to make D'Arcy grateful so that he'd take him home for the holidays."

"Oh, bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, eyeing Trimble in a peculiar way now, whilst the Terrible Three chuckled. "So—so that was it?"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Trimble, his fat face full of dismay. "I say, sir, don't you believe him. Mellish did it to pay D'Arcy out for ramming snow down his neck this morning. I know nothing at all about it. Besides, he wanted me to do it, and that proves it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Silence! This is not a laughing matter!" hooted Mr. Ratcliff. "It is now quite clear that Trimble was in league with Mellish. You will accompany Mellish to my study, Trimble."

"Oh dear! But, I say, sir——"

"Enough! Come!" thundered the Housemaster.

Mellish and Trimble groaned and went. Mr. Horace Ratcliff was, perhaps, the only master at St. Jim's who would have caned a boy on breaking-up day. The Fourth-Formers trudged on dismally after Mr. Ratcliff towards the New House. Baggy's great scheme had failed. Instead of an invite to Eastwood House, he had earned only a drenching and a licking.

"Oh, bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, staring after the departing trio blankly. "What a feahful spoofah Twimble is! Howevah, I twust that will teach the cadgin' wottah a lesson."

"What hopes!" grinned Lowther. "The fat ass—— Hallo! What's this?"

Lowther stooped and picked up something from the heap of snow. It was a folded newspaper, rather grimy and jammy. Lowther glanced at it carelessly, and then quite suddenly his eyes become riveted on a paragraph encircled with pencil.

"Must have dropped from Trimble's pocket," grinned Tom Merry. "I saw the fat ass reading a newspaper this morning, and he hid it when he spotted me. Let's hope he isn't taking to backing gee-gees. Is it a racing—— Why, what's the matter, Monty?"

"My hat!" gasped Lowther, his eyes still glued to the paper. "I say, have you seen this, Gussy?"

There was great excitement in Lowther's tone.

"Bai Jove! Pway what is that, Lowthah?"

"Look at it," said Lowther briefly. "That explains why dear old Baggy knew about your giddy family ghost. Read that!"

Arthur Augustus took the much-thumbed and grimy newspaper. It was folded at the marked paragraph, and he jumped as his eyes fell upon the heading of the paragraph.

"Oh, gweat Scott! What—what——"

Gussy's eyeglass fell from his eyes as he read the paragraph through, and the frown on his aristocratic brow deepened as he read on. And no wonder, for the marked paragraph read as follows:

"THE CURSE OF THE D'ARCY'S!"

"The ghost of a Cavalier, with bloodstained sword, a secret room, the whereabouts of which has remained a mystery, and a sinister legend, coupled with an ominous curse, are the romantic ingredients of a remarkable story which centres round Eastwood House, the beautiful ancestral home of the D'Arcy family in Hampshire.

"The ghost is that of Sir Ralph D'Arcy, an ancestor of the present Lord Eastwood, who died a violent death in Cavalier days. The legend concerns the secret room, and states that, unless the mystery of its whereabouts be discovered, death will fall upon the thirteenth generation after Sir Ralph when his ghost walks at Christmastide.

"Now, according to local gossip, the ghost has been seen by at least three of the servants at Eastwood House. As Lord Eastwood's sons, Lord Conway, the Honourable Arthur Augustus, and the Honourable Walter Adolphus, constitute the thirteenth generation, the appearance of the ghost of Sir Ralph so near to Christmas is regarded as an ominous portent, and has occasioned no little alarm and apprehension among the servants and tenants on the estate.

"Lord Eastwood, however, when seen by our correspondent yesterday, appeared to be more disturbed at the publication of the story than at the possible fulfilment of the legend, and he declined to discuss or to give his views on the matter."

"Oh, bai Jove!" groaned Arthur Augustus. "How feahful wotten! No wondah the patah was watty."

"Phew! So that's the yarn, Gussy!"

The Terrible Three eyed Arthur Augustus queerly. They understood now why their chum had been so disturbed at the contents of his father's letter.

"Gussy," said Tom Merry earnestly, "you'll take no notice of that rot? You're not superstitious enough to believe there's anything in the legend?"

Arthur Augustus coloured.

"Wathah not," he replied, after a moment's hesitation.

"But—but I don't like the patah bein' wowed, and I know the matah will be wowed. And if there is somethin' w'ong at home, then I feah you fellows won't enjoy——"

"Don't worry about us, Gussy," said Tom Merry, his eyes beginning to gleam. "There is something wrong at East-

wood House—not much doubt about that. If several servants have seen something, then—well, there's something that wants looking into."

"Looks like it," agreed Lowther soberly. "But——"

"It isn't a giddy ghost," said Tom emphatically. "That's rot! It's somebody spoofing. We're going to set ourselves to bowl that spoiler out, Gussy!"

"That's the idea!" said Manners. "Buck up, Gussy! And if there's anything in that secret room story——"

"The patah believes there is a secwet woom somewhere," admitted Arthur Augustus slowly. "But——"

"Then we're the men to find it!" said Tom cheerfully. "A nice little job for us over Christmas—a job that suits us! There are no giddy ghosts, anyway, so——"

"Excepting Trimble," grinned Lowther. "And I don't fancy dear old Baggy will haunt you after this. It was a narrow escape, though. If old Ratty hadn't spotted Mellish, then Baggy's game would have come off, and we should have been landed with the fat ass for Christmas. But that spook's bowled out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Terrible Three and Arthur Augustus went indoors, laughing. But their laughter was just a trifle forced, for that. Somehow, like Arthur Augustus, the Terrible Three could not help a strange feeling of foreboding—a fear that something was indeed wrong at Eastwood House. And Blake & Co., and Figgins & Co., and Levison of the Fourth—all of whom were joining the party for Eastwood House—felt the same when they heard the story, and all agreed that it was a matter for investigation. And they meant to investigate—thoroughly.

CHAPTER 3.

A Little Surprise!

"ALL aboard!" said Tom Merry cheerily. "Soon be off now!"

"Some of you are already off—off your giddy chumps!" said Wally D'Arcy. "Mind those eighteen-league boots of yours, Herries. Sling 'em over the side of the wagonette, so's half a dozen more chaps can get in!"

"Cheeky young ass!" grunted Herries. "Why——"

"Cheeky old ass!" said Wally independently. "I say, got your tin whistle, young Manners? Good! Got your trumpet, young Levison? Ripping! I say, we'll make things hum in the giddy train, chaps!"

"Oh dear! Looks as if we're booked for a rowdy trip!" said Tom Merry, with a faint grin. "You'll have old Gussy in fits if you keep up that fearful din on the journey, Wally——"

"Bow-wow! Blow Gussy!" said the irrepressible Wally. "Let it rip, chaps!"

And the three chums of the Third—Wally D'Arcy, Frank Levison, and Reggie Manners—did let it rip with a vengeance—Wally with a mouth-organ, Manners with a whistle, and Levison minor with a trumpet.

Wally & Co. were in a hilarious mood—in fact, all the party bound for Eastwood House were, for that matter, excepting, perhaps, Arthur Augustus, who was, at the moment, conspicuous by his absence. The moment of departure for the Christmas holidays had arrived. Already a dilapidated wagonette was at the gates for the Eastwood House party. Arthur Augustus had intended to engage taxicabs to take them all to the station, but lofty seniors had engaged all the available ones for miles around.

For hours now the old quadrangle had been ringing with cheery voices calling farewells, and good wishes for Christmas, as brake after brake departed, with crowds of fellows bound for all quarters of the kingdom. And now Tom Merry & Co. were off—or nearly off. The reason why they were not quite "off" was because Arthur Augustus, the founder of the feast, so to speak, was missing. And whilst they waited for Arthur Augustus, Wally & Co. discoursed sweet music on mouth-organ, trumpet, and whistle—at least, they claimed it was sweet music.

"For Heaven's sake stop that row, you noisy young bouncers!" bawled Blake. "Where on earth has that ass Gussy got to? Just like him to keep everybody waiting like this, blow him!"

"Let's go without him!" suggested Wally, ceasing his musical efforts breathlessly. "Wouldn't it be a lark? I say, driver, go ahead!"

"Here, hold on!" said Tom Merry, in alarm. "Better go and look for the ass. I expect he's changing his necktie again. Come on, Blake!"

"Hallo! Here he is!" chuckled Lowther.

Arthur Augustus came rushing up through the gates, his face flushed and annoyed. A hilarious and ironical cheer greeted him.

"Get on, Gussy, you ass!"

"All serene, driver!"

The driver whipped up his horse. Arthur Augustus gave a yell.

"Stop! Stop, deah boys! Some feahful wascal has hidden or wemoved my handbag. It has my gloves, and—"

"Blow your handbag!" roared Blake. "Up you get, you ass."

"Stop! My handbag— Oh, bai Jove!"

The wagonette rumbled on, and Gussy ran after it, yelling. But the cheers of the fellows seeing them off, and those from the fellows aboard—not to mention Wally's orchestra—drowned his yells.

"Quick, you silly ass!" bellowed Blake, nearly helpless with laughter as the hapless Gussy's strides lengthened on the slippery snow. "Jump for it!"

There was nothing else for it—bag or no bag. Blake stood on the steps of the wagonette and fairly hauled the wrathful Arthur Augustus aboard. The swell of St. Jim's collapsed on the floor of the wagonette among the legs of his chums.

"Ow!" he panted. "Ow—ow! Blake, you feahful wuffan, what have you done with my handbag?"

"Nothing, old top!"

"Hewwies—"

"Not guilty, my lord!" said Herries cheerily. "Never mind your giddy bag, Gussy—be thankful you weren't left behind."

"The giddy handbag's all right, I bet!" remarked Blake. "Old Taggles must have sent it on with the luggage."

"But I distinctly told him I was takin' it myself!" said Gussy. "Howevah, I never thought of that."

"Gussy never does think of these things," said Wally, lowering his mouth-organ. "Did you sleep well last night, old top?"

"Bai Jove! Why should you ask— Oh, bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus eyed his cheery minor suspiciously. "Bai Jove! Wally, you young wascal, was it you who put all that beastlay holly in my bed last night?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Wally. "Did it tickle your toes, Gus?"

"Why, you—you—"

Arthur Augustus would have committed assault and battery upon his cheeky minor there and then, but Tom Merry reminded him that it was Christmas, and the swell of the Fourth sat down again, breathing hard. The wagonette rumbled on to Rylcombe Station over the frozen snow. Near the station the party overtook Gordon Gay & Co. of Rylcombe Grammar School, who sent a farewell greeting after them in the form of a volley of snowballs. And soon the merry party were in the train en route for Eastwood House—even Arthur Augustus wearing a smiling face now.

It was a long journey through the snowy countryside, and the winter afternoon was deepening into dusk when the juniors drove along the stately drive of Eastwood House. Lord Eastwood met them and greeted them in the hall with a pleasant smile. Whether worried by recent events or not, the courtly old earl was obviously determined not to show it, or to allow it to cast a shadow over the Christmas festivities.

Yet, even as they stood in the old panelled hall with its log-fire and glimmering armour, the juniors could not restrain a feeling of chill. The servants wore rather frightened looks, and moved about with an exaggerated quietness; even the old butler's emotionless features seemed pale and eloquent of the general disquietude in the house.

"Patah," said Arthur Augustus, eyeing his father keenly, "I—we're sorry about that w'etched affair you w'ote about. I weally do twust that you are not wowwyin' about it at all."

Lord Eastwood's face clouded.

"It has annoyed me a great deal, Arthur," he said. "I mean the fact that the matter has been reported so prominently in the Press has annoyed me. It is really too absurd. There must be some simple and natural explanation of what the servants claim to have seen. My one hope and request is that you and your friends will dismiss it from your minds, and not allow it to interfere with your enjoyment."

"We'll watch that, patah," grinned Wally. "Catch me worrying my napper about a giddy ghost! I say, where's old Pongo? Come on, young Levison, and you, young Manners."

And Wally rushed his chums away.

Lord Eastwood laughed.

"That young rascal does not intend to allow the matter to trouble him, at all events, and you must follow his example," he said. "Come, Arthur, bring your friends along. Your Cousin Ethel has arrived with her friend Doris. And that reminds me—your school friend arrived about an hour ago with your bag; he is now in the dining-room having tea."

"My—my fwiend?" echoed Arthur Augustus in some surprise. "I—weally, I do not undahstand you, patah. All

my fwiends are here with me. But, bai Jove, did you say with my bag, patah?"

"Yes, Arthur." The old earl raised his eyebrows slightly, though a rather grim smile flickered round his lips. "He stated that you had asked him to come on ahead with your bag. He appeared to be very hungry indeed, and expressed a desire not to wait tea until you came."

"Oh, bai Jove! Gweat Scott!"

The juniors eyed each other. Lowther gave a sudden, soft chuckle. A suspicion of the truth was already forming in his mind. Lord Eastwood, a peculiar look on his face, left them then, and they hurried on to the dining-room, curious to know who the unknown and uninvited guest could be.

They soon knew.

The dining-room door was ajar, and as they neared it they heard a well-known voice:

"That's right—dash it all, get a move on, my man! Some more of that ripping pie, and for goodness' sake tell the cook to send along a decent helping this time! And some more of those mince-pies, too. I must say they're jolly good, though I don't think much of the blessed service here. Buck up—don't stand there staring, my man!"

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"Trimble!" gasped Tom Merry faintly. "It—it's that fat worm Trimble!"

Undoubtedly it was.

In the doorway the juniors met a footman, emerging from the dining-room with an empty tray and a rather amazed expression on his face.

The next moment Trimble came into view.

He was seated at the table, and his fat features were shiny and sticky and smeared with jam and crumbs. By the look of him Baggy Trimble appeared to be already filled well above the Plimsoll line, so to speak. He gave a start and eyed the juniors a trifle apprehensively as they appeared in the doorway.

"Oh! Oh, here you are, you fellows!" he gasped. "C-come in—come in, Gussy, old fellow. How—how are you, old chap?"

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus slowly placed his eyeglass into its customary position, and subjected Trimble to a steady stare. Trimble grinned feebly.

"I—I hope you had a pleasant journey down, Gussy, old chap!" he gasped. "F-fancy me getting here before you chaps! I—I suppose you were delayed, what?"

"Twimble—"

"It's—it's all right, Gussy!" said Trimble hastily. "Don't apologise about the bag, you know. I didn't mind bringing it along for you at all. It was jolly careless of you to leave it behind, but—"

"You—you fwightful fat wottah—"

"Oh, really, Gussy—after me being so k-kind—"

"I did not leave my bag behind at all, Twimble!" said Arthur Augustus in deep indignation. "My bag was missin' when I left St. Jim's. I supposed that Taggles had sent it on—"

"D-did you?"

"Yaas. Now, howevah," said Gussy in great wrath, "I know diffewently. I stwongly suspect that you took it away with you long before we started, simply to have an excuse to come heah, Twimble."

"What a brain!" murmured Lowther, with a chuckle. "Fancy old Gussy working that out, you fellows!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I spotted Trimble hooking it through the gates about an hour before we started!" grinned Figgins. "He was carrying two bags; one must have been Gussy's."

"Oh, I say, Figgins—"

"You feahful spoofah, Twimble—"

"Oh, really, Gussy, that's a bit thick, you know!" said Trimble reproachfully. "After me being so kind and obliging as to bring your bag along, too. Is this how you treat your guests? If you'd accepted my invitation to spend Christmas with me at Trimble Hall now—"

"Wubbish!" said Gussy heatedly. "I did not invite you at all, Twimble!"

"Well, your pater did!"

"What?"

"Of course he did!" said Trimble warmly. "He told you to bring all your friends along. Well, ain't I your best pal? Dash it all, Gussy—"

"But you aren't a pal of mine at all, Twimble—"

hooted Gussy.

"Oh, Gussy!" interrupted Trimble, almost with tears in his eyes. "Fancy you saying that! Haven't I always taken you under my wing at St. Jim's? I've insisted upon being your best pal. In any case," added Trimble hurriedly, "I don't look upon myself exactly as being your guest, but your pater's."

"Bai Jove!"

"He was jolly thankful to see me, I can tell you!" said Trimble. "He made me jolly welcome—said he was delighted to see me, and all that. I told him how I looked after you at St. Jim's, Gussy—"

"You fat fibbah—"

"And I told him why I'd accepted your invite to come," said Trimble firmly. "I explained that I'd purposely cancelled other pressing invitations in order to come and protect you from the fearful peril that hangs over you this Christmas, Gussy."

"Twimble, you—you—" Words failed Gussy.

"You can leave this ghost business to me, Gussy," said Trimble, waving a fat hand. "You just enjoy your Christmas, and I'll protect you from the unseen forces—leave it to me. I'm not afraid of the supernatural—"

"He means supernatural!" said Lowther. "That's because he's supernatural himself, you know! Trimble's the ghost, after all, and the terrible peril hanging over old Gussy has been fulfilled—Gussy's been landed with Trimble for Christmas."

"Unless we kick him out!" suggested Blake. "After all, Trimble himself admits that he doesn't look upon himself as Gussy's guest. So there's no reason why—"

"Yes, kick the fat rotter out!" grunted Herries.

"Excuse me, Master Arthur—" The soft-footed footman stepped forward deferentially. He had returned with a loaded tray in time to catch the drift of the conversation, and he placed the tray on a side-table and stepped forward with a bow. "Excuse me, Master Arthur, but do I understand that this—this individual has not been invited here, sir?"

"Bai Jove! Watah not, James!" said Arthur Augustus indignantly. "The cheekay wottah was nevah invited by me. But—"

"Then perhaps, if I may be permitted to suggest it, sir, you will allow me to eject him, Master Arthur?" said James, a faint trace of eagerness in his smooth voice.

There was a chuckle. It was quite clear to the juniors that Trimble, as usual, had been making himself unpleasant already to the staff at Eastwood House, and that James was simply yearning to kick Trimble out into the cold, snowy world outside.

But Arthur Augustus frowned and hesitated.

Arthur Augustus was angry, and, like the prophet of old, he felt that he did well to be angry. For days Trimble had haunted him, during which time the swell of St. Jim's had been obliged to employ all sorts of stratagems in order to avoid his fat shadower. But it had all been in vain—Trimble was here, on the premises. They were landed with Trimble's charming society, unless—

Yet it was Christmas-time, the time of peace and goodwill to all—even to fellows like Baggy Trimble! And Gussy was a very kind-hearted and generous youth. He looked at Trimble, and that scheming youth eyed him in dismal apprehension.

Gussy's heart smote him.

Christmas was the time to forgive and forget—even the manifold sins and failings of Baggy Trimble.

Arthur Augustus was the last fellow in the world to kick out Trimble at such a time.

"Bai Jove! I—I—weally, Twimble, you are the limit!" he gasped at length. "However—no, James, after all. Twimble can stay now he is heah! You are weally a most feahful spoofah, Twimble, but—but I weally cannot kick you out at Christmas-time."

"Oh really, Gussy, old fellow—"

"Twimble is a school-fellow of mine!" Gussy felt obliged to explain to James. "There has been a—ahem—a mistake, James. However, now he is heah he will be treated as my guest ovah Christmas!"

"Very good, Master Arthur!"

James bowed and proceeded to attend to the wants of Baggy Trimble without showing any trace of whatever disappointment he may have felt. Baggy grinned a fat grin. He had "banked" on the improbability of being "booted" out once he was safely wedged in, and—it had "come off." He was a guest—though possibly not an honoured one—for Christmas at Eastwood House. Leaving him devouring mince-pies at a great rate, Tom Merry & Co. left the dining-room. Arthur Augustus was frowning, but his chums were all grinning. They had known what to expect—they had known it was quite impossible for the soft-hearted Gussy to turn the fat Fourth-Former out now. Trimble had come to stay.

CHAPTER 4.

Baggy Transgresses!

TEA was a merry meal. Lady Eastwood presided, and her gracious manner and Lord Eastwood's genial interest in his guests soon put all at their ease. The St. Jim's party were hungry, and they did full justice to the good things. Scarcely had tea started when

Baggy Trimble made an appearance, and Lady Eastwood kindly found him a seat—being quite ignorant that Lord Eastwood had already arranged tea earlier for Baggy. But Baggy did not mind at all, nor did he mention that he had already had enough tea for half a dozen fellows. He piled in, seemingly oblivious of the peculiar looks his lordship gave him, and of the eloquent expressions on the faces of Tom Merry & Co.

Gussy's cousin, Ethel Cleveland, was there, and so was Doris Levison, sister of the Levison brothers, and an old friend of Ethel's, and in the general chatter and laughter Baggy was soon forgotten by the rest of the juniors.

The matter of the ghost was by mutual consent not mentioned. But after tea Baggy Trimble brought the question up in his usual tactless way. Fortunately, only the Terrible Three, Levison, and Blake & Co. were present. They were sauntering on the terrace that ran the length of the great house, laughing and chatting cheerily. Ethel Cleveland and Doris Levison had gone into the music room, and Figgins & Co. had joined them there—Figgins having suddenly discovered that he was frightfully keen on music. His chums knew that Cousin Ethel was the real attraction, but they had manfully repressed their grins and followed him to join the girls.

It was a keen, frosty evening, and it was pleasant walking on the terrace beneath the twinkling stars. But all the pleasure seemed to go when Baggy Trimble joined the group of juniors.

"Oh, here you are, you fellows," he grunted. "Been hunting everywhere for you. Blessed if I know how you chaps can laugh and joke with this fearful peril hanging over the house."

"Oh, dry up, you fat ass!" said Blake uneasily. "Blow the giddy ghost!"

"I've been asking the servants about it!" said Trimble, lowering his voice. "I say, there's no doubt about it, you fellows. Some of 'em have seen the ghost of Sir Ralph."

"Oh, rats!"

"Do dwy up, Twimble!" said Arthur Augustus.

"Eh? Why shouldn't we talk about the blessed ghost!" sniffed Trimble. "It's your giddy family ghost, isn't it, Gussy?"

"Oh, yaas, Twimble! But—but, well, for one thing, my ancestah, Sir Ralph D'Arcy, was not an ancestah to be pwoud of fwom all accounts," said Gussy, with a faint smile. "He was watah a cwuel, swashbucklin' wuffian, I believe."

"But that's not the only reason you don't like to discuss him, Gussy!" grinned Baggy. "Excuse me mentioning it, but it's really because you're in a fearful funk, old chap."

"Oh, dwy up!"

"Still, I'm scarcely surprised!" went on the fat Fourth-Former cheerily. "You're one of the giddy thirteenth generation, Gussy, and if the legend is fulfilled, now the blessed ghost's been seen—"

"Shut up!" snapped Tom Merry. "If you don't dry up, Trimble, we'll drop you over the terrace into the snow."

"Oh, really, Tom Merry—I say, though, what's the good of shutting our eyes to the fearful danger," said Trimble. "I'm surprised at you fellows, I must say. But I'm going to look after you, Gussy, old fellow."

"Wats!"

"Rely on me!" said Trimble. "I'm afraid of nothing on earth! One of the footmen saw the ghost, and I asked a maid who's seen it, too—a fierce-looking Cavalier, he was. She said, with blood-stained sword! The footman spotted him late at night in the portrait gallery, and the maid caught sight of him on a landing at the top of the blessed house. I say, they're all in a fearful stew about it, Gussy. They say it means death to you, old chap—Ow! Leggo, Blake! Here, what—"

But Blake didn't let go—at the moment.

"Lend a hand, chaps!" he growled, in great exasperation. "We've warned him, and he won't stop. Over with him!"

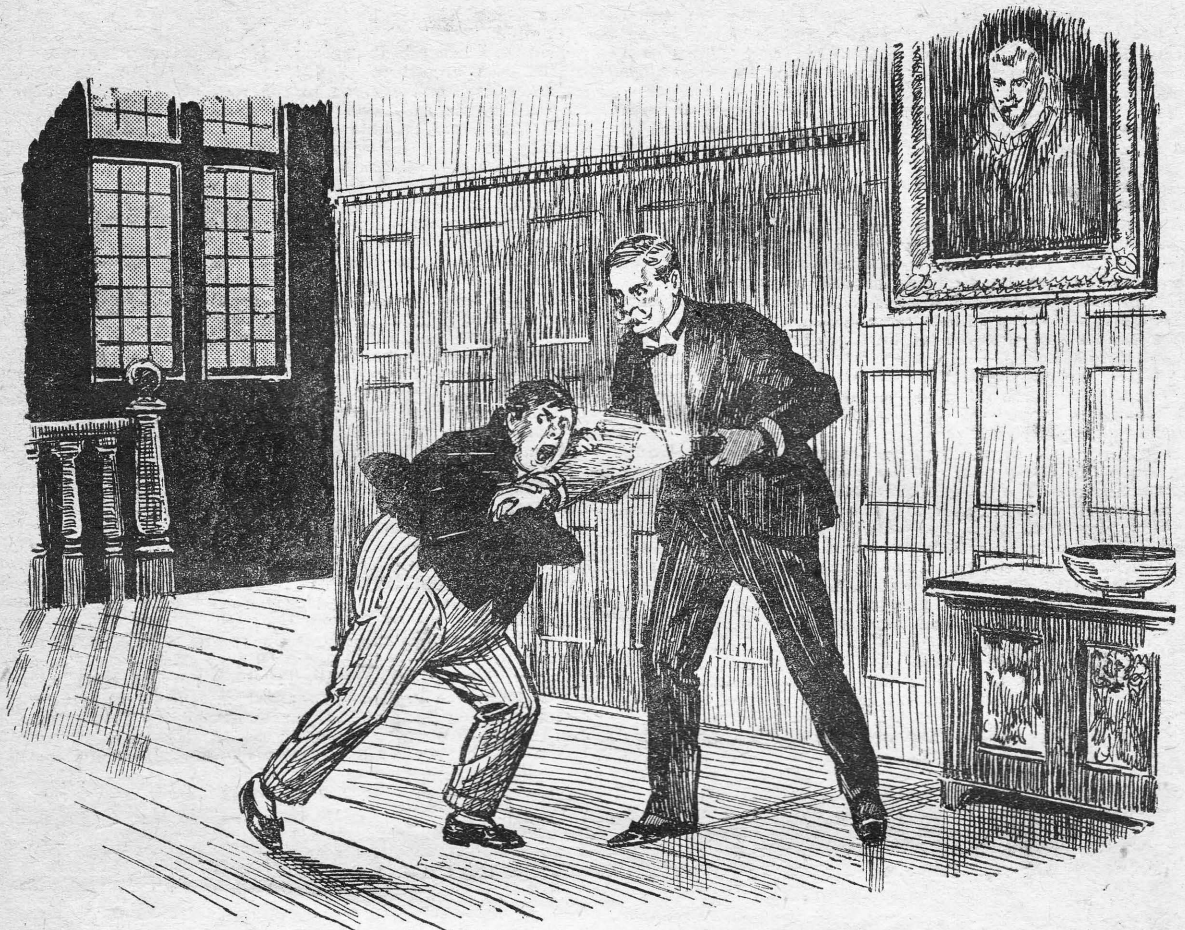
"What-he!"

Trimble howled as he was grabbed on all sides—only Arthur Augustus withholding his aid. Kicking and struggling, Baggy Trimble was rushed across the terrace to the stone balustrade, his yells muffled by Blake's hand.

"Hold on!" gasped Gussy. "Bai Jove! Pway, let the wottah—"

But Gussy's kindly intervention came too late. Tom Merry & Co. were "fed-up" enough with Trimble for pushing himself upon the party, and the next moment the fat Fourth-Former was sent flying through the air.

"Yaroooogh! Oh, crikey! Yarooo— Mum-mmmm!" The thick snow below the balustrade smothered Trimble's wild howl, and he almost vanished from sight in its clinging embrace. Tom Merry & Co. watched him struggle out, puffing and gasping, and then they strolled back across the terrace cheerfully.



In his blind stampede, Baggy Trimble collided with Lord Eastwood, and the earl grasped the shaking fat junior. "Stop! Trimble, my boy! What—" "Help!" shrieked Trimble, as the light from an electric torch flashed in his face. "The ghost! The ghost!" (See Chapter 5.)

"All serene, Gussy!" remarked Blake. "He'll be able to get in by going round the house to the back all right! Let the fat rotter rip! Hallo, that's Cousin Ethel singing. Good!"

"Ripping!"
And Tom Merry & Co. strolled along to the partly open french window of the music-room and entered.

Cousin Ethel stopped singing, and Doris turned round from the piano just at that moment.

"I'm sure I heard something outside—a kind of shout!" said Cousin Ethel, in some alarm. "Oh! Here is Arthur! Did you hear a noise, Arthur, like someone in pain?"

"Ahem! Perhaps it was the wind!" suggested Figgins, who had recognised the voice of Baggy. "Don't worry, Miss Ethel—"

"It was only Trimble!" explained Blake airily. "He dropped in the snow outside, you know. But he's quite all right."

"Oh! He—he isn't hurt at all?"
"Not at all!" said Tom Merry, knowing Baggy could scarcely have been hurt in the thick snow. "He's gone round the house to get in another way, I think. Please go on with that song—it was ripping!"

"Splendid!" said Figgins.
And Cousin Ethel went on singing and Doris Levison went on with the accompaniment—though both of them looked rather curiously for the moment at the smiling faces of Tom Merry & Co. They both knew Baggy Trimble well enough, and possibly they guessed something of the truth. But if they did, they said nothing. The impromptu concert proceeded, whilst Baggy Trimble, snow-smothered and seething with wrath, made his way round the great house in search of an entrance. Unfortunately, he blundered into Wally D'Arcy & Co., who were busy making a snow-man—an effigy of Arthur Augustus, in fact, with silk hat and eyeglass complete—on the lawn, and those cheery youths immediately turned their attention to Baggy. They fairly bombarded him with snowballs; and when the fat Fourth-Formier found refuge in the servants' entrance at last, he looked like a snow-man himself, and his state of mind was homicidal.

CHAPTER 5.

At Dead of Night!

"OH crumbs! It's jolly c-cold!"
It was cold—freezing, in fact. Tom Merry & Co. had already noted that fact more than once that evening—with great joy. A keen frost meant skating on the lake in the grounds, and the guests at Eastwood House were looking forward to it. The only exception was Baggy Trimble. Baggy hated the cold, and the delights of skating did not appeal to him in the slightest degree.

The evening had passed all too quickly for Tom Merry & Co. On the whole it had passed pleasantly enough even for Baggy Trimble. Before the leaping flames of a great log fire, after an excellent dinner, the St. Jim's fellows and the other guests had lounged in comfort, eating roasted chestnuts and yarning—eating chestnuts and telling chestnuts, as Lowther had put it.

Trimble had taken little part in the merry chatter and conversation; he had been far too busy devouring chestnuts as fast as the other fellows roasted them! But Tom Merry & Co. much preferred to keep Trimble eating than risk hearing his charming conversation.

But bedtime had come at last, and the juniors had retired to their rooms, tired, and ready enough for sleep. Trimble was fortunate in having a bed-room to himself—and the rest of his school-fellows considered themselves fortunate in not having him with them. Trimble had his own reasons for wanting a room to himself, however.

It was in the solitude of his bed-room that Trimble announced that it was "jolly c-cold," and the hour was late—eleven-thirty, in fact. Trimble had been in bed for some time, but he had not been asleep. Like the other juniors, Trimble was tired—but he was also hungry. At dinner, Trimble had done himself very well indeed, and he had spent most of the time since dinner devouring roasted chestnuts. None the less, Trimble was hungry again now.

The fact was that when passing through the kitchen after being chased indoors by the snowballs of Wally & Co., Trimble had sighted something that he simply could not get

out of his thoughts. It was the long kitchen-table, piled high with plates and trays of good things for Christmas—mince-pies galore, jam-tarts and cakes and jellies and custards, and all sorts of delicacies destined for the enjoyment of the D'Arcy household and guests.

The memory of those good things had remained with Baggy all through the rest of the evening, and now that he was beginning to feel hungry again the thoughts of them were proving irresistible.

It was no good—sleep was impossible for Baggy. As a matter of fact, the fat Fourth-Former had gone to bed fully intending to raid the kitchen. The thought of braving the cold and solitude of the great house was not an inviting one, but Baggy had tried in vain to dismiss the vision of the pile of tuck on the kitchen table and get to sleep.

A fire had been lit in Trimble's room, but it was low now—only a few glowing embers remained in the grate. Baggy lit a candle and shivered as he slipped from beneath the warm, cosy blankets.

"Ugh! It's jolly cold!" he repeated to himself dismally. "Still, it'll be worth it! Now, where's that torch I pinched from Gussy's room. Oh, here it is! Hallo, that's eleven-thirty striking! Ugh!"

The deep note of the half-hour rang out on the frosty air from the clock-tower of the great house, and Baggy shivered again. The thought of traversing the long corridors alone at that hour was not a pleasant one to Baggy. The servants would all be in bed as well as the guests—Baggy had taken the trouble to inquire and make sure of that—but he had heard Lord Eastwood state that he intended to stay up late to go through estate accounts or something. But for the knowledge that somebody would be about, Baggy would probably never have dared to tackle such an errand.

He realised that he would have to go warily, however, if he did not wish to blunder into Lord Eastwood. So he blinked cautiously out into the corridor before venturing forth.

Baggy had pulled on his ordinary clothes above his pyjamas, yet he shivered as he peered along the dark corridor—not from cold now, however. All was still as the grave—as a matter of fact, the earl had retired to bed five minutes ago, though Baggy was blissfully unaware of that fact. The whole house was silent—horribly silent to Trimble, who was no hero at the best of times.

"Oh dear!" shivered Trimble.

But much as he hated darkness and solitude, the thought of the feed that awaited him in the kitchen proved just a little too much for Baggy. Moreover, he still imagined that Lord Eastwood was in the library downstairs.

So Baggy took a grip of himself and crept cautiously along the dusky, oak-panelled corridor. At the far end a tall window looked out over the park, and the leafless trees looked ghostly in the bright moonlight against the gleaming white of the piled-up snow.

Baggy blinked out, and the bright light served to give him a little courage.

He crept swiftly across the moonlit patch and dived on into the darkness of the corridor beyond. Then he crept downstairs, his heart thumping against his fat ribs.

Somehow, he could scarcely believe that anyone could be up. There were no lights on; the great hall was in darkness, save when the flickering flames leaped up from the dying fire, glimmering redly on the black panelling and the armour-clad figures ranged around it. Only a faint crackle from the fire broke the deadly stillness.

"Ugh!" groaned Baggy.

He stood trembling, undecided whether to return to his warm bed or to go on—one foot still on the bottom stair. He could hear other sounds now—the whistling of the wind round the old roofs and chimneys; the soft flutter of snow blown against the windows high up above his head. But the sounds only served to intensify the deathly stillness. A burning ember fell suddenly from the fire, and Baggy gave a convulsive start.

"Oh d-dud-dear!" he mumbled, glancing fearfully about him. "I—I think I'll go back to— Wha-what's that?"

From the dim and shadowy passage across the wide hall had come a movement—Baggy was sure of it!

What was it?

Trimble's heart leaped.

He stood as if turned to stone.

Only a faint, rosy glow from the embers of the fire showed at the moment—the rest of the hall was in deep darkness, save where stray beams of moonlight came through the stained-glass windows.

As he stood there Baggy Trimble knew that he was not alone. Some presence was near him—a presence nameless, undefinable.

The movement came again—a soft, eerie movement from the dim, shadowy recesses across the hall.

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Something was there—something or someone—vague and intangible.

Trimble's heart beat rapidly. He could not have moved of his own accord to save his life. His tongue went suddenly dry, and cleaved to the roof of his mouth. An icy chill began to travel up his spine. Motionless, paralysed with fear, Trimble stood for what seemed to him an eternity of time, his eyes, wide-open and glassy, staring into the shadowy darkness.

Another ember fell from the fire in the huge, carved fireplace. It fell with a shower of sparks, and as it did so, a flame shot up banishing the darkness from the hall.

Then Trimble saw something.

It was the ghost—the ghost of the evil Cavalier, Sir Ralph!

Trimble knew that—if he was capable of knowing anything in that moment of stark terror.

Before him—scarcely a dozen yards away, stood the Cavalier. The gay cloak was thrown back, and in the ghostly hand was a sword—a sword that gleamed ruddy in the red firelight. The plumed hat shadowed the features, but Trimble saw two glittering eyes that held his own with hypnotic intensity.

Trimble's heart all but stopped beating.

He stared and stared again. He wanted to run—to flee, shrieking, from the dread, awful apparition. Yet such was his terror that he could not move—he was paralysed with dread in that awful moment.

The form moved—came nearer with a stately but noiseless stride; the eyes held the hapless junior fascinated, helpless with fearful terror. Then the light died down as suddenly as if it had flamed up, and only a dull glow came again from the grate.

But the figure was still there—the vague, terrible form was coming—coming—

One wild shriek came from Trimble's parched lips.

The spell was broken. The next instant he had turned and was fleeing upstairs, shriek after shriek of terror leaving him to ring through the silent house. And as he went, from behind him came a sudden unearthly groan. It was followed immediately by a peal of awful laughter that almost froze the blood in the veins of the terrified fat junior.

Trimble flew. Never in his life had the fat junior negotiated stairs at such a speed. Stumbling, leaping madly, he rushed up the wide staircase, shrieking with fear.

"Help, help! Oh, help!"

In his fevered imagination the hapless fat junior could hear and almost feel the ghost behind him, and he tore on.

He could hear shouts now—voices calling and questioning, and he gave a sobbing gasp of relief as a light flashed suddenly ahead of him in the long corridor. Then, quite suddenly he collided with someone in his blind stampede, and strong hands grasped him.

Trimble shrieked with renewed fear.

But it was Lord Eastwood himself, and his grasp held on the shaking fat junior.

"Stop! Who—ah! Trimble, my boy! What—"

"Oh! Ooooooh! Oh!" gasped Trimble, as the light from an electric torch flashed in his face. "Help, help, help!"

"What in Heaven's name—"

"Help!" shrieked Trimble. "The ghost! The ghost! Oh, it was awful! Oh—"

Trimble slid to the floor before his lordship could prevent him.

"Quick!" exclaimed Lord Eastwood, as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, followed by a crowd of pyjama-clad figures came rushing up with candles and torches. "Arthur, switch the light on—at once! It is that boy Trimble! Something has happened. He has fainted—"

But Trimble had not fainted, though he was very near it at that moment. He lay now in Lord Eastwood's strong grasp, and in the light, his fat features were like chalk. He mumbled sobbingly:

"Keep it away—keep it away! The ghost! It's coming! Ooooooh!"

The electric light was switched on, and the crowd of startled juniors gathered round Trimble and Lord Eastwood.

"The boy has had a fright—a bad fright!" exclaimed his lordship grimly, his own face a trifle pale. "Trimble, you are in safe hands—what has happened, my boy?"

Tom Merry & Co. stared as Trimble sat up, fairly shaking with terror. Trimble undoubtedly had had a fright—a bad fright! Tom Merry's face set grimly as he noted that the fat youth had his clothes on over his pyjamas, and he guessed what he was doing abroad at that hour of the night. But he said nothing.

It took the fat junior some moments to recover somewhat, but at last he managed to gasp out his story.

"It—it was the ghost!" he mumbled. "It was awful! It came right at me! And the sword—it was all bloodstained, horrible! It was the Cavalier. And the eyes—oh, they were awful! They—they looked right through me!"

And Trimble shuddered and shook. Lord Eastwood set his lips. The scared juniors looked at each other. For once Trimble was not spoofing—there could be no possible doubt about that. He had seen something—something that had filled him with a nameless terror.

"You saw the ghost of a Cavalier?" demanded Lord Eastwood. "Where, boy?"

"In the—the hall, sir! Ooooooh! It was awful! The eyes—"

"Can you describe the dress and figure?" "Ow! Yes, sir! It—it was just like you see in pictures—all ribbons and lace and stuff, with a cloak and feathered hat!" panted Trimble, recovering himself quickly now he saw the familiar faces around him. "It was like—like that portrait in the gallery just by the window."

"Sir Ralph!" breathed Blake. "Gussy showed it us today."

He glanced at Arthur Augustus. That junior's face was calm and composed, though a trifle white.

"What were you doing out of your room at this hour of the night, Trimble?" asked his lordship, after a pause.

"I—I was hungry!" groaned Trimble, his face still like chalk. "I—I was after grub from the kitchen. But—but, oh, it was awful! I saw it—I tell you I saw it, and it came right for me!"

And Trimble shuddered again. But the fact that he had confessed so promptly the object of his midnight expedition was enough for Tom Merry & Co. They knew Trimble only too well, and they knew that he would never have admitted that unless he was in an uncontrollable state of fear. Trimble had seen the "ghost"—there could be no doubting that. And Tom Merry and his chums eyed each other in scared amazement.

Lord Eastwood passed no comment regarding Trimble's reason for going downstairs. But his face was grim and grave now. For Trimble's description of the ghost, brief as it was, was identical with that given by the servants who had already seen it.

But his voice was calm as he turned to Arthur Augustus. "Your friend had better not sleep alone for the rest of the night, Arthur," he said. "Ah, here is James! He will help you to fix up a bed in your room. There must be some natural explanation to this amazing business, of course. Do not allow yourselves to believe anything else, for I am convinced that someone is playing tricks in the house. I will go down myself now and investigate the boy's story."

"We'll come with you, sir!" said Tom promptly. "We don't believe in spooks, of course, sir!"

"Yes, do let us come, sir!" It was a chorus, and the old earl nodded with a grim smile.

So while Arthur Augustus, Levison, and James, the footman, led the shaking Trimble away, Tom Merry and the rest accompanied Lord Eastwood downstairs with several of the servants, who had been aroused by the commotion. The electric lights were soon blazing all over the house and along the corridors, and in the rooms the investigators searched thoroughly. But neither in the great hall, nor anywhere else was anything unusual discovered.

If Trimble had seen the ghost, then it had gone, without leaving a sign.

They gave it up at last, and went back to bed, buzzing with excitement. With the lights burning brilliantly all over the house Trimble's story seemed absurd and fantastic, and Tom Merry & Co., at all events, pretended to take it lightly, and even joked about it as they tumbled into bed again. But in spite of their cheerfulness, they could not blind themselves to the fact that others had seen something as well as Trimble, nor could they forget the legend and the Curse, the shadow of which was already beginning to hang over them all. And Christmas had not yet come! Were the mysterious happenings ended yet? That was the question in every mind.

CHAPTER 6.

For Trimble's Benefit!

TOM MERRY & CO. were up and about bright and early on the following morning. It was glorious December weather, and the wintry sun sparkled on hoary frost and glimmering snow.

Long before breakfast the juniors made an expedition to the lake to see

if the ice would hold; but it was generally agreed that it was scarcely safe yet for skating, and they returned cheerily in time to join in a snow battle between Cousin Ethel, Doris Levison, and Wally & Co. Then, ruddy-faced and bright-eyed with health and high spirits they went indoors for breakfast with well-earned appetites.

Lord Eastwood's keen desire was that they should not allow ghosts or anything else to interfere with their enjoyment of the Christmas holiday, and they were determined to see that nothing did—if they could help it. Somehow, in the bright wintry sunshine and frosty air the startling events of the night before seemed strangely grotesque and unreal—even to Baggy Trimble. That fat grub-raider grinned feebly as he met the chums on the terrace after breakfast.

"But it was real enough, you fellows," Baggy told them impressively. "I saw it—as close as I am to you fellows now."

"Well, you saw something right enough!" admitted Tom Merry grimly. "But aren't you ashamed of yourself, you fat rotter? Hadn't you already had enough to scoff without disgracing us like this?"

"Oh, really, Merry—"

"You want kicking—kicking right off the premises!" said Tom. "Grub-raiding's bad enough at St. Jim's. But we're guests here, and it's up to us all to behave ourselves. Anyway, any more of this kind of thing, Baggy, and we'll deal with you ourselves."

"But I was—was starving!"

"Oh, shut up, you fat cormorant! Anyway, any more of that—"

"No fear!" said Baggy, with a shiver. "I've had enough! It was frightful. You should have seen the eyes—like—like coals of fire, you know! Of course, I wasn't frightened!"

"Oh, no, of course not!" said Lowther. "You ran to fetch us to come and have a squint at it; that was it, wasn't it?"

"Exactly," agreed Baggy, failing to see Lowther's sarcasm. "That was just it. And—and I yelled, of course, to wake you up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's nothing to laugh about, you rotters—"

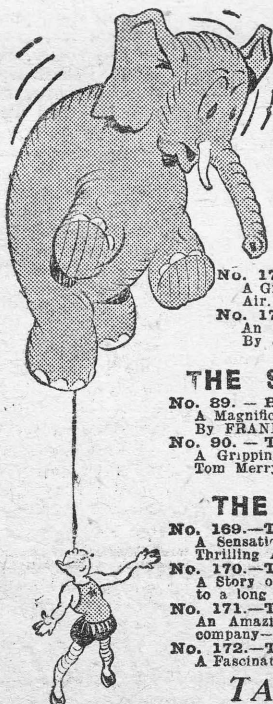
But Tom Merry & Co. thought it was. They were still laughing when Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison came along.

"Do tell us the joke," said Doris, smiling. "Poor Ethel is quite dismal this morning—"

"I'm not, Doris!" said Cousin Ethel reproachfully. "But—well, I am just a bit worried about this ghost affair."

"Well, listen to Trimble's story of how he met the ghost," grinned Lowther, "and your worries will fly! Go ahead, Baggy!"

(Continued on next page.)



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TALES FOR ALL TASTES

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"It wasn't a laughing matter, I can tell you!" snorted Baggy Trimble indignantly. "If you fellows had seen the awful eyes—"

"I don't think it is really a laughing matter," said Ethel quietly. "I don't believe in ghosts, and I'm not afraid of seeing one! But—but something is wrong here!"

"I think so, too," said Tom Merry soberly. "But—"

"Lord Eastwood is worried about it—and Lady Eastwood, too," said Cousin Ethel. "And you can see that Arthur is worrying—more because he knows how his father feels about it than anything else. I think we ought to do something to help, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry nodded and frowned.

"I wish we could!" he said. "But—"

"Somebody is playing ghost here!" said Cousin Ethel emphatically. "I'm sure of it, I've spoken to one of the servants who claims to have seen it. She said the same as Trimble here, and lays special stress on the burning, staring eyes. The others who've seen it say just the same. It isn't fancy or imagination. Somebody is playing ghost, and I suggest that we set ourselves to hunt the ghost down."

"Phew! Good wheeze! I'm on for one!"

The thought of a ghost hunt was exciting, and appealed to them all.

"We'll tell Arthur to show us all over the house, and— Oh, here is Cousin Arthur now! Why, he looks—"

Cousin Ethel paused, trying hard not to smile, as Arthur Augustus came trudging up the steps of the terrace. The noble Gussy was smothered in snow, and he was dishevelled and looked a wreck. Even his silk hat looked more like a concertina than anything else.

"What's happened, Gussy?" demanded Blake. "You look as if you've been scrapping with a coffee-mill!"

Arthur Augustus snorted with wrath.

"It was Wally and those othah young wascals!" he said in great indignation. "They have actually had the impudence to build a w'etched snow man to wepresent me, bai Jove! I know they mean it for me because they've stuck the lid of a blackin'-tin in the eye for an eyeglass!"

"Ha, ha, ha! We saw it!" laughed Tom Merry.

"It is a wotten insult!" said Gussy, in great wrath. "I wemonstwated with them, and when I twied to demolish it the young wuffians attacked me and wolloed me in the snow. I am smothahed in snow, and feel vewy uncomf'able indeed."

"How really dreadful!" said Cousin Ethel solemnly. "But never mind that just now, Arthur. I must scold them—"

"I intend to give all three of them a feahful thwashin' when I have changed my clobber—"

"What's the good of changing now?" said Lowther. "You'll only have to change again when they've done with you—"

"Wats! I wefuse—"

"It's Christmas, Gussy, when you should forgive your enemies!" said Blake severely. "Besides, you can't thrash guests—"

"Oh, bai Jove! I weally nevah thought of that! But, weally—"

"I'm sure you will forgive them!" laughed Ethel. "But we were just wanting you, Arthur—we want your advice."

"Oh!" It always pleased Gussy to know his valuable advice was wanted, and his brow cleared instantly. "Vewy well, deah gal! If you want my advice—"

"It's about the ghost!" said Cousin Ethel, serious again. "We're thinking of having a ghost hunt, Arthur. It's clear that somebody is playing ghost here, and we mean to get to the bottom of it!"

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, quite forgetting his discomfort and wrath now. "That is a vewy good ideah! In fact, I was goin' to suggest it myself, deah boys and gals!"

"Bow-wow!"

"I weally was, Lowthah!" said Gussy. "If we can lay that w'etched ghost we shall be suah of a weally mewwy Christmas, then. What do you w'pouse?"

"I propose a competition," said Cousin Ethel, with a

smile. "The one who lays the ghost, or who finds a clue that leads to the laying of it, gets a prize."

"Good wheeze!"

"Ripping!"

"That is a vewy good ideah, Ethel!" said Arthur Augustus, giving a deep chuckle. "But it must be a vewy good pwize—one weally worth winnin', you know. You agwee to that, deah gal?"

"Certainly!"

"Vewy well, then. As you agwee that it must be a pwize weally worth winnin'," said Arthur Augustus gallantly, "I suggest that the winnah—weceives a kiss fwom you and anothah fwom Dowis."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Ripping!" said Figgins.

"Quite a brain-wave, Gussy!" said Blake.

Cousin Ethel blushed crimson, as did Doris Levison. She eyed her chum, and then she gave a merry laugh.

"Vewy well!" she said. "I—I agree to that. If you think that a prize worth winning—"

"We do!"

"We does."

"If Doris agrees—"

"Oh, all right!" said Doris, with a laugh.

"That's settled, then!" laughed Cousin Ethel; and she ran away with her chum, both of them blushing.

Baggy Trimble grinned after them.

"He, he, he! I say, you fellows, I'm going to bag those kisses!" he sniggered. "Though they won't stop kissing me when once they've started, I expect. Girls are always like that with me!"

"You fat rotter—"

"You dry up, Tom Merry! I say, Gussy, I've got another splendid idea. What about that secret room?" demanded Trimble, his eyes gleaming. "It's that I'm after more than the blessed ghost. I've already been hunting round—"

"My hat! So that was what you were after when I caught you tapping the panelling in that upstairs corridor?" grinned Lowther.

"Just that!" said Trimble, with a fat chuckle. "I'm going to find that room if it is to be found. I say, Gussy, if a chap finds it I hope your pater will do the decent thing."

"Bai Jove! What—"

"Findings are keepings," explained Trimble. "If I find the room then the treasure's mine, ain't it? No getting away from that."

"T-treasure, Twimble?"

"Of course! What the thump d'you expect to find in a secret room that's been a mystery for centuries?" demanded Trimble. "It's bound to be full of treasure—pieces of eight, and all that, you know."

"You fat, greedy ass—"

"Oh, really, Blake—"

"If I had my way," said Blake grimly, "I'd dribble this fat worm all along the front drive and kick him out into the cold world!"

"Let's do it!" said Herries eagerly.

"Oh, really— I say, you fellows, you're quite mistaken—it isn't the treasure I'm after," said Baggy in alarm. "The—the fact is—"

"Now for a whopper!"

"The fact is," said Trimble, glaring at Lowther, "my sole reason for wanting to find the secret room is to save Gussy from a dreadful fate."

"Bai Jove!"

"The Curse says that death will come to the thirteenth generation if that mystery isn't solved by Christmas Day!" said Trimble impressively. "You fellows know that. And only by finding that room can it be solved and the Curse averted. Well, I'm here to protect dear old Gussy, and to avert the dreadful Curse that's hanging over the D'Arcys."

"Oh, rats! Buzz off, you fat chump!"

"You shut up, Levison! I'm blessed if I know why my old pal Gussy asked you fellows at all. A lot you care—"

"Weally, Twimble—"

"A lot you care whether the house is plunged into mourning this Christmas!" sneered Trimble. "It wouldn't trouble you fellows a scrap to wake up some morning and find old Gussy lying with a blood-stained sword through— Here, leggo, Blake! Here, wharrer you fellows at? Leggo! I'll yell—"

But the juniors were fed up with Trimble, and his yells went unheeded. In the grasp of many hands the fat Fourth-Former was rushed to the

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balustrade, and sent whirling over into the deep snow below. Trimble's yell ended in a muffled gurgling.

"There, you fat rotter!" called Blake down to him in sulphurous accents. "That's what you're going to get every time you misbehave yourself, Trimble. Take no notice of the fat chump, Gussy," he added, turning to Arthur Augustus and breathing hard. "That legend's all rot!"

"Twimble's remarks do not wowwy me," said Gussy, with a short laugh. "I am not afraid of the legend—

"Oh, you needn't take a hand in it—in fact, you can keep out of it, Gussy," said Lowther. "But I mean to pull dear old Baggy's leg a bit."

"What's the wheeze?" asked Blake, grinning. "I'll tell you later," said Lowther, with a meaning look at Arthur Augustus. "Let's go in and see what the girls are doing."

And the practical joker of the Shell at St. Jim's chuckled deeply as the juniors passed indoors through the french windows.

CHAPTER 7.

Extraordinary!

"I TELL you it is, Blake. It's the clue, or it claims to be the clue, to the whereabouts of the secret room! Phew! At last!"

"After long years!" said Blake.

There was a great excitement in the tones of Blake and



"The pwize for the one who lays the ghost must be weally worth winnin', Ethel," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with a chuckle. "I suggest that the winnah weceives a kiss fwom you and anothah fwom Dowis." "Hear—hear! Rippling!" Cousin Ethel gave a merry laugh. "Very well," she said. "I agree to that!" (See Chapter 6.)

wathah not! But—but—well, as a mattah of fact, I was goin' to talk to you fellows about that secwet woom, you know. The patah is suah it exists—"

"D'you mean your pater believes in the legend?" said Blake, in astonishment.

"Wathah not! But he's studied old books and documents in the libwawy," explained Arthur Augustus, "and he is convinced that there is a secwet woom somewhere that has nevah been discovered, deah boys."

"My hat! That sounds exciting!" said Tom Merry.

Arthur Augustus nodded, his eyes gleaming.

"It does. I was goin' to suggest, before Twimble mentioned it," he went on, "that we search for it, deah boys. We can have a competition for that mattah—a pwize for the fellow who finds the secwet woom."

"Good wheeze!" said Figgins eagerly. "And—and we'll ask Cousin Ethel to offer the same prizes as for the ghost."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yaas, wathah! I will ask her, Figgay," chuckled Arthur Augustus. "I hope, though, that whoevah does find the woom, or bowt out the w'etched ghost, it will not be Twimble! I'm suah it will uttally wuin the deah gals' Christmas to be obliged to kiss Twimble."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I'm going to find some clues for Trimble to follow up, anyway," said Lowther, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "If Trimble's keen to find something, we'll help him."

"Weally, Lowthah, I trust—"

Monty Lowther—at least, there appeared to be. Baggy Trimble, who happened to be passing the door of their room at the moment, halted abruptly as he heard the voices.

There could be no mistaking the nature of what Blake and Lowther were discussing so breathlessly.

Baggy Trimble's heart leaped.

He gave a quick glance round, and then he crept cautiously on tiptoe towards the slightly-opened door and peeped within the room.

Lowther and Blake were stooping over the writing-table by the tall window. Before them was spread an old, dilapidated book. They appeared to be studying a sheet of paper that they had found within the leaves of the book. That was the idea Trimble got, at all events.

Trimble drew a deep, deep breath.

"You—you're quite sure it's genuine?" went on Blake anxiously.

"What a question to ask!" said Lowther, in great scorn. "Can't you see for yourself, Blake? Phew! We must keep this to ourselves. We don't want anyone else to get the glory of finding the secret room, Blake."

"Rather not! That fat rotter Trimble especially! For the sake of those girls we mustn't let Trimble win the prize. At all costs that must be prevented. Just imagine the torture of those girls if they have to kiss a fat porker like Trimble!"

"Dreadful!" said Lowther, with a shudder.

Baggy Trimble's eyes glittered with wrath at that.

"Beasts!" he murmured. "Oh, the rotters!"

He remembered the old saying that listeners never hear any good of themselves. Still, what he had overheard before compensated for everything else.

"Well, we'll be getting down now," said Lowther. "Think this will be safe here, Blake?"

"I should think so. Nobody will dream we've discovered a valuable clue," said Blake reflectively. "Yes, it's safe enough until we come back, old chap. Just shove it in that drawer with the book."

"Right-ho! Come on!"

Baggy Trimble gasped, and dodged away from the door. On tip-toe he scudded to a room farther along and slipped inside. Blake and Lowther strolled out, and went off in the opposite direction. Round the corner, at the end of the passage, however, they both stopped, and Monty Lowther gave a soft chuckle.

"Now let's see if dear old Baggy's swallowed it," he murmured.

He peeped round the corner, and gave a chuckle again as he caught sight of Baggy Trimble's fat form just vanishing into their room.

"All serene!" grinned Lowther. "He's swallowed it, and the rest will be easy, Blake. Now come on and help me into that armour. We'll have to be slippy, or Baggy will be along investigating before I'm ready."

"Ha, ha! Yes."

And Blake and Lowther scudded off downstairs. Meanwhile, Baggy had found the book in the drawer, and his eyes fairly gleamed as he drew out the loose sheet of paper and blinked at it.

The sheet had the appearance of great age, at first glance. It was brown and curled, and the ink upon it was faded, or it appeared to be faded. Actually, it was an ordinary sheet of notepaper which had been scorched before a fire. The ink was weak, having been mixed with water. But one glance was enough for Baggy. All his attention, after that first glance, was given to the writing.

Baggy read it, fairly trembling with excitement.

It appeared to be the continuation of a longer message, and ran as follows:

"... finde ye secret room, searche ye floor, at base of ye thirde figure in ye armour from ye fireplace in ye hall. Press ye knob and—"

The message ended there.

But the significance of it made Baggy Trimble shake with glee.

He knew the figure in armour mentioned quite well; it stood in the dark corner just under the gallery running above the hall on that side.

"Pheh!" he breathed. "That's it, for a pension! Either there's a secret door in the floor just there, or else it's in the panelling just behind. Great pip! I'm in luck, and no mistake! But I'm not jolly well waiting until those rotters investigate to-night. I'm doing it now. Nobody will be down there—Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

The exclamation came from the doorway, and Baggy jumped as Arthur Augustus D'Arcy entered the room.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed the swell of St. Jim's, eyeing Trimble suspiciously. "What are you doin' in here, Twimble?"

"I—I—I—" Trimble stammered and stopped, quite at a loss for once.

"Twimble," exclaimed Arthur Augustus sternly, "I wegwet that I must ask you what you are doin' here? I cannot allow my othah guests to become victims of your wotten twicks."

"I—I— The fact is—"

"What is that book in your— Bai Jove! It is a book from the libwawy! If you have actually torn that page from it, Twimble, my patah will be vewy angry—"

"Not at all, old fellow!" gasped Trimble hurriedly. "It's just—just—I mean—"

"Hand that sheet to me at once, Twimble!" ordered the noble Gussy grimly. "I insist upon your handin' it ovah at once. Otherwise, I shall be obliged to take it from you, guest or not!"

"Oh dear!"

There was grim determination in Gussy's voice, and Trimble saw there was no help for it. He slowly handed over the precious "clue."

Gussy glanced over it, and then he jumped, his eyeglass falling from his eye in his amazement.

Trimble could not help an excited grin.

"I was goin' to show it you, Gussy—I was really," he stammered. "What d'you think of it? I told you I'd jolly soon find that secret room."

"Oh, bai Jove! Twimble—"

"Mind you, I found it; you can't deny that!" said Trimble anxiously. "I've won!"

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"Did you find it in that book, Twimble? It is a histowy of Eastwood House."

"Yes—I mean, nunno! I—I found it yesterday, in another book. I—I shoved it there to—to show you. I say, if those fellows claim—"

"But this is weally amazin'!" gasped Arthur Augustus, waving his eyeglass in his excitement. "Aftah all these yabs. Twimble, you have weally done a wemarkable thing, deah boy. Now—"

"And your pater?" said Trimble eagerly, eyeing Gussy craftily. "You'll see he plays the game—fifty-fifty at least, when the treasure's found—"

"Pway do not be wedic, Twimble. Howevah, this is wippin'. Twimble, wush and find the othah fellows—I must investigate this without delay."



"Ow! Yaw figure stepp towards him Gussy turn"

And the excited Arthur Augustus dashed from the room. Trimble followed hot on his heels, just as excited and a trifle apprehensive. He had no intention of finding Tom Merry & Co. The two clattered pell-mell downstairs and into the hall.

A little crowd of juniors who were hiding just behind the door of the dining-room—empty but for them—saw the two, and groaned.

"Well, my hat!" said Jack Blake. "That awful idiot Gussy has butted in."

"Trimble must have shown him the giddy clue!" grinned Figgins. "That rather mucks up Lowther's game. It was Trimble we wanted to give a shock to!"

"Well, Gussy was made to have his leg pulled, too!" said Blake. "Come on, we'll stroll along and watch the giddy investigators."

They emerged openly from the room, and strolled along the hall. In the dark corner beneath the gallery they found Arthur Augustus grovelling on the floor before the pedestal of one of the armour-clad figures. It was a fine figure, with sword down, and hands crossed over a huge, two-handed visor.

"Bai Jove! I am glad you fellows have come along!" gasped Gussy, looking round breathlessly. "I—or, watah,

Twimble heah—has found a valuable clue to the secret woom. Somewah heah is a secret door or panel, and—"

Gussy got no further, for just at that moment a remarkable thing happened.

The figure in armour moved. Trimble almost shrieked as he glimpsed it! Slowly the hands clasped the sword and raised it in the air.

Gussy did not see it—he was still grovelling in search of the "knob." He first became aware that something was happening when the flat back of the sword came down on his back with a terrific whack.

Whack!

"Yawwwooooogh!"

Gussy's howl was enough to awaken the celebrated Seven Sleepers—almost!



Why Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a yell of fright as the armoured figure from its pedestal with a queer, mechanical motion, and came sword upraised. The other juniors shrieked with merriment as they ran for it, with the figure rattling and clanking in his wake. "Ha, ha, ha!" (See Chapter 7.)

As he sprawled forward the sword descended again with another whack, and Gussy's nose came into violent contact with the foot of the pedestal.

"Yawwwooooogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gussy scrambled up, fairly seething with wrath and pain. "Who—what feahful wuffian did that?" he shrieked.

"Was it you, Blake?"

"Not guilty, me lord!"

"Was it you, Hewwies, you— Oh!"

Gussy's eyes gleamed as he suddenly sighted the fleeing figure of Trimble. The sight of an armoured figure suddenly coming to vigorous life like that had proved too much for Baggy. He had given a wild howl and bolted for his life. His fleeing footsteps died away along the passage leading to the servants' quarters.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Gussy. "It—it was that feahful wottah Twimble, then! I—I will give the wottah a feahful thwashin' when I see him for that wuffianly assault. It is nothin' to laugh about, you fellows."

And Gussy stooped to carry on—being far too eager to pursue his investigations than to chase Trimble just then. He had scarcely bent again when the great sword swooped down once more.

Whack!

"Yawwoooop!" roared Gussy.

Fairly gasping with wrath, he scrambled up, just in time to glimpse the sword being lowered into position, and the gauntleted hands folded over the handle.

He could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes. He gasped aloud and stared and stared in stupefied amazement.

"Oh, gweat Scott!" he stuttered feebly. "Oh, bai Jove! D-dud-did you fellows see— Ow!"

Really, it was no wonder that Arthur Augustus gave a yelp of fright in the circumstances. For just then the armoured figure moved again—in earnest this time. It stepped down from the pedestal with a queer, mechanical motion, and came towards the dumbfounded Gussy with sword upraised.

Clank, clank, clank!

"Ow! Yawwoooop!" roared the swell of St. Jim's in affright. "Oh, bai Jove!"

It was really too much for the gallant Gussy's nerves, strong as they usually were. Arthur Augustus was afraid of very little, but not knowing that Lowther was inside the armour, it was really no wonder that he turned tail and ran for it.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The other juniors fairly shrieked with merriment as the armoured figure went clanking and rattling in chase of Gussy.

But suddenly Lowther came to grief.

His armoured foot caught against a thick Turkish rug, and then—

Crash, crash! Clatter, clatter! Crash!

"How are the mighty fallen!" murmured Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus heard the laughter; he could scarcely help hearing it, and he pulled up suddenly. Then, suspicion growing in his noble mind, he ran back to find his hilarious chums helping the armoured form to its feet. That fall had been a terrific one, and Lowther had been hurt considerably. He was roaring with pain, his voice muffled behind the vizor of the helmet.

Even then Arthur Augustus did not understand it. But he soon did when the other juniors, nearly helpless with laughter, removed the helmet, and Monty's face, crimson and anguished, was revealed.

"Oh, bai Jove!" faltered Gussy. "Lowthah! Oh, gweat Scott!"

Gussy stood as if transfixed as the humorist of the Shell was helped out of the armour.

Lowther grinned a trifle sheepishly at Gussy.

"Sorry to frighten you, old top!" he gasped. "It was really meant to give dear old Trimble a shock."

"Then—then it was all spoof—that clue—"

"Was written by little me!" grinned Lowther cheerfully, as Tom Merry helped him off with his steel jacket. "Sorry, Gussy, but if you will ask to have your leg pulled, then— Oh, my hat!"

Monty Lowther did not stay to finish—nor to have any more of his armour removed. For just then Arthur Augustus, in a towering rage, made a blind rush at him.

Lowther fled, with the irate Arthur Augustus going after him at a great rate. They vanished from sight, and the juniors doubled up and howled with delirious laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

When Arthur Augustus turned up for lunch some time later he had a rather badly-discoloured eye, whilst Lowther sported a red and swollen nose—even Gussy's Chesterfieldian manners had not saved Lowther from that! Lord and Lady Eastwood must have been surprised to note the signs, but they made no comment. Cousin Ethel and Miss Doris also must have noted the signs, but they also were too polite and diplomatic to pass remarks. But Lowther did no more "leg-pulling" that day, and Arthur Augustus followed up no more "clues." Both had had enough.

CHAPTER 8.

The Problem of Trimble!

"TWIMBLE is weally the limit! I—I weally do not know what to do about him!"

Arthur Augustus was the speaker, of course, and he spoke rather dimly.

Time was passing swiftly at Eastwood House—all too swiftly for Tom Merry & Co. and the rest of the guests there. Every day was a busy day. The ice was safe now, and the juniors spent jolly hours skating with Cousin Ethel and Miss Doris. Races were organised, and prizes presented to the winners by Lady Eastwood. Then there were games and concerts in the evenings, and fun in the snow, which looked—to the joy of all—like staying over Christmas. Then there was shopping to be done and presents to be bought, while

all lent a willing hand to fetch holly and mistletoe from the woods on sleighs. Finally, there was the task of decorating the house, a task in which Cousin Ethel and Miss Doris shone, of course.

The juniors were enjoying themselves thoroughly, while Trimble was having the time of his life—especially at table! There had been no further alarms or adventures—the ghost seemed to be taking a rest, to the relief of all. The juniors had already spent most of one night watching, but the ghostly Cavalier had not appeared. They had also spent hours searching for the secret room—all to no purpose.

But Christmas had not arrived yet! Behind all the enjoyment and festivities the household and guests could not forget the ghost and the dread legend—it was impossible to forget it. At the back of the minds of all was the dread fear that something might happen yet, though what, they did not dare to put into words. They did not believe in ghosts or curses, and yet the shadow of the Curse was over them all—they could not entirely dismiss it from their minds. Great as the inducement was, and in spite of the enticing prize to be won, the juniors gradually lost their keenness to “bowl out” the ghost and to find the secret room. There was so much else to be done.

There was another fly in the ointment, however, that threatened to spoil the Christmas enjoyment of the Eastwood House party; that fly was a very fat one—Baggy Trimble!

Baggy seemed to enjoy himself most when he was causing unhappiness and unpleasantness to others. He made himself objectionable to the servants, and to Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison. Baggy fancied himself as a lady-killer, and under this mistaken impression he was wont to bestow his attentions upon the girls—to their obvious annoyance. In addition, he seemed to find pleasure in comparing the food and service at Eastwood House with that at Trimble Hall with a frankness that made Tom Merry & Co. yearn to kick him—hard.

During the past few days Arthur Augustus had rarely been seen without a worried frown on his brow. At St. Jim's the noble Gussy knew exactly how to deal with Baggy. But the fat Fourth-Former was now a guest, and a boot, often and forcibly applied, was out of the question at Eastwood House between host and guest.

It was on the evening before Christmas Eve that Gussy mentioned the matter to Tom Merry & Co.

“He weally is the limit, deah boys!” repeated Arthur Augustus, shaking his head dismally, as the juniors walked along the terrace after dinner. “The fat wottah is quite puttin’ a damp on the festivities. I do not like to say anythin’, of course, as he is my guest heah—though an uninvited one. Still—”

“Well, we’ve offered again and again to take him over,” said Blake. “We’ve offered to boot him out, but you won’t allow it, you soft-hearted fathead.”

“Leave him to us!” grinned Lowther. “Just say the word, Gussy, and we’ll find a way of making him glad to make a bee-line for Trimble Hall.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“He’ll need an imaginary aeroplane to reach Trimble Hall, as it only exists in his imagination!” went on Lowther. “Still—”

“It is gettin’ beyond a joke, though,” said Gussy unhappily. “He is annoyin’ the matah, though she won’t say anythin’, and the cook’s complainin’ about him pinchin’ gwub fwom the kitchen, and the footmen are complainin’ about his cheek! Barton, our old butler, looked quite ill when he complained about him this mornin’. Twimble must have wowed him—”

“Leave him to us!” said Blake grimly. “After all, he had the thumping cheek to come here on his own, the cheeky worm! You owe him nothing, Gussy! He had his chance to behave himself, and he won’t—can’t, I suppose.”

“I’ve already got a wheeze!” said Lowther, with a grin. “Why not haunt him?”

“He’s haunted Gussy enough, so we’ll haunt him,” said Lowther. “He’s seen the ghost once—though what it was he really saw, goodness knows! Still, when he’s seen it once or twice he’ll get the wind up, and perhaps he’ll shove off home and leave us in peace.”

“It’s worth trying,” laughed Tom Merry. “Though the fat boulder is a sticker, and will take some shifting, I’m afraid. We can try it, though—”

“Weally, deah boys—” began Arthur Augustus uneasily.

“You dry up, Gussy, old chap,” said Blake. “You’re dead in this act. We’re not Trimble’s hosts, thank goodness, and we’re not bound to consider the fat ass! But what’s the wheeze, Lowther?”

Lowther chuckled.

“Simply to haunt Trimble and frighten the fat ass until he gets the wind up and takes his hook!” he said. “One of us can easily dress up as Sir Ralph—”

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“Weally, Lowthah—”
 “Oh, all right, Gussy!” chuckled Monty. “We’ll keep you out of it, old chap. We’ll do it on our— Shush! Here’s the fat rotter now! I say, play up, you chaps!” And Lowther raised his voice a trifle and went on as if he had not spotted Trimble approaching. “No jolly fear!” he said. “I’m not letting that greedy, fat rotter have one. Why, he’d scoff the lot! And it’s a ripping box—full of cream chocs. I’m going to take it upstairs with me to-night and hide the box under my bed. We’ll share ’em in the morning first thing, and— Oh!”

Lowther halted abruptly with a start—seeming to become aware at last of Trimble’s approach.

Trimble rolled up. His eyes gleamed a little, and though he pretended not to have heard, the juniors knew quite well that he had.

“Oh, here you are, you fellows,” he said, with a grunt. “Looks to me as if you’re always trying to dodge me. Hallo, Gussy! You’re looking no end seedy, old fellow! Still funky of the ghost—what? Well, I don’t wonder. It’s Christmas Eve to-morrow and the blessed secret room hasn’t been found yet. Still, while there’s life there’s hope. I bet you’re shivering in your shoes, though.”

“I am not shivewin’ in my shoes, Twimble!”

“That’s right,” grinned Trimble. “Take a leaf out of my book, old chap. Nothing on earth would ever frighten me. I’m not afraid of the blessed ghost.”

“Then why do you still wefuse to sleep alone, Twimble?” asked Gussy scornfully.

“Eh? Oh, because—well, because I’m afraid of something happening to you, old chap. I insist upon being near you—to keep watch and ward, you know,” said Trimble calmly. “I insist upon sleeping with you because I’m here to guard you from the fulfilment of the Curse, old chap.”

“Weally, Twimble—”

“It’s lucky for Lord Conway that he’s spending his Christmas abroad!” grinned Trimble. “I can’t pretend to guard all three of you—and young Wally must take his chance. But I’m not seeing my old pal Gussy stuck with a blessed sword if— Here, wharrer you walking away for?”

Arthur Augustus did not stop to explain that—he just walked away. It was just as well for Trimble that he did.

“You—you fat rotter!” hissed Blake, breathing hard. “Why can’t you thumping well keep off that subject, Trimble? If you don’t stop rubbing it in—”

“Eh? You shut up, Blake!” said Trimble independently. “Blow you! Old Gussy shouldn’t be such a funk. I can’t stand funks! I say, you fellows, isn’t this a measly hole? I’m always hungry here—not like I am at Trimble Towers—I mean, Trimble Hall. They don’t stave you there. I bet you chaps are hungry now!”

“You—you—”

“If you are, I can put you on to a good thing,” said Trimble, lowering his voice. “There’s some ripping mince-pies on a table just under the kitchen window—I’ve seen ’em. The window’s open a bit now, and if one of you chaps will come and give me a leg up—”

“Snowballs!” rapped out Blake.

“Eh? Snowballs?” ejaculated Trimble, not even understanding when Blake stooped and started to make one. “I’m talking about mince-pies, not— Here, what—”

Biff!

“Yarrooop! Mum-mum-m-m-mum!”

Trimble’s yell ended in a muffled gurgle as the snowball left Blake’s hand and broke on his fat chin, most of the snow entering his open mouth. The next moment Trimble was plunging away for life with snowballs breaking all over his fat person as the juniors followed Blake’s example with a will.

The fat Fourth-Former vanished round a corner of the House, and his yells died away.

Blake breathed hard as he disappeared.

“If that fat worm stays here much longer there will be a sudden death at Eastwood House!” he growled. “I’m fed up with him. We’ve simply got to get rid of him somehow.”

“What was the idea of that spoof yarn about the chocolates, Lowther?” demanded Tom Merry.

“Couldn’t you see that?” grinned Monty. “I’m going to dress up as Sir Ralph and haunt the fat rotter! And we’ve got to get Baggy to leave his bed-room somehow. Gussy sleeps with him, and we don’t want to frighten dear old Gussy. And if we tell Gussy he’ll feel in duty bound to stop the game, see?”

“Oh, you mean that Baggy will leave his room and come after the chocs to-night?” grinned Figgins.

“Just that,” said Lowther. “He knows I had a box by post this evening—though it wasn’t a box of chocs. Still, Baggy thinks it was; he asked me for one ten minutes ago. He’ll be after ’em to-night, never fear—when he thinks I’m asleep. See the idea?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

"So now let's go indoors and root out some suitable clobber for me to wear as Sir Ralph," grinned the practical joker.

And Lowther led the way indoors. All agreed that the game was worth trying; Baggy had abused the hospitality of his hosts, and he had to be got rid of somehow. But Fate was to take the game out of Lowther's hands had he only known it!

CHAPTER 9.
Two Ghosts!

"BEASTS!"

That was Trimble's opinion of his fellow-guests at Eastwood House—at least, of Tom Merry & Co. Trimble knew he was not wanted there; he could not blind himself to the fact that his charming company was unwelcome at the home of the D'Arcys. But though the family were polite and gracious to Baggy, and showed nothing whatever of how they regarded him, Tom Merry & Co. made no effort whatever to do likewise. Had Baggy behaved himself matters might have been different.

"Beasts!" repeated Baggy to himself. "They're jealous—that's what it is; jealous of my good looks and of the way I'm impressing the girls. And they want all the good things for themselves! Why, even to-night that beast Blake refused to roast me any more chestnuts—said they were for the girls, though I know jolly well they wanted them for themselves. Anyway, I'm jolly well having some of Lowther's chocolates! Wonder if that ass Gussy's asleep yet?"

And Baggy raised himself in bed and blinked across the moonlit room at the other bed, which contained the elegant form of Arthur Augustus. It was still freezing hard, and Baggy shivered. Through the tall windows of the bed-room the moonlight flooded in—the shadow of the window-bars lay in black lines across the bed in which the swell of St. Jim's lay. But his face was in deep gloom, and Trimble could not see it.

"You awake, Gussy?" whispered Trimble.

There was no answer. As he waited breathlessly Trimble caught the sound of soft breathing. The scion of the noble House of Eastwood slept the sleep of the just.

"Oh, good!" grinned Trimble.

He slipped out of bed and hastily donned his dressing-gown and a pair of slippers. Then, groping for Gussy's electric torch, Trimble crept softly from the room.

Baggy had "swallowed" Lowther's remarks regarding the fictitious box of chocolates only too well. Not for one moment did he suspect a jape, despite his experience over the "clue" to the secret room. Lowther had hidden the chocs to prevent him having any. Baggy fairly trembled with indignation at the thought. Well, he'd jolly well see!

Baggy had thought it out. It was easy enough. Lowther's room, which he shared with Tom Merry, Manners, and Levison, was only at the end of the passage. He had only to sneak in, after making sure they were all asleep, and collar the box. Baggy mentally resolved it should be an empty box when he had finished! It would serve the mean beast right!

The fat youth had a very short memory for "lessons." The thought of the ghost he had seen was not even in his mind as he stepped out into the corridor. But as he stood there and blinked out he felt a sudden thrill. It all came back to him as he peered along the dim, silent corridor towards Lowther's room. Somehow, in the deep silence, it did not seem quite so easy or safe.

"Oh dear!" mumbled Baggy. "I—I think I'll get back into bed. Besides, it's jolly c-cold! I can easily slip along before they're awake in the morning. But—"

The thought came to him then that he was extremely unlikely to waken before the others. They would be out snowballing, or else on the ice long before he was dressed and up. Rising early was not Baggy's strong point, and he knew it. And Lowther had said he intended to open the box early in the morning—

It was no good! After all, it was only at the end of the corridor—though it did look rather long in the dark! And he was up now—

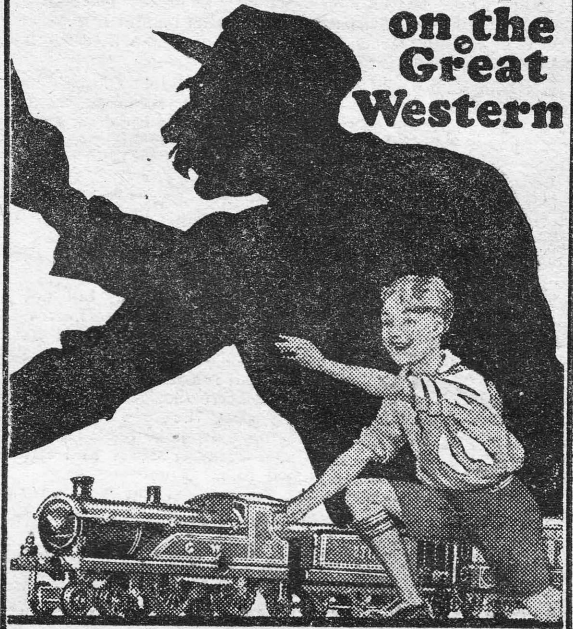
Baggy took another blink along the long passage. Then, screwing up his courage, he stepped out, and took three rather hesitating steps along the passage.

But he only took three. Quite suddenly he stopped, as a queer, horrifying feeling suddenly took possession of him. Baggy had had that feeling before—the night he had seen the ghost of Sir Ralph! It was a terrible, nerve-racking, terrifying feeling.

It was the feeling that he was not alone—that another presence was near him.

(Continued on next page.)

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It was behind him—he knew it! Not once had Baggy glanced along the passage in the other direction; he had never thought of doing so. He did not do so now; he could not, to save his life, just then. He stood, shaking in every limb. In that horrifying moment of fear Baggy Trimble would have given worlds to be safely back in the room, though it was scarcely three yards behind him.

But he couldn't reach it—couldn't move; stark terror had possession of him. And then—

It was a sound behind him—a soft footfall! Baggy's hair began to rise on his scalp, his heart thumped wildly. It was no good; he had to look round. He did look round, too, though it was with no conscious effort of his own. And then—

Baggy Trimble saw it!

Once again the fat junior gazed with terror-stricken eyes at the dread apparition—the ghost of the evil Sir Ralph of Cavalier days. He saw the vague outline of the gay, plumed hat, the swaying cloak, and the glint of steel. Then the fierce, staring eyes met his, and held them.

Trimble's mouth opened. He tried to shriek, but not a sound came from his parched throat. He strove to move—to run, but his muscles refused to obey. He staggered back against the passage wall, half-fainting.

The ghostly form came on. It had reached the doorway of his room now; there was no hope of reaching that! Nearer and nearer it came—soundlessly after that one footfall. It loomed above him; the glittering eyes held his with fierce intensity. It was upon him, and Trimble strove and strove to shriek as something touched him. Then—

Merciful oblivion came to the hapless fat youth. He fainted.

"I'm doing it!" said Lowther.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" grinned Tom Merry sleepily. "That fat ass isn't worth leaving a warm bed for on a night like this! Let him rip!"

"Why, you silly chump," snorted Lowther, sitting up in bed in the moonlit bed-room, "you agreed to the jape when we planned it this evening!"

"I know! But—well, I can't see the fun of it now!" said Tom, yawning. "The fat ass isn't worth the trouble. And I think it'll take more than a ghost to shift Trimble. Let him rip!"

"But Trimble will be here soon—after the chocs!" snorted Lowther. "You footling fathead, Tommy! After all the trouble I've taken to get the clobber ready! I've got the sword, too, from the hall!"

"Well, give Trimble a good whacking with it when he comes! It'll be useful for that, old chap!"

"Fathead!"

Snore!

Tom Merry was asleep—or pretending to be!

Lowther breathed hard in the gloom. It was really too thick! In the evening, when they had discussed the plot, his chums had been keen and enthusiastic enough. Certainly none of them had offered to take the part of the ghost. Still, Monty was keen to do that himself. None the less, he wanted help in the matter. The joke would fall very flat if there was nobody to witness Trimble's fright and flight.

Lowther himself had been tired out. They had had a busy day—snow-fights, skating, shopping, decorating with holly and mistletoe, and dancing, followed by yarns round the fire before retiring to bed. But Lowther had forced himself to keep awake. Why couldn't his chums have done the same? Certainly Tom Merry had—Lowther himself had seen to that. But he evidently had no intention of getting out of bed to help. And the other fellows in the room had been asleep for some time—despite Lowther's wrathful remarks.

Really it was too thick!

Lowther felt like a martyr to the cause.

Still, it had to be done now. At any moment Trimble might come after the chocs, and Lowther wanted Trimble to meet the ghost—himself—in the corridor! He was not going to back out just now because his faithless chums had done so. Besides, he knew they would chip him if he did. After all, it was his idea, and he had—in daylight—insisted upon being the one to carry it out.

He rather wished he hadn't now.

"Oh blow!" grunted Lowther. "I'll punch your head in the morning, Tommy, for this!"

Snore!

Lowther set his lips and slipped out of bed. The next moment he had lit a candle, and was setting to work to prepare himself for the part he was to play—the part of the ghost of Sir Ralph D'Arcy, the evil Cavalier! Hurriedly Lowther donned his disguise—a long, curly wig, fierce mustaches, and thickly-applied grease-paint, knee-breeches,

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plumed hat, and cloak. Then he groped under the bed and drew out a long, ugly-looking sword.

In the candle-light Lowther really looked the part to the life. If any of his chums had wakened just then, they would have had the fright of their youthful lives—whether Trimble was likely to have or not! To Lowther's relief he was ready before there was any sign or sound of Baggy Trimble.

"Oh, good!" grinned Lowther, feeling a bit better now. "If Trimble doesn't think the giddy ghost has turned up again—I'll eat my hat!"

He opened the door of the room and peered out. Lowther had plenty of nerve; yet, despite himself, he could not restrain a tremor as he glanced along the dark, gloomy passage. At the far end—seemingly an endless distance away—he glimpsed something white. It was a shaft of moonlight across the passage from the landing window.

In between all was dark and shadowy. He even imagined he caught sight of something moving in the shadows.

Was it fancy?

Lowther stood motionless, his heart thumping madly against his ribs. He stared along the passage, trying to pierce the gloom. The hand that gripped the long sword trembled. It was all very well laughing and joking about ghosts in the daylight, but somehow it was a different matter at night. Lowther began to regret his intention of playing such a trick on Trimble. Then he remembered some of Trimble's recent transgressions, and he set his lips. After all—

What was that?

Lowther felt sure of it now—something was moving towards the far end of the corridor. A shapeless mass it seemed, moving away from him. What was it?

Lowther could have yelled, so strung up were his nerves. And then he suddenly stiffened. He was sure he glimpsed a form in the shaft of moonlight from the landing window; he was certain he could make out a plumed hat, a cloak, and the glint of moonlight on steel.

It vanished on the instant, leaving Lowther staring into the shadowy gloom again, with parted lips and panting breath.

How long the junior stood thus he never knew. But his heart gradually steadied, and suddenly he gasped and licked his dry lips.

"Phew!" he breathed. "That gave me a turn and no mistake! I'm sure I saw it, though. It looked like— But it couldn't have been! Dash it all, I'm getting nervous! My hat! I wonder if it was Trimble? He may have turned the wrong way in the dark, forgetting which way to turn for our room. Or the fat rotter may have gone downstairs even—after those mince-pies he was gassing about to-day. I—I'd better see if he's in his room."

Lowther would infinitely have preferred to go back to his warm bed. But he was curious now. He badly wanted to learn if it was Trimble he had glimpsed, for he certainly had glimpsed somebody or something.

For another few seconds Lowther hesitated, and then he trod carefully along to the room occupied by Arthur Augustus and Trimble. He reached the door, and, finding it ajar, slipped inside the room.

Then he looked at Trimble's bed.

It was empty.

The bright moonlight showed up half the bed clearly, but it failed to show up Trimble's elephantine form beneath the bedclothes. To make sure, Lowther stepped cautiously close to the bed and felt over the pillow. The bed was undoubtedly unoccupied. Lowther felt the sheets—they were still warm.

"Well, the fat ass!" breathed Lowther. "He's gone downstairs grub-raiding, for a pension, unless—"

Lowther stepped to the door and waited for some minutes, half-expecting Trimble's return any second. If Trimble had mistaken the way to his room then he would be back soon enough. He would soon find out his mistake. But as the minutes passed Lowther realised that that was not the explanation.

"Well, my hat!" breathed the practical joker. "That fat rotter has more nerve than we've given him credit for! Fancy going down to the kitchen at this hour, after that fright he had the other night! Well, this beats me!"

It was certainly astonishing. But then Trimble was always astonishing them one way or another. There was no accounting for what he did—when he was hungry. Lowther himself had often remarked that Baggy would rob a lion of its quarry if he were hungry enough. At all events, he was missing now, and it was pretty clear he had gone downstairs grub-raiding again. Lowther remembered the mince-pies, on the table under the kitchen window, and he couldn't help chuckling.

"Well, let the fat idiot rip!" he murmured. "I'm blowed if I'm going to wait here in the cold any longer

for him—jape or no jape. Oh, blow! All my trouble for nothing. Still, I'll scare him out of his skin another night!"

And Lowther went back to bed—glad enough to do so. He found Tom Merry asleep—really asleep this time, and, manfully resisting the desire to give the sleeping form a few hefty whacks with his sword, Monty doffed his disguise and put out the light. Then he climbed into bed, and within three minutes was fast asleep.

CHAPTER 10.

Missing!

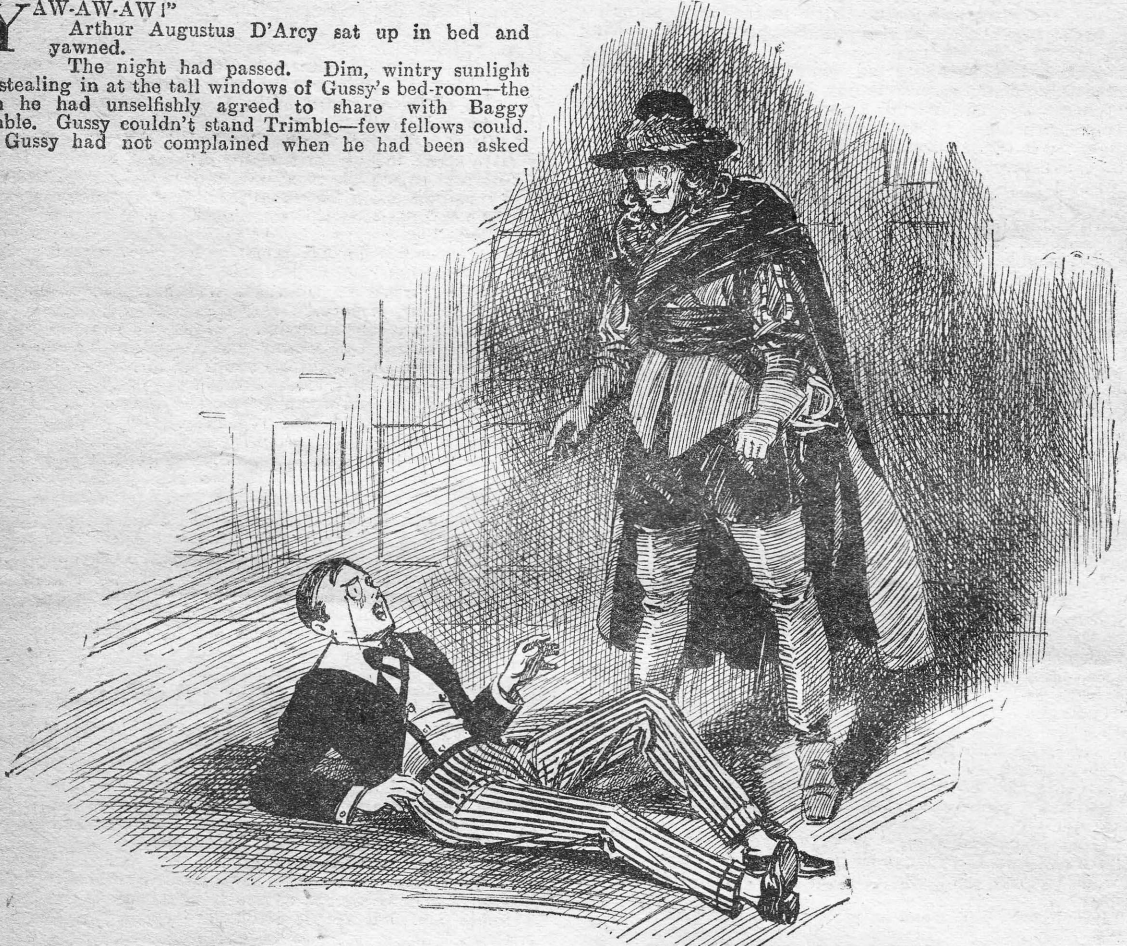
"YAW-AW-AW!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy sat up in bed and yawned.

The night had passed. Dim, wintry sunlight was stealing in at the tall windows of Gussy's bed-room—the room he had unselfishly agreed to share with Baggy Trimble. Gussy couldn't stand Trimble—few fellows could. But Gussy had not complained when he had been asked

Slacker, had suddenly become Trimble, the Energetic? Had he gone down, after a cold bath, for a spin on the frozen lake, or for a brisk walk in the snow? Gussy chuckled at the thought. Much more likely that the fat junior had awakened hungry, and had gone down to raid the larder! After a feed, with his early morning appetite appeased somewhat, Trimble would return to bed again. Nothing was more certain than that.

Arthur Augustus hurried away to the bath-room, had his bath, and returned to dress. Dressing was usually a long process for the swell of the Fourth, but he spent little time on it now. There were likely to be plenty of snowballs flying around before breakfast, and Gussy did not spend much time on his toilet.



Crash! Arthur Augustus D'Arcy fell upon something with a force that half-stunned him. Then his dazed senses made out the figure that stood over him—the ominous, dreadful figure of a Cavalier of old in plumed hat and cloak! It was the ghost of Eastwood House! (See Chapter 11.)

to take the frightened Baggy in with him. Though he couldn't stand Trimble, the good-hearted Gussy did his very best to do so, being more sorry for Trimble than he was for himself.

Arthur Augustus awoke on that Christmas Eve morning with a prodigious yawn, and stretched himself.

Gussy had promised to show Cousin Ethel—and anyone else who wished to learn—just how to skate the figure eight without breaking necks or going through the ice, or making oneself look like an intoxicated monkey trying to keep its balance. Gussy had a good opinion of himself as a skater, but though Cousin Ethel had smiled at the offer she had accepted it in her usual graceful manner.

It was a pleasure Gussy was looking forward to keenly, and he intended to get up quite early.

He was out of bed in a flash, and suddenly he missed something—something he was very familiar with in the Fourth Form dormitory at St. Jim's at rising-bell.

It was Trimble's snore. That snore was always working overtime, so to speak, long after the other fellows had awakened. So Gussy missed it now, and he glanced in some surprise across at Trimble's bed.

Then he jumped.

Where was Baggy? Was it possible that Trimble, the

He went along and looked in at Blake's bed-room.

"Weady, you fellows?" he inquired. "Buck up, deah boys!"

"We'll be along presently, old chap!" said Blake. "We don't intend to miss the circus performance."

"The—the what?" ejaculated Gussy.

"Circus performance!" repeated Blake, raising his eyebrows. "You promised to give an exhibition on the ice, Gussy—"

"Oh, yaas! But, weady—"

"Well, we're not missing it!" said Blake. "I once saw Charlie Chaplin doing a figure eight on the films. I'm hoping yours will be as good as his, old chap."

"Weally, Blake—"

"We'll come!" said Herries. "I believe young Wally said he was arranging for an ambulance."

"And Lowther said something about phoning the Cottage Hospital to have a bed ready," said Digby seriously. "We do hope it won't end fatally, Gussy—"

"I expect some of us will die of laughing," said Blake, shaking his head. "I must say girls have pluck. I never realised how much until Cousin Ethel accepted Gussy's offer. She's a heroine, chaps."

"Yes, rather!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, you wottahs—"

"But we'll be along soon, Gussy," said Blake. "I'm bringing my knife, in case you do get tied into a knot. And, in any case, we're Scouts, and pretty good at untying 'em!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats!"

With that brief and scornful retort Gussy departed, snorting. As a matter of fact, Gussy was actually a very good skater; he was active and graceful, and it was really a pleasure to watch him. But his chums had no intention of allowing Gussy to have a "swelled head" over the fact. And on this occasion he acquitted himself well, and they all spent a merry half-hour on the lake. On the way back, as usual, there was a running battle in the snow, and they went in to breakfast with sharpened appetites and glowing faces.

Breakfast had been started some minutes when Lord Eastwood suddenly missed Baggy Trimble.

"Where is your friend Trimble, Arthur?" he asked, in some surprise. "I trust he is not unwell. Possibly, though, he is taking breakfast in bed."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

"My hat!"

Arthur Augustus looked rather alarmed as he glanced round the big table.

"Bai Jove! That is vewy stwange!" he remarked. "No, patah, Twimble is not unwell, neither is he havin' bweakfast in bed, to my knowledge. It is wathah stwange, as I noticed he was not in bed when I woke up, and that was wathah early."

"What?"

It was Monty Lowther who made that involuntary ejaculation. He coloured as all eyes turned upon him.

"I—I say, Gussy," stammered Monty, "is that right? Wasn't that fat—I mean, Trimble, in bed when you got up? Wasn't he in the bed-room?"

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"I weally was vewy surprised myself, Lowthah," he answered. "His bed was empty, and I have not seen him at all this mornin'. I think it wathah wemarkable. Haven't any of you fellows seen him?"

There was a chorus of replies in the negative, and Lowther's face went quite pale.

"That—that's queer," he said quietly. "He wasn't—that is, I mean to say—"

Lowther paused. He could scarcely confess his adventures of the previous night, but—

"We'd better look for him, I think, sir," said Tom Merry, giving Lowther a sharp look. "If you would excuse us—"

"Certainly. It is very strange!" said Lord Eastwood, eyeing the juniors in rather a curious way. "Arthur, you had better go with them, I think."

"Vewy good, sir."

Tom Merry, Lowther, and Arthur Augustus left the table quietly, and outside the morning-room they eyed each other queerly.

"Monty," gasped Tom, "were you going to say—"

"I was," said Lowther, anticipating the question. "When I went to play ghost on Trimble last night, his bed was empty."

"Bai Jove! You went to play ghost, Lowthah?"

"Yes."

Monty nodded contritely, and the next moment he was breathlessly telling of what he had seen, and fancied he had seen, in the night. Tom Merry and Gussy looked at each other, their faces quite pale.

"Well, it's queer!" said Tom soberly. "If it was Trimble you saw, then where the thump can he have got to? The only thing is to hunt for him. What a nuisance the fellow is!"

But, though Tom spoke as if Trimble must be about somewhere, he felt distinctly uneasy in mind. And his uneasiness increased, and was shared by his chums, when they reached Trimble's bed-room.

Trimble was not there.

But his clothes were there, in an untidy heap, just as Trimble had left them on undressing the night before.

If Trimble was out and about, then he was dressed only in his pyjamas, or else somebody else's clothes. That much was certain now.

"D'you think he can have boited?" said Tom. "He may have got suddenly scared of the house and cleared out."

"In somebody else's clothes?" said Lowther. "That's not likely. In any case, is Trimble the sort of fellow to clear off in the middle of the night? Not him! He hasn't any cash, either. It was only this afternoon he was trying to touch me for a bob."

"Well, it—it's no end queer!"

"Yaas, wathah! It's wathah wotten!"

"It's more than queer," said Lowther in a low voice, his

face tense. "I—I don't like it, you fellows. I don't want to be an alarmist, but—"

Lowther paused.

Somehow, at the back of his mind he felt a strange feeling of fear. He remembered that queer, shapeless form in the gloom of the corridor, and how it had assumed the shape of a man in cloak and plumed hat, when passing the shaft of moonlight before the landing window. He had seen the gleam of steel—he was sure that he had. The conviction was growing now—growing—

He shivered at his thoughts.

"Let's go down and ask the servants," he said. "No good worrying Lord Eastwood and the rest until we know for certain that Trimble's missing."

"Very well," said Tom.

They went downstairs again. Lowther was silent, and Tom Merry eyed him several times as they hurried to the servants' hall. In the passage they met James, the footman. They stopped him, and James eyed them questioningly; his wooden features betrayed no astonishment at their invasion of the servants' hall. But his sharp eyes scanned their faces intently.

"Where is Barton, James?" asked Arthur Augustus. "I wish to speak to him for a moment."

"Barton is not about at the moment, Master Arthur," said the footman in his smooth tones. "To be quite exact, he has not been seen this morning."

"What?"

"Quite possibly he has gone for an early morning walk, sir. He has not been well of late," explained James apologetically. "When he returns I will ask him to see you, Master Arthur, at once."

"That is wathah annoyin'. Howevah, we are wathah alarmed, James. One of my guests—Master Twimble—has not come down to bweakfast, nor is he in his woom, though his clothes are still there. And appawently he has been absent frowm the bed-woom for most of the night."

"Indeed, Master Arthur? That is very strange," said James, his face showing surprise at that. "I trust—"

"It is vewy stwange indeed, James," agreed Gussy. "I think you had better get John to help you, and make a thorough search of the house."

"Very good, Master Arthur. I will do so without delay."

Leaving the footman with a curious expression on his face, the juniors returned to the breakfast-room. Lord Eastwood eyed them anxiously.

"Well, Arthur, have you—" he began.

"Twimble is not in the bed-woom, sir," reported Gussy breathlessly. "And his clothes are still there!"

"What? Bless my soul!"

"It—it is wathah stwange, father," stammered Gussy, his face quite agitated. "James states he has not seen him this mornin', and appawently he has not been seen this mornin' by anyone. Barton is not about, but James is sendin' him to us when he appeahs. But— Lowthah, deah boy, you had bettah tell the patah all."

Lowther did so, colouring as he met Lord Eastwood's frowning glance. There was nothing else for it now. Something queer had happened to Trimble, undoubtedly.

What was it? Where was Trimble?

That was the question on all lips as Lowther finished.

"This is very serious!" said Lord Eastwood, his face grave. "Something has obviously happened to the boy. Is Trimble addicted to the habit of walking in his sleep, Arthur?"

"I have nevah known him do so, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "Have you fellows?"

All the juniors shook their heads.

"I feared that possibly he had met with an accident while sleep-walking," said the earl. "But a thorough search must be made, of course. If you boys would care to help—"

There was no question about that; all were only too eager to do all they could towards solving the mystery. The juniors forgot Trimble's many faults and failings then—they forgot that their one yearning had been to see the last of him. Now Trimble had gone—in such circumstances—their attitude towards the fat youth underwent a sudden change.

What had happened to him? They meant to find out; and soon breakfast was forgotten, and in twos and threes they began the search, even extending it to the park-land round the house. For hours they searched, and it was noon before they gave it up at last. By that time all seemed to realise that it was hopeless.

Barton, the aged butler, had turned up shortly after the start of the search. He also had seen nothing, and he soon organised the servants for the search. Like Lord Eastwood, he shared the view that Trimble had been sleep-walking, and had come to grief somewhere, and he suggested that the lake should be searched, for one thing—a suggestion that filled all with horror.

It was a case of "poor old Trimble" for the rest of that day, and there was no question of further jollity and fun. A deep gloom had settled on Eastwood House and all under its roof. Just before tea the earl, worried and anxious,

decided to wait no longer, but to dispatch an urgent wire to Trimble's home to make quite sure that he had not, after all, gone home in the night. Hope was not yet given up that that theory would account for Trimble's strange absence. And all waited for the reply in tense anxiety.

CHAPTER 11.

Gussy Investigates!

"**B**AI Jove! I—I wondah!"
As he murmured the remark to himself Arthur Augustus D'Arcy ceased brushing his hair and frowned reflectively at himself in the mirror before him.

Gussy had already brushed his hair well before tea. Now tea was over and he found himself obliged to repair to his bed-room to repeat the operation.

It was all Wally's fault that this was necessary.

Of all the inhabitants of Eastwood House on that Christmas Eve, only Wally, perhaps, was inclined to scout the idea of Trimble having come to harm. In that callous young scamp's view Baggy Trimble had been born to hang, and nothing short of hanging could therefore put an end to Trimble—according to the scamp of the Third!

"Fancy making all this silly fuss about the fat rotter!" sniffed Wally scornfully. "Let him rip, I say. Good riddance to him! I bet he's enjoying himself somewhere. I think I'll suggest to the pater that he'd better count the spoons; I've already suggested to cook that she takes stock in the larder—"

Wally had rattled on in that strain, and Arthur Augustus, greatly shocked, had remonstrated with his callous minor. As usual, the wordy argument had ended in personal violence, and in his efforts to eject the cheeky fag from the lounge-hall, where they were talking, Arthur Augustus had ended up with his noble head in the coal-scuttle, whilst Wally and his chums had made themselves scarce, roaring with laughter.

An immediate visit to the bath-room had been necessary for Gussy, and, having removed the coal-dust there, he had repaired to his room to finish cleaning up.

Then the brain-wave had struck Arthur Augustus.

"Bai Jove!" he repeated. "I wondah if Twimble has been searchin' for that secwet woom and come to gwief! He was feahfully keen to find it, and he may have got up in the night— Oh, bai Jove! That's it. Possibly he's found the woom and got himself shut up in it somehow. That would be just like Twimble."

The more Gussy reflected on the matter the more certain he became that his great new theory was sound.

But where had he gone searching for the room? In the daytime Trimble had ample opportunities for searching in any occupied part of the big house. They had watched him tapping panelling, and had laughed at his ceaseless efforts to find the room. But the fat Fourth-Former had not minded. If he had dared to get up in the night to search, then it must have been to search a part of the old house that was forbidden ground.

The only part of the house forbidden to the juniors was the attics and the little staircase leading up to them. The stairs and the flooring of the attics were rotting away, and had become dangerous in the extreme—to anyone who did not know the danger spots, at all events. Lord Eastwood had expressly forbidden them to explore there. The place had been thoroughly explored in the past, according to the earl, and it was a waste of time as well as dangerous. Moreover, a modern door had been built at the beginning of the passage leading to the flight of stairs, and this was always kept locked.

It had been locked when they had searched only that morning. Tom Merry and he had tried it themselves. Yet Arthur Augustus knew the craftiness and cunning of Baggy. Had the fat youth somehow become possessed of the key? Certainly the old butler was unlikely to hand it to him, but—

"Bai Jove! I wondah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I will ask Barton if he has lent Twimble the key, though—"

The thought came to Arthur Augustus then that the door would not be locked if Baggy had passed through it. Yet even as the thought struck him another followed it. Possibly the key was still in the lock—on the other side. It had certainly been locked when they had tried it in the morning. Had Baggy locked it behind him?

Arthur Augustus was reflecting deeply on the problem as he left his room and started to make his way towards the stairs. He would ask Tom Merry's advice, anyway, and they would come and—

At that point in his reflections Arthur Augustus reached the end of the long corridor. From there another corridor led at right-angles towards the wide staircase leading to the hall. But facing him now, in a deep sort of alcove, was

the door built by Lord Eastwood to prevent anyone from carelessly and unknowingly straying to the unsafe part of the wing.

Acting on sudden impulse, Arthur Augustus walked into the alcove. The winter evening was drawing in fast now, and it was growing dusk. It was very dark in the alcove, and Arthur Augustus could not restrain a shudder as he suddenly remembered that it was Christmas Eve—and the memory of the Curse of the D'Arcys flashed in his mind.

It was all rot, of course, but—

Almost mechanically Arthur Augustus turned the knob of the door. To his great amazement the door opened—it was not locked after all!

Arthur Augustus stared along the short passage beyond. It was panelled in oak, black with age, and was dark and dismal. At the far end was the narrow staircase leading up to the old, disused attics. On a little landing facing him was a small window, half the panes covered on the outside by banked snow. Above the snow a few stars showed against the darkening sky.

Despite himself, Arthur Augustus shivered again. Somehow he felt a strange feeling of fear—of foreboding—stealing over him. Possibly it was at the thoughts of the legend and the Curse! The thirteenth generation the legend had said—when the ghost of his evil ancestor walked abroad at Christmastide. Well, it was Christmastide now—Christmas Eve! And the ghost had been seen by more than one person. There could be no doubting the evidence of so many.

Arthur Augustus shook himself and set his teeth. He was not going to be frightened by such rot! And just then he caught sight of something on the floor, gloomy as it was in the passage.

It was a small object wrapped in paper. He stooped and picked it up. Then he jumped.

The object was toffee—a piece of sticky toffee wrapped in paper. Gussy knew at once where it had come from. The night before he had seen Baggy Trimble take a handful of toffees from his jacket pocket and ram them into his pyjama-coat pocket—obviously to eat in bed. Gussy had "jawed" Baggy about eating toffee in bed, and for going to bed with sticky hands and face. Trimble had told him to shut up, and he had shut up!

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And now here was one of the toffees on the floor of the forbidden passage behind the door that should have been locked—had been locked that morning, in fact. What did it mean? Had Baggy been here, and had he dropped the toffee from his pyjama-coat pocket somehow?

Arthur Augustus knew instinctively that he had. And at the thought all Gussy's own fears and forebodings fled. He fairly tingled with excitement.

He felt feverishly in his pocket for matches. But he had none with him as it happened, and he hurried back to his bed-room for his electric torch. The thought came to him to go down and report his discovery to his chums, but he dismissed it, not wishing to disturb them from their seats by the cosy fire, until he had made a more certain and satisfying discovery.

In a few seconds Gussy was back at the door in the alcove. He passed through, and started to search eagerly. Almost at once he found another of the paper-covered sweets, and then another nearly at the end of the passage.

"Thwee!" murmured Arthur Augustus, his eyes dancing with excitement. "Bai Jove! I weally cannot imagine Twimble dwoppin' three sweets without knowin' about it and stoppin' to pick them up. That is not like Twimble. It would almost seem as if he was bein' cawwied when he dwopped them. It is vewy remarkable."

It certainly was. But Arthur Augustus found no more sweets after that. He searched along the passage, and even up the narrow flight of stairs, warily avoiding weak spots in the floorboards.

"Bai Jove!" he muttered in disappointment. "I seem to be stumped. I had bettah visit the attics and— Bai Jove!"

A sudden bright idea struck Gussy then, and he shone the light from his torch on the stairs. They were thick with the dust of ages—undisturbed save for his own foot-prints!

The meaning of his discovery was born in upon Gussy's mind very quickly.

Nobody but himself had been up those stairs for years!

Arthur Augustus had always prided himself on his detective abilities, and he certainly showed no little ability on this occasion. He ascended the flight of stairs and began to subject the floor of the passage to a careful scrutiny.

It was the same there for some distance from the stairs. Only his own footprints showed on the thick dust. He moved on—and then his eyes gleamed.

Other footprints were there—the footprints of a man. They were flat, and appeared to be those of a man wearing slippers or heeless boots or shoes. They began half way down the passage and ended at the door, going both ways; and they were numerous.

Then if Baggy had passed that way he had undoubtedly been carried.

But why did the flat footprints end and begin half-way down the passage? The eyes of Arthur Augustus gleamed with excitement. He fancied he could guess.

He began to examine the spot. A few more flashes of the light on the floor, and then he began to examine the panelled wall.

He saw something interesting at once.

A little higher than half-way up the moulding of one of the panels he saw four clear finger-prints. He touched them and found they were sticky.

Trimble's!

They were firmly impressed on the moulding, but there was not a mark on the panel itself. And they were sideways—as if Trimble, if it was Trimble; and Gussy did not doubt it—had clutched at the side as he passed through.

What did that mean?

It was a secret panel, undoubtedly, and if Trimble had passed through he had been a prisoner.

Gussy started instantly to examine the panelling, pushing and pressing at projecting knobs and curves of the carving.

He found it sooner than he had expected—a sudden click came, and then the panel moved a fraction of an inch. He pushed and pressed, and suddenly it shot back with a suddenness that almost caused him to overbalance.

Arthur Augustus panted.

Before him was a black orifice. He guessed—he knew—that before him was the way that led to the secret room—the room that the ancient legend spoke of.

What mystery lay beyond? The thought of the dread Curse sent the blood rushing to the junior's heart in that moment of excited discovery. It all came back to him in a flood then, and he glanced fearfully about him; he could not help himself. It was Christmas Eve, and he was in a lonely part of the house—far away from aid if he needed it. His imagination conjured up the form and face of Sir Ralph—he looked round swiftly half expecting to see the evil Cavalier behind him.

A sudden rush of terror took possession of the junior in that moment, and he trembled violently. But it passed, and after another moment's hesitation he set his teeth, biting his lip until the blood came. Then, with sudden

resolution, he shone the light of his torch through the hole.

But to his surprise—and momentary disappointment—only a blank stone wall was revealed. Then he saw that it was the wall of a passage—he sighted the stone floor the next instant.

Arthur Augustus took a grip of his nerves and stepped through, and his feet touched the floor of stone. And then it happened—swiftly, unexpectedly.

Even as his feet touched, the floor seemed to drop away from him. An involuntary yell of sheer terror escaped the hapless junior as he felt himself falling headlong, and then—

Crash!

He fell upon something with a force that half-stunned him, and he fancied he heard a cry. Then his dazed senses reeled as a figure stood over him—the ominous, dreadful figure of a Cavalier of old in plumed hat and cloak! It was only a glimpse that he had, for even as he opened his mouth to shout, a hand was clapped over it—a human hand, stifling him. Then Gussy's senses left him.

It was cosy and warm in the lounge hall. A huge log fire crackled in the ancient fireplace, and the leaping flames danced and flickered on the black panelling, and on the smiling faces of the group of youthful figures sitting at ease round the fire. In the firelight their faces looked as bright as the shining holly leaves and berries that lent such a festive air to the ancient apartment.

Lowther was amusing the company with funny stories when a tall form suddenly entered the lounge. It was Lord Eastwood, and he carried a telegram in his hand. His face was grave.

"You—you've heard from Trimble's father, sir?" asked Tom Merry breathlessly.

"Yes—I scarcely expected to get a reply so soon on Christmas Eve. But—but it is as we feared. The boy has not returned home. His father knows nothing of his whereabouts, apparently. Is Arthur here?"

"Arthur— Oh! Where—where is Arthur?" gasped Cousin Ethel. "Why, he went out nearly an hour ago!"

"My hat!"

The juniors looked around the circle of faces in the firelight—and only then did they miss Arthur Augustus.

"It's queer!" said Tom Merry, a sudden unaccountable feeling of alarm taking possession of him. "Where—where is old Gussy? He went upstairs to clean himself up; but he should have been back ages ago. Have you seen him, Wally?"

Wally shook his head—for once, the scamp of the Third looked strangely frightened.

"I haven't seen him since he chased us out!" he said.

"What is that?" demanded the earl, a sudden tremble in his voice. "You—you say that Arthur should be here?"

Tom Merry got up.

"He's all right, sir—certain to be!" he said, though his own voice was not quite steady. "He usually takes a long time to change. Perhaps he's rather waxy because we all laughed so much at him. I—I'll run up now for him."

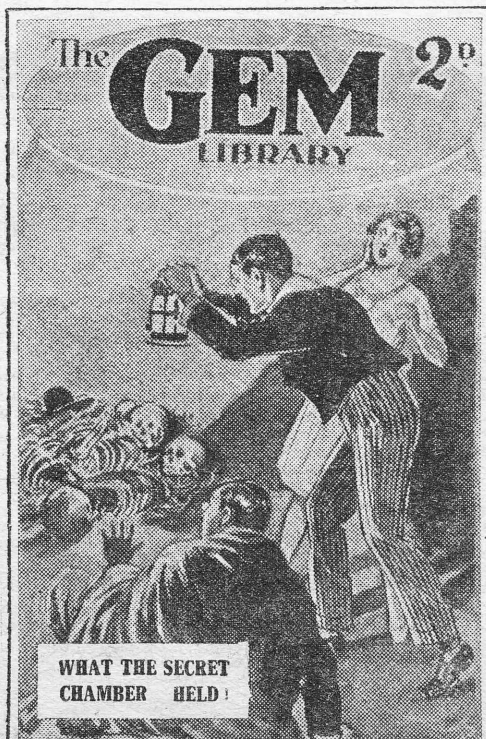
"And I'll come, too!" said Blake shakily. "He—he's all right, of course."

They both hurried from the room. In their own minds they felt quite certain that Gussy—whether on his high horse or not—would never leave his guests for long alone; he would sink his own feelings rather than risk being unmannerly in any way. Something had happened to him! But what?

In the minds of both juniors was a horrifying fear—they could not help it. It was Christmas Eve. Little as they believed in ghosts and the dread Curse, they simply could not dismiss it from their minds as they tore upstairs, without voicing their fears to each other.

They rushed along the passage to Gussy's bed-room, and switched on the light. The room was empty. They ran next to his own snuggery—perhaps he was reading there? But Arthur Augustus was not there. From room to room they ran with growing uneasiness and fear.

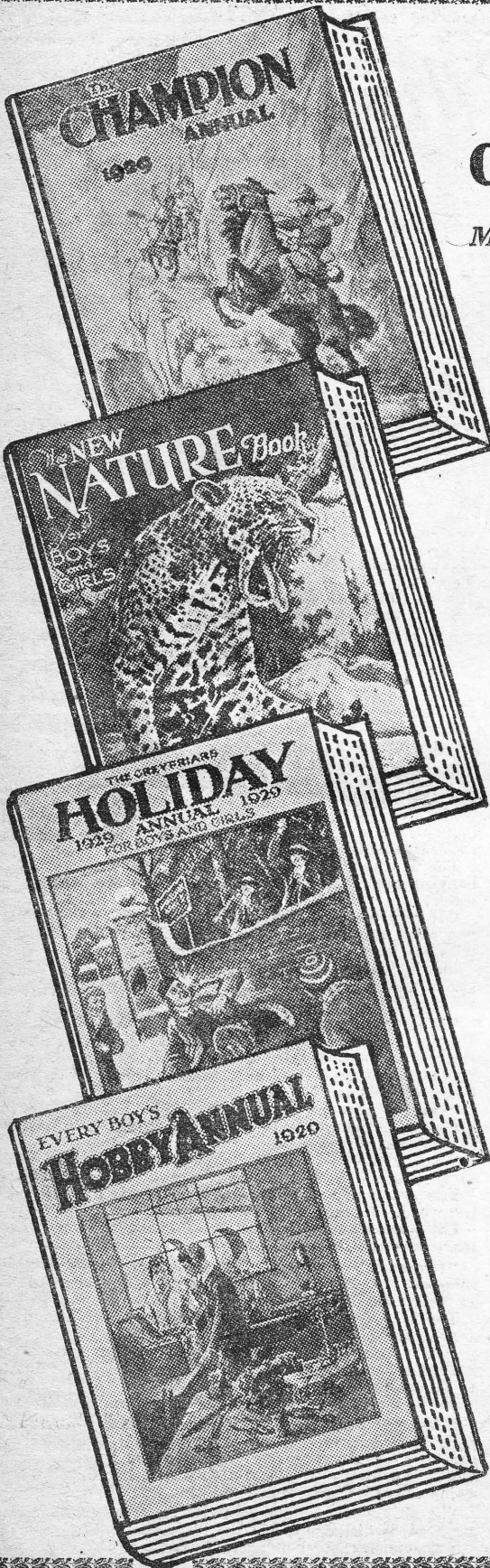
(Continued on page 23.)



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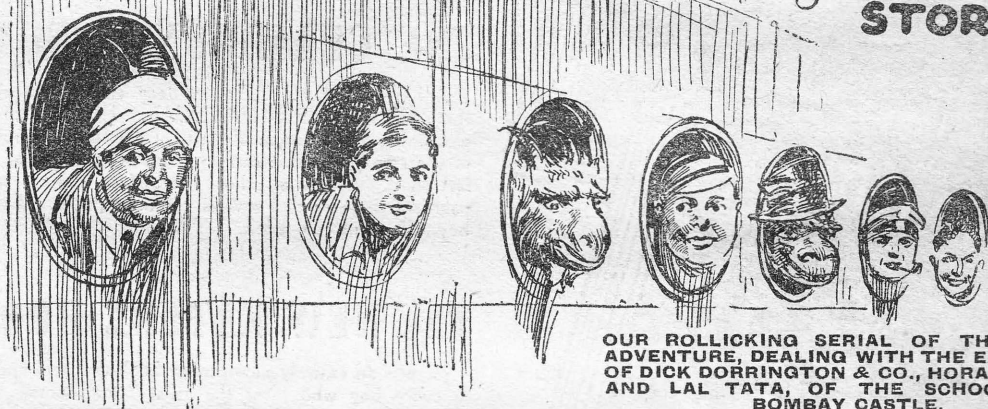
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Then, having scrubbed down the decks, they commenced to hoist Gus, the crocodile, out of the engine-room in his cricket bag.

Cecil, who was chewing a biscuit, grunted as he looked astern.

Two black triangular fins were slipping through the water side by side, keeping station with the boat as she moved through the water.

"Now, that's a funny thing about ole Cecil!" said Mr. Pugsley. "He was the first to spot that brace of kippers chasing us up. I've noticed that Cecil's got the best eye for a shark in the Bombay Castle. 'E can see a shark afore a Malay look-out or a Chink—which is very strange, considerin' that orang ortangs don't swim in the sea, and sharks don't live up trees. But there y'are!" added Mr. Pugsley. "The ways o' Nature are strange and mysterious, as the showman said when 'e sewed up the pig in a lion's skin and called it the larfin' hyena!"

Gus was dragged out of his cricket bag, smelling a bit musky, and he lay still whilst the boys scrubbed him with deck scrubs well loaded with sand and soft soap.

"Lummy!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley in admiration. "Ole Gus, 'e's coming up like a new shilling! Y'know, boys, I don't believe that cricket bag life is good for Gus. 'E's like a City man that gets too much feedin' and not enough exercise. Shouldn't be at all surprised if we don't open that bag one of these fine days and find 'im dead of fat 'eart, or something of the sort. Now, mind you don't scrub any of that sand or sooji-mooji into 'is eyes. 'E might wake up and get a bit too lively."

"You needn't be afraid of that," said Dick Dorrington. "The eyes of the crocodile are protected with horny plates. Gus wouldn't know it even if he had a half-brick in his eye!"

"Get over!" added Dick, giving Gus a prod with the end of a mop-handle in the stomach.

Dick thought he knew all about crocodiles. But he did not know that a jab in the stomach at that particular point was the one thing that would tickle Gus up and make him wag his tail.

Gus, at the prod, could not help giving a switch with his tail; and a cry of horror went up as it cut Dick's legs from under him, and over he went into the sea.

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"Good lord! Those sharks!" gasped Mr. Pugsley, stopping his engine and putting it into reverse.

It was too late to get Dick. He was swimming well astern, for the launch was doing a good stroke through the water.

And Cecil, seeing him go, had made a sudden dive over-side, followed by Hamish McCosh and Angus Macpherson, who had whipped out their dirks as they dived.

Mr. Pugsley, his face white as a sheet, was steering the launch now in a circle, trying to get between the boys and those two sinister fins.

The sharks, wary at the stopping of the engines, were hanging back from the four heads that were bobbing in the water.

"If any more o' you boys go over I'll cow'ide you till you can't stand for a week!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley, as, with set jaws, he steered the launch to cut off the sharks.

Mr. Lal Tata, sitting on the cabin-top, was wringing his hands and chewing the tail of his turban in an agony of anticipation.

"Whatcher cryin' about, ole Fat Chops?" demanded Mr. Pugsley, with a snap in his voice, forgetting his usual respectful address to Mr. Lal Tata. "That's the worst o' you black beggars—you always start crying when there's a bit of trouble on!"

"Oh, the poor boys!" exclaimed Mr. Lal Tata, wringing his hands. "They will be swallowed up by these horridsome sharks—like Jonah!"

"Never you mind about Jonah!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley, as the launch neared the sharks and the swimming boys. "You get ready to shove ole Gus overboard when I give the word. Launch 'im like a torpedo."

Lal turned and looked at Mr. Pugsley in surprise, as the tears poured down his fat cheeks.

"Crocodile's the only thing that a shark's afraid of!" snapped Mr. Pugsley. "Gus 'as got the chance of 'is life to show what 'e's made of!"

The boys hastily surrounded Gus and laid him ready to shove overboard.

If Gus could have worn any expression but that of intense malignity and rascality it would have been one of surprise at this moment.

In the water the boys had bunched round Cecil.

"Angus!" said Hamish, swimming, dirk in hand, "get ye behind me, wi' the other laddies and auld Cecil. Gin one o' these durruy dogs comes nigh, I'll dive and gi'e him a jab in the waistcoat that'll gi'e him hiccups! Ye'll watch the other beastie and pu' him out!"

The sharks were closing in on the little group now. At some yards distance one of the black fins disappeared.

The launch came tearing towards them.

"We can't pick 'em up!" cried Mr. Pugsley. "Slap them the lifebuoys and stand by with the crocodile!"

Gus hesitated for a second on the gommel as the launch passed between the boys and the sharks.

"Slip!" roared Mr. Pugsley.

Four oarblades were thrust under Gus, and he was shot over the side with a mighty splash, disappearing in the foam of the launch's wake, where four lifebuoys lay floating.

Then a few yards from the boys there arose something like a dogfight in a fountain of spray.

Rare old Gus, hitting the water, had felt himself stung up by something like an electric shock. He tingled all over, and he sensed sharks and the salt in the water.

A crocodile will always go for a shark, as the gentleman discovered when he had been bathing at the mouth of a river near the Solomon Islands.

"There are no sharks about here, I notice," said the gentleman, as he dried himself with his bath towel.

"No," answered the native who was attending him.

"Shark him afraid of the crocodiles!"

The shark, which had dived to discover what a bit of Scotch beef was like, only had had a glimpse of Hamish, who had likewise dived, dirk in his grip, and was kicking down below the green water.

Then something with great open jaws shot at the shark like a torpedo. The jaws closed with a crunch on his white waistcoat three feet down from his own hungry jaws.

Two clawed feet bit into him, and, before Jack Shark knew where he was, he found himself in the grip of some creature which was stronger and more ferocious than himself.

It was indeed Gus' day out.

The second shark sheered off as the two rolled over and over in the water, which gradually became tinged with a crimson hue as Gus fought that shark.

A cheer went up from the launch as she came backing down on the four swimmers, for Hamish had come up shaking water out of his eyes and flourishing his unused dirk.

"Boys," said Hamish, as he grabbed a lifebuoy, "it's a more thrillin' spectacle than a footba' match! Gus is simply pu'ing that pair beast o' a shark limb fra limb!"

"You'd best come aboard afore ole Gus turns on you!" said Mr. Pugsley, leaning over the side and hauling Hamish aboard by the scruff of his neck.

At that moment Cecil, with his battered topper jammed over his ears and his pockets full of water, climbed over the gommel like a huge spider, and picked up the bit of biscuit he had carefully dropped on deck before he had plunged to the rescue.

Then Dick climbed on board, regarding Mr. Pugsley with a rather doubtful eye, as he felt that he was the cause of all this excitement.

"How did you manage that?" was all that Mr. Pugsley asked.

"Why, I gave old Gus a prod with the mop-handle and touched the button somewheres," said Dick. "He switched his tail, and over I went!"

"Well, all's well that ends well, as the monkey said when 'e coughed up the sixpence he'd swallowed," said Mr. Pugsley; "but don't you jab that croc in the slats again. And I consider that it was very sportin' of ole Cecil to go over after you in that fashion—very sportin', seein' that 'e don't like water any better than an Eyetalian!"

Cecil held out his paw to Dick, who shook it heartily.

"I'll stand you a new rig-out for that, Cecil," said Dick gratefully; "and, by George, you need it! That old Eton suit of yours has been through something!"

"I've got the very thing, Dick!" piped up Conkey Ikestein. "It's down below, a complete suit I bought from Willie Waffles, because he says that it is old-fashioned and the nuts at Eton are not wearing 'em now. There's a new shiny topper in a leather box, and I'll chuck that in."

"What are you doing with an Eton suit aboard?" asked Dick, in astonishment.

"Upon my word, Conk, you beat the band!"

"Why, Dick," answered Conky, "you see, it's like this. I thought I might trade it off for some pearls, or something, with one of these little sultans. They are very fond of wearing European clothes, and they like 'em with silk linings. But from the way we were received by the Sultan of Bungalow I think that there is nothing doing. So you can have the suit and welcome for old Cecil as a swap for your cricket bat and half

nicker, and it's dirt cheap at the price! 'Pon my word, Dick," added Conky earnestly, "it's a lovely suit! Willie Waffles has his clothes made for him by one of the posh tailors in the West End, and I wouldn't let it go at such a sacrifice if it wasn't for old Cecil!"

"All right!" said Dick, surveying Cecil. "It's about time that Cecil had a new rig. He looks awful with that old gunny sack sewed across the seat of his trousers. Come down below, Cecil, and I'll rig you up like a perfect little gentleman. You'll look like some swell waff from an Eastbourne private school!"

Cecil went down below, and his eyes gleamed when Conk produced a really fine Eton suit, throwing in a white shirt and a clean collar, and stealing a pair of thunder-and-lightning socks out of Algy Cuffs' trousseau.

Soon Cecil was rigged up in his new suit, and his delight was unbounded when, out of a leather hat box, Conkey produced the shiniest silk topper that ever found its way into the Eastern seas.

Cecil was cheered again and again when he climbed up on deck, looking as smart as a Bond Street nut.

He stood on the cabin top, perching the shiny topper on his hideous head, looking round for some sign of old Gus.

The shark had disappeared. The crimson blood had faded out of the blue water. There was not a sign of a shark in the sea, and not a sign of a crocodile, as Mr. Pugsley, running dead slow, cruised around trying to pick up their mascot.

"Keep your eyes open for ole Gus, Cecil!" he called. "As likely as not, tasin' blood an' liberty, 'e's gone off on a shark-unt on his own. I misdoubt but that we've lost 'im for ever. You boys'll have to get another crocodile to stow in that bag o' foolishness that you've carried round so long."

The boys were rather depressed. They gathered in the bow, looking round for some sign of Gus.

Mr. Pugsley, turning the wheel, quartered the sea carefully, blinking his eyes in the sun glare.

"I've swept mines and I've chased whales," he muttered; "but this is the firs' time I've ever gone crocodile cruisin'. Keep your eyes open, Cecil. Remember that you are the star look-out of the ship."

Cecil shaded his eyes against the sun.

Suddenly he gave a sort of coughing grunt, which was his way of giving the signal. "There she blows!" and pointed with his paw to the starboard bow.

Mr. Pugsley altered course and slowed his engine, and sure enough there was old Gus, paddling about three feet below the surface of the deep blue sea, looking for all the world like a prehistoric monster.

To sight Gus was one thing. To get hold of him was another.

Gus had tasted liberty and shark, and the sting and tang of the sea water had made him feel as lively as a lizard after his long slumbers in the cricket-bag.

Mr. Pugsley bade the boys run a couple of running-nooses in some light line that was handy, and to stand-by to lasso the old companion when they saw the chance.

He edged the launch up close alongside Gus. But as soon as Gus saw the ropes, away he went with a sweep of his mighty tail, scrabbling his way through the calm sea with his paws.

"The dirty dog is out to give us some trouble!" said Mr. Pugsley. "I thought we'd have a to-do to get him again. Stands to reason, too! He's like a chap out of gaol!"

Half a dozen attempts were made to come alongside Gus and to lasso him, but Gus evaded every effort to capture him.

He would allow the launch to touch his scaly sides, then he would dive under her keel and pop up the other side, or he would sheer off with a wicked look in his evil eyes.

At last Mr. Pugsley, tiring of this game of tip-and-run, stopped his engines and allowed the launch to drift on the azure main alongside the runaway.

"What are we going to do about him?" he asked. "It's plain that 'e's made up 'is mind to play the wag from the school, and we might stand by him all day without getting him! What about it? 'E's evidently cocked his hat and gone gay!"

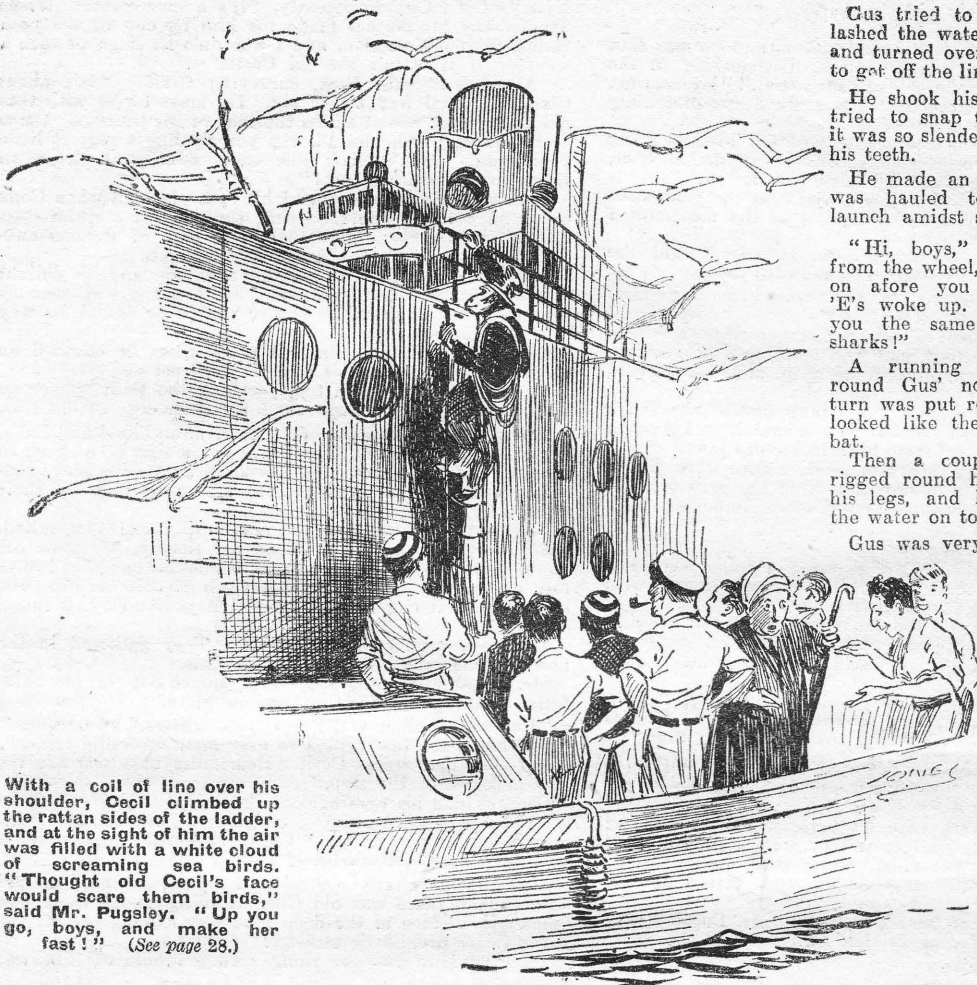
"What about trying him with a bit of salt beef?" suggested Skeleton. "Gus is very fond of a bit of salt beef!"

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INTRODUCTION.

Dick Dorrington & Co., of the school ship *Bombay Castle*, together with their master, Mr. Lal Tata, are detailed to search for a shipload of movie actors who have mysteriously disappeared somewhere within the vicinity of the pirate-infested waters of the Archipelagoes of Pahang. In addition to the crew are the ship's pets—Herc, the goat, Gus, the crocodile, and Cecil, the ape. On nearing Bungalow the boys are captured by pirates and taken before the sultan, who falsely accuses them of smuggling, and imprisons them in a leopard's cage in the palace courtyard. They are rescued from their perilous position by the ship's pets and John Henry, the sultan's sacred elephant, who proves to be an old friend of Mr. Pugsley, the *Bombay Castle*'s gunner. In possession of a choice selection of weapons and a locked chest taken from the sultan's bedroom, the *Bombay Castle* party reach their boat in safety. Then they race away from the Island of Bungalow. Aroused from their slumbers early next morning, the boys discover two huge cobras in their cabin. Taking careful aim with his catapult, Chip Progers slays the unwelcome visitors and throws them overboard. After a hearty breakfast the chums prepare to "scrub decks."

(Now Read On.)



With a coil of line over his shoulder, Cecil climbed up the rattan sides of the ladder, and at the sight of him the air was filled with a white cloud of screaming sea birds. "Thought old Cecil's face would scare them birds," said Mr. Pugsley. "Up you go, boys, and make her fast!" (See page 28.)

"But 'e won't take it!" said Mr. Pugsley. "'E's full up o' shark!"

"It doesn't follow that he can't find room for a bit of beef," answered Skeleton. "There's plenty of times when I don't want any more meat and I find I've got a corner for a bit of pudding!"

"You've said it," replied Mr. Pugsley. "See if you can get 'im with a bit out of the harness cask. Try him with that tough-looking, rubbery bit with the yellow fat that's on the top. I'd sooner that Gus had it than me!"

Skeleton went down into the fore hold and came up with a couple of mouldy-looking bits of beef from the top of the harness cask.

"We've got to attract him, you know!" said he, as he fastened the first bit of rubbery salt horse to a pair of corks and shoved it off towards Gus.

Gus was a bit suspicious of the beef at first. He suspected that the beef was some dark and dirty trick to lure him back into his cricket-bag prison.

But the scent of the beef overcame him. He made a sudden rush through the water like a duck.

Snap!

Gus swallowed the beef.

"Coo lummy!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley. "What a mouth for a tart!"

Skeleton tied the other chunk of beef to a stout fishing-line of oiled silk, threading it through and through with a packing-needle.

It was a good bit of line, strong enough to hold the crocodile, and, when the beef was dropped into the sea, Gus could not see the slender line.

His suspicions were disarmed by the easy bolting of the first delightful mouthful, and he shot close alongside the launch and swallowed the second.

"Got him!" said Skeleton delightedly. "Lay hold, boys! This is better sport than catching tiddlers!"

Gus tried to go backwards. He lashed the water with his great tail and turned over on his back, trying to get off the line.

He shook his head violently and tried to snap the tough line. But it was so slender that it fell between his teeth.

He made an angry roaring as he was hauled to the side of the launch amidst shouts of laughter.

"Hi, boys," called Mr. Pugsley from the wheel, "you put 'is muzzle on afore you bring him aboard! 'E's woke up. May treat some of you the same as 'e treated the sharks!"

A running noose was slipped round Gus' nose, and turn after turn was put round it till his jaws looked like the handle of a cricket bat.

Then a couple of hitches were rigged round his stomach, between his legs, and he was hoisted from the water on to the deck.

Gus was very much annoyed.

First he tried to run forward and to dash over the bows into the sea again. But a smack on the nose with a cricket bat caused him to back astern.

"Here, I don't want 'im with me!" called Mr. Pugsley. "Get him into his cricket bag!"

The cricket bag was laid alongside Gus, and the boys prepared to hoist him in it. But the scent of his old home made Gus struggle like a pickpocket being taken to the station.

He lashed out with his claws and tail, sending the boys flying right and left.

"Get hold of him, Cecil!" cried Dick.

Only Cecil's enormous strength could tackle Gus. He seized Gus round the body and tried to shove his nose into the opening of the cricket bag.

Gus struggled and writhed. He was wet and slippery from the sea. He rose in Cecil's arms and knocked his new and shiny topper from his head. Then he shot out of Cecil's grip like a bit of wet soap, brought his tail down with a bang like a sledge-hammer on deck, and slid down the cabin companion with a heavy thump.

Cecil picked up his hat and looked down the companion.

Then he looked at his posh new hat, which was knocked as flat as a pancake.

The boys roared with laughter at the rueful expression on old Cecil's face. Cecil could never keep a topper for more than a day.

But their laughter was cut short by a dismal howling from the cabin.

"Goodness!" exclaimed Dick. "Blowed if old Gus hasn't got into bed with Lal!"

The Deserted Liner!

"HELP, boys! Help!" cried the voice of Mr. Lal Tata from the cabin.

"What's the matter, sir?" demanded Dick Dorrington.

"The crocodile has devoured my boots," answered Mr. Lal Tata. "Now he is devouring my trousers. Next he will devour me."

The boys peeped through the skylight.

Lal, who had perspired freely during the fight with the sharks, had gone down to change his clothes. Gus had

shot down into the cabin whilst Lal was making his toilet and, rendered lively by his recent sea bath, had snapped up Lal's boots and coat. Now his trousers were hanging out of Gus' mouth, whilst Gus turned a loving eye upwards on Lal himself who was crouching in a top berth.

"Get the brute out of the cabin, boys," pleaded Lal, "or he will devour me like hot dogs! He is full of wickedness!"

The boys swiftly got a hitch round Gus' tail. The line was passed through a pulley, and Gus was dragged out on deck, made fast, and piled into his cricket-bag.

Mr. Lal Tata cautiously put his head up the companion hatch when he heard that all was safe.

"Did you get my trousers, boys?" he asked.

"No, sir. He swallowed them just as we were hiking him out," said Pongo Walker, grinning.

"Then he has swallowed all my keys, and six pounds fourteen shillings and threepence of my own, and two pounds three-and-fourpence which belongs to the Boy Scouts!" said Mr. Lal Tata.

"Why, old Gus is a regular savings-bank!" said Dick cheerfully.

"And he has swallowed my impot book!" said Mr. Lal Tata.

A tremendous cheer went up from the Glory Hole Gang at this glad news. In Lal's impot book were recorded all their misdemeanours and punishments, which would go down in their half-yearly reports.

And Gus had swallowed the lot, leaving them all with a clean slate.

"Three cheers for Gus!" cried Jim Handyman.

Three cheers were given as heartily as if Gus had secured a week's holiday.

Immediately after breakfast was over and all hands had washed up, Canjee Island loomed up through the heat haze which was gathering on the horizon of the oily sea.

It was a craggy, lumpy sort of island, rising straight from the sea in square cliffs.

"Almost reminds you of Margate, don't it, boys?" said Mr. Pugsley. Then he sighed. Good ole Margate!" he added. "Wish I could see it on the port bow."

Mr. Pugsley had given Canjee Island a bad name, and there is always interest attaching to a bad name.

"It's a proper pirates' 'ome," said he. "Always has been and always will be, so long as there is a chance of piratin' on the sea. In the ole days those Canjee merchants used to lie hid up in those cliffs, which are full o' deep bays, and they would wait for the south-bound junks, full o' tea and silk. And then—what-ho!"

"Do they pirate to-day, Puggo?" asked Dick, who was always greatly interested in pirates.

"Give 'em a chance, and those cliffs would turn out pirate prahus like a first 'ouse turning out of a movie shop on a Saturday night!" replied Mr. Pugsley. "But we are all right, unless our engine 'appened to break down. All the same, we won't look in too close!"

Mr. Pugsley stood off a point or two as they neared Canjee Island, the shadows of whose white cliffs in the perpendicular sun giving them a ghostly effect, so that, with the heat haze, it looked like a painted island on a painted ocean.

"Is there anything lives on the island, Puggo?" asked Jim Handyman.

"Goats an' snakes!" answered Mr. Pugsley, with the promptitude of a geographical directory. "And they do say that the goats live on the snakes and the snakes live on the goats, and so they live 'by takin' in each other for lodgers. I don't think that I could fancy a bit of goat that lived on snakes!" said Mr. Pugsley, taking a side look at Horace, who was sitting on the cabin top basking in the sun.

Horace soon became aware of the proximity of land. He lifted his head, sniffed the air, and bleated.

"There y'are," said Mr. Pugsley triumphantly. "Ole 'Orace can sniff some of 'is trustics ashore; he can sniff 'em in the breeze at a distance o' four miles, just the same way as you can smell the orange-blossom when you are steamin' along the coast o' Sicily."

The D.S.B. slowly rounded a headland, abrupt and precipitous. Mr. Pugsley gave a sudden exclamation as they entered the deep bay beyond.

For there lay a steamship of about three thousand tons looking infinitely forlorn—deserted!

Her paint was faded, her wire rigging was gone. She looked stripped bare, not with the stripping of the sea which takes some things and leaves others, but with the systematic stripping of a shipyard.

"The Star of the East!" exclaimed the boys in chorus. "Wrecked!" they added.

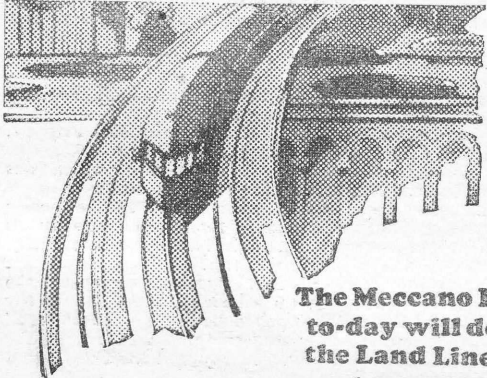
"Not so, gentle boys!" said Mr. Pugsley, who had picked

(Continued on next page.)



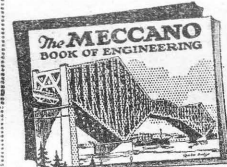
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up his glasses and was studying the stripped hull. "That's not the Star of the East, and she's not wrecked. She is swinging to her anchors, and if my eye is not out this morning, yonder is the ole Rosy Morn that was sold to the Siamese after the War and rechristened the Menam, after their big river. She was supposed to have gone down three years ago in the big hurricane, but I can see the sort of hurricane that she struck! Her engines broke down or she shipped a gang of pirates as passengers. And she's got proper amongst the lads of the village."

Mr. Pugsley searched the bay with his glasses.

"We will have a look in on her," said he.

Mr. Pugsley changed course and headed towards the ship. "Get up the arms, boys," said he; "forewarned is forearmed, as the monkey said when 'e smelled the tiger and went up a tree."

The boys quickly shipped the quickfirer, and rifles and ammunition were brought up from their hiding-place beneath the floor of the engine-room.

In a few minutes the D.S.B. became an armed cruiser.

Cecil, seeing these warlike preparations, dived down below and brought up the great carved club which a South Sea chief had given him.

Both the bay and the ship looked incredibly lonely as they came in.

The paint of the deserted boat was blistered off the hull, and lines of seabirds whitened her rail.

"There's no one aboard to hurt us," said Mr. Pugsley, "or those birds wouldn't be sitting there!"

And he headed boldly towards the steamer, which was swinging to her anchors half a mile from the cliffs.

Never had the boys seen a ship more systematically stripped. Everything was gone. Even the brass-steam whistle and the siren were missing. Not a bit of rigging, not a life-belt or a ship fitting was left.

"Coo-jumpy!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley, surveying the hulk. "They've cleaned 'er up all right, and I should say our young friend the sultan touched 'is commission on 'er!"

He steamed round the stern and saw that the name of the ship had been obliterated. Then he brought the D.S.B. to a standstill a few yards from the blistered sides.

"There you are, boys," said he, pointing to a rattan ladder that was hooked to the rail. "The rascals have taken the trouble to paint out her name, and yet they leave one of their rascally scaling ladders hanging on her!"

He brought the launch alongside the ladder. "Don't trust the rungs, boys," said he. "Let ole Cecil go up it with a line, and he can pull up our own monkey ladder!"

Cecil understood perfectly. With a coil of line over his shoulder he climbed up the rattan sides of the ladder, and at the sight of him on deck the air was filled with a white cloud of screaming sea birds.

"Thought ole Cecil's dial would scare them birds," said Mr. Pugsley, with a grin. "Up you go, boys, and make 'er fast!"

(That some mystery surrounds this deserted liner the chums of the Bombay Castle are convinced. Now it's their job to find out what that mystery is. Mind you read next Wednesday's fine instalment, boys, for it simply teems with thrills.)

"THE CURSE OF THE D'ARCYS!"

(Continued from page 22.)

Where was Gussy? He was in none of the bed-rooms allotted to the St. Jim's juniors. He was not in his den, or in any room for that matter. The juniors rushed downstairs again—to find that the others had been searching the drawing-room, dining-room, and the other apartments on the ground floor.

"Well?" demanded Lord Eastwood.

"He—he isn't upstairs, sir!" said Tom. "I—we can't quite understand it!"

There was a startled gasp. The guests looked at each other with scared, white faces.

"He—he must be somewhere about!" whispered Cousin Ethel.

Lord Eastwood set his lips—the muscles of his face twitched slightly.

"I will order the servants to search the house at once!" he said.

He hurried away. The group of scared guests buzzed with excited, scared conjecture.

"We musn't stand here doing nothing, chaps!" said Tom Merry, in a husky voice. "For goodness' sake put that rotten ghost and legend out of your minds! Gussy's about somewhere safe enough, and we're going to find him—and Trimble, too. Separate into twos and make a start—at once!"

It was done—Tom Merry & Co., Wally & Co., and Figgins & Co., not to mention the girls, were only too eager to help. Soon all over the great house lights were blazing, and all was bustle and excitement. For the second time that day the house was searched from top to bottom—and for the second time that day the searchers met with failure—stark failure! Even then Lord Eastwood was not satisfied. He ordered another search of the house—Barton, the aged butler, was not at hand, but the efficient and ever handy James was, and he superintended the domestic staff in the search, while Tom Merry took charge of the guests. But again it came to nothing. Arthur Augustus had disappeared as unaccountably and mysteriously as had Baggy Trimble.

Trimble had gone—now Arthur Augustus D'Arcy! With growing apprehension in their faces, Tom Merry and his helpers kept at it—searching, though they knew in their hearts it was hopeless.

Gussy was gone—where? What had happened to him and to Trimble? That the appearance of the ghost of the evil Sir Ralph D'Arcy of Cavalier days had some connection with the disappearance of the two juniors none of the St. Jim's party would openly admit. But for all that, the dread legend of the Curse of the D'Arcys was in the minds of all that gloomy Christmas Eve.

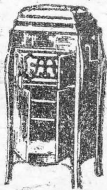
THE END.

(Be sure you read the magnificent sequel to this yarn, entitled: "THE MYSTERY OF EASTWOOD HOUSE!" which will appear in next week's bumper issue of the GEM. It is full of thrills and exciting situations, chums.)

26 DEPOSIT

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