

**"THE MYSTERY OF EASTWOOD HOUSE!"** THIS WEEK'S CHRISTMAS YARN  
OF THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S

The

# GEM

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EVERY  
WEDNESDAY.

**LIBRARY**



**A GRUESOME DISCOVERY  
IN THE SECRET ROOM!**

*(See the nerve-tingling story of Tom Merry  
& Co. in this issue.)*

A DRAMATIC COMPLETE TALE OF CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE—

# The MYSTERY of

While the rest of the world are making merry the chums of St. Jim's are busy solving the mystery of Eastwood House and the strange disappearance of some of their chums. And when that mystery is solved, and only then, will Tom Merry & Co. celebrate Christmas as it should be celebrated.

## CHAPTER 1.

### The Shadow of the Curse!

#### CHRISTMAS EVE!

Darkness had long ago settled down upon Eastwood House and the surrounding countryside. For days now the snow had been piled thick and white over the wide stretches of parkland, with deep drifts against the trunks of the leafless trees. And now, with the coming of night on that Christmas Eve, snow had started to fall again. Great flakes padded faintly against the stained-glass windows of the hall, driven there by the icy December wind that whistled round the old gabled roofs and twisted chimneys.

But inside the hall it was cosy enough. A huge log fire blazed and leaped in the wide, old-fashioned fireplace, the flames glimmering on ancient armour and age-old paneling. Holly and garlands decked walls and ceiling, giving the stately apartment quite a festive, Christ-mas-y air.

Only the faces of the company present on that Christmas Eve were not in keeping with the general air of festivity.

Little had Tom Merry & Co. thought, when they had accepted the invitation of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy to spend Christmas with him at Eastwood House, of the strange adventure into which they would soon be plunged.

The reflection came to Tom Merry now as he glanced round at the circle of white, anxious faces lit up by the flickering firelight.

It seemed strange that barely half an hour ago the Eastwood House guests had all been sitting round the fire cheerily eating roasted chestnuts and cracking jokes and telling stories. And now—

Gussy was gone! Arthur Augustus, their light-hearted and youthful host, had vanished just as mysteriously and unaccountably as Baggy Trimble, their fellow-guest at Eastwood House, had vanished from his bed-room the night before. From top to bottom the big house had been searched by servants and guests, and now the St. Jim's fellows, with Cousin Ethel and Doris Levison, had re-assembled in the hall after the search to report—failure.

Like the egregious Baggy Trimble, Gussy was gone. Where?

As Tom Merry looked round, Jack Blake met his eyes and spoke.

"Well, what's to be done now?" he said quietly. "We've searched the house from top to bottom, and it seems pretty hopeless, Tom. Wherever old Gussy is, he's not in the house."

"And I'm convinced that he is!" said Tom grimly. "There's something jolly fishy going on here, you fellows!"

"It—it almost seems as if there was something in that legend after all," said Monty Lowther, with a shiver. "You

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—you know what it says—that evil will befall the thirteenth generation of the D'Arcys when the ghost of the Cavalier walks at Christmastide. Well, the ghost's been seen by several. It was seen by Trimble, and—"

"Oh, dry up, Monty!" said Tom, almost angrily, with a warning glance in the direction of young Wally D'Arcy. "We don't believe in that rubbish—"

"You needn't be afraid of frightening me," said Wally, with a faint grin. "I don't believe in that tosh, although I belong to the giddy thirteenth generation. Old Gussy's been wandering round and lost himself as usual. As for Trimble—"

"Trimble's vanished, too," said Tom Merry impatiently; "yet the legend can't affect him at all. It's all rot. But something's wrong, for all that. I wasn't really much worried about Trimble at first. I thought the fat ass must have cleared out and gone home—afraid to stay here because of the ghost."

"But he left his clothes and everything behind!" said Manners.

"I know that. Still, I imagined he'd pinched somebody else's—or, I tried to tell myself that," said Tom, a trifle uneasily. "But now—well, we know now that Lord Eastwood has had a wire from Trimble's pater, saying he hasn't gone home. That looks as if he never left for home. It—it's queer!"

It was queer—all realised that only too well. In the flickering firelight even Tom Merry's own face showed white and troubled. Plainly enough the same thought was in the minds of all on that snowy Christmas Eve. Was the disappearance of Arthur Augustus, at all events, connected with

—FEATURING TOM MERRY & CO., THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S!

# EASTWOOD HOUSE!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD



the appearance of the ghost of Sir Ralph D'Arcy, the evil Cavalier, and the ancient curse of the D'Arcys?

As Tom finished speaking a tall, stately figure came into the hall from the library. It was Lord Eastwood, and Tom Merry felt a pang as he noted how pale and anxious the old earl looked.

The junior eyed him questioningly, and Lord Eastwood shook his head.

"I have telephoned to all the shops in the village," he said quietly. "Nothing has been seen or heard of Arthur in Easthorpe this evening. It is very strange indeed. Has Barton been in with his report yet, boys?"

"The butler—no, sir," answered Tom Merry. "I haven't seen him since dinner. He was not in charge of the servants during the search, sir."

Lord Eastwood frowned.

"Barton is old," he said. "I fear he is becoming unequal to his duties of late. However, if you see him perhaps you will kindly send him to me in the library."

"Oh, yes, sir. If—if we can do anything else——"

"I do not see what else can be done now," said the old earl dully. "You have searched the house thoroughly, and I have given instructions for the outside staff to search the grounds and park. We can only wait now until their report comes, my boys. But I see no reason to worry unduly as yet," added the earl, glancing in a troubled way over the assembly. "I am only very sorry indeed that this disquieting happening should have spoiled your holiday."

"We—we don't mind ourselves one bit, sir. Please do not think of us now," said Tom earnestly. "But I've been thinking, sir. Why not allow us to search the unused part of the west wing? Gussy—I mean, Arthur—might easily have gone exploring there——"

"But——"

"I know you have forbidden us to go there," said Tom hurriedly. "But this is a different matter, and we'll be careful—we promise that, sir."

Lord Eastwood frowned.

"Possibly you are right!" he said at last, a sudden gleam of hope in his eyes. "Arthur is sometimes very foolish and venturesome, though I cannot imagine him acting in defiance of my orders. I forbade the exploring of the old wing because it is decidedly dangerous. The floors are rotting away, and I did not wish to risk an accident. But—but——"

The old earl paused, and Tom Merry hastened to press forward his advantage.

"We needn't all go, sir!" he pleaded. "Just Blake, and Figgins, and myself. We'll take lights, and we'll be very careful indeed. Please let us try it, sir!"

"Very well!" said Lord Eastwood, after another pause. "In the circumstances perhaps a search there would be wise. Barton will give you the key, and I devoutly hope your efforts will meet with success."

He turned and left the hall, obviously disturbed and agitated.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"If Gussy's anywhere in the house that's where he'll be, you chaps!" he said. "It came to me just now. Perhaps Gussy's gone there exploring hoping to find some trace of Trimble, and—and perhaps he's met with an accident. If the floorboards are so rotten——"

"Phew! Yes, rather!"

"Why didn't we think of it before?" said Ethel Cleveland eagerly, her face alight with renewed hope.

"I'll come for one!" said Lowther.

"And count me in!" said Wally D'Arcy emphatically.

"Only Blake, Figgins, and myself go!" said Tom flatly. "Lord Eastwood gave permission to us only—that was understood. Come on—Hallo, here's James!"

There was a soft step in the hall, and one of the footmen came into the firelight.

"Any news, James?" demanded Tom.

"None, I regret to say, sir!" said James, bowing. "The grounds have been searched, and even now a party is searching the deer park. It is very difficult in the driving snow and wind, however. I myself, if I may be permitted to say so, do not think Master Arthur can have left the house."

"Why?"

"I have been all round the house, and found no trace of footprints!" said James. "In the short time since Master Arthur was last seen it is scarcely possible for the new fall of snow to have obliterated them."

"Phew! That's so!"

"If I might make a suggestion, sir——" went on James, with a slight cough.

"Well?"

"Master Arthur is a very venturesome young gentleman, sir!" said James. "Is it not possible that he has gone exploring the disused part of the west wing while searching for Master Trimble? Would it not be wise to go there and search for him?"

"I thought of that a few moments ago!" said Tom Merry.

"Lord Eastwood has just given us permission to go there and search. Where is the butler, James?"

"He is in his room, sir, I think," said the footman, a slight frown appearing on his usually impassive face. "He is unwell, and has been resting since dinner. If you wished to——"

"I only wanted the key of that door leading to the ruined wing," said Tom. "We'll call for it as we go up, James. You'd better report to Lord Eastwood in the library now."

"Very good, sir!"

The footman trod silently away towards the library, and Tom Merry turned to his chums.

"Come along, you fellows!" he said, his voice trembling with eagerness. "I really believe we've got on the right track, this time. If we don't find both Trimble and old Gussy there I'm a Dutchman. It's the only possible explanation of the mystery, anyway."

And with Blake and Figgins at his heels, Tom Merry led the way upstairs, his face lighted up with new hope. His conviction that somewhere in the ruined west wing was to be found the clue that would solve the mystery of the missing juniors, grew stronger with every passing moment. And Tom Merry was grimly determined that it should be found.

## CHAPTER 2.

### The Attack in the Dark!

TOM MERRY and his fellow investigators made straight for their rooms, where they got pocket-torches, for they knew the old disused rooms were not lighted by electricity or by gas. Then they hurried to the butler's room for the key. Owing to the

dangerous nature of the ruined wing, Lord Eastwood had had a door built across the passage leading to it, and this was always kept locked.

Tom knocked on the butler's door, and they waited patiently. But no answering call came. Apparently Barton was not in his room after all.

"James said he was in his room resting," said Tom, trying the door-knob impatiently. "Hallo, the door's locked! Oh, blow! What the dickens does the man want to sport his oak for, I wonder?"

"Gone down again by the other staircase, I suppose," said Blake.

"Perhaps he's gone off to the village on the razzle," said Figgins, with a faint grin. "I noticed James seemed a bit uncertain and queer when he mentioned him."

Tom shook his head.

"I hardly think so," he said. "Old Barton's been here all his life, and the family think no end of him."

"Well, Lord Eastwood's been grousing about him lately," said Blake. "He never seems to be about when he's wanted, and—"

"He's getting old," said Tom. "And James said he'd been unwell lately. It's not our business, anyway," he went on impatiently. "We want that key. No good all of us going down again, though. Cut down for it, Blake, and we'll wait by the door."

"Right-ho!"

Blake hurried away—eager enough to be of help in any way. It was not the time to argue. Tom Merry and Figgins made their way to the west wing, and soon they had reached the passage at the end of which was the door cutting off the ruined part from the rest of the house.

It was dark here, and Tom looked about in vain for a switch.

"No light apparently," he said briefly. "Come on—switch on your torch, Fig—What's that?"

Tom Merry broke off sharply.

From the far end of the passage ahead of them had come a slight sound.

Figgins drew in his breath sharply as he stared along the dark corridor. So startled were the two juniors, indeed, that neither had the presence of mind to switch on his pocket-torch. They stood perfectly still, staring into the blackness, their hearts thumping a little.

"There—there's something there!" breathed Figgins.

Tom Merry did not answer—yet he also had glimpsed a shapeless, ghostly figure in the deep gloom. Something lurked there—Tom glimpsed clearly a patch of moving white.

"I saw something, too!" he muttered. "It looked—My hat!"

Suddenly remembering his torch, Tom Merry moved his finger to switch it on. But even as he did so, something happened, as swiftly as it was unexpected.

There came a sudden alarmed yell from Figgins, and next instant a vaguely-seen form leapt at them from the gloom.

The torch went flying from Tom's hand, as fingers clutched at his throat, choking his wild, terrified yell into silence.

Only for a brief instant did Tom feel that fearful grip, the next moment he was sent crashing against the panelling.

There followed a sudden gasp in the darkness, and then a fall.

Crash!

The unknown, whoever he was, had fallen over Figgins, who had been sent headlong by that unexpected charge. Tom grasped this as Figgins' voice came in a wild yell from near at hand.

"Quick, Tommy! I've got him! Quick!"

Half-dazed and sickened, Tom Merry stood leaning against the panelling. But as he grasped the situation, the junior took a grip of himself, and flung himself at the figures struggling furiously at his feet.

But his intervention only seemed to make matters worse for Figgins, for it was impossible to see friend from foe in the darkness.

There followed a few seconds of blind scuffling and gasping, and then, even as Tom got a grip of the unknown, a sudden vicious blow sent him reeling backwards. Next moment there was a warning shout from Figgins, and then the sound of retreating footsteps.

Tom staggered to his feet just as the light at the end of the passage was snapped out, leaving them in total darkness.

"Gone through the house!" panted Figgins. "Phew! The fellow was strong as an ox! Let's have a light, Tommy, for goodness' sake!"

Tom Merry was already feeling about the floor for his torch. He found it, after a moment's search, and a light flashed on. With Figgins at his heels, he rushed to the end of the passage.

The light in the corridor outside had been switched off, THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,089.

as had the light on the landing at the head of the wide staircase.

"Whoever he is, he knows his way about, anyway," panted Tom, his eyes gleaming. "That's something to know, Figgy. Phew! You're right about his being strong," he added, feeling his neck tenderly. "Who the dickens could it have been?"

"Here's somebody now!" breathed Figgins in reply. "Where's the switch?"

He found the passage switch, and the next second the corridor was flooded.

"It's only Blake," said Tom, as Jack Blake came hurrying along from the stairs. "Nobody seems to have heard the rumpus. I say, Blake," he added eagerly, "did you meet anyone on the stairs?"

"Eh! No," was Blake's answer, as he eyed the two in astonishment. "But what the dickens has happened? You both look as if you'd seen a ghost—and scrapped with one, too!"

"We have, and a pretty hefty ghost, too," said Tom.

He told the startled Blake what had happened.

"Phew!" breathed Blake. "That looks no end fishy! Hadn't we better search the rooms? Nobody passed me on the stairs, anyway."

"He may have got clear by the back staircase," said Tom. "And, as he was a fellow who seems to know his way about, I'm afraid it's pretty hopeless to search. Still, I think they're all unoccupied bed-rooms here, and we can try. Did you get the key from Barton?"

Blake shook his head.

"The old bouncer can't be found," he said. "He isn't in the servants' quarters, anyway. But aren't we wasting time?"

"My hat, yes!"

Without further ado the three juniors started the search, though Tom Merry felt it was hopeless from the start. If the unknown knew his way about, it was unlikely he would linger in the vicinity. They gave it up at last.

"No go!" grunted Tom, his forehead wrinkled in a deep frown. "But we do know now that there's something jolly queer going on in this house. It's rather significant that that chap was lurking in that passage in the darkness. I vote we go and try the door, chaps."

"Good weeze!"

Tom led the way back to the dark passage, and very soon they reached the big, stout new door that blocked it. But the door was locked.

"Well, we seem to be stumped," grunted Tom Merry, in disappointment. "Blow old Barton and his key! We can do nothing until we get that. Let's get down and report to Gussy's pater."

There seemed nothing else to be done. If the lurking intruder was a burglar, then the sooner Lord Eastwood heard of the matter the better. Half-way down the wide staircase they met a stately, grey-haired old man in black livery. It was Barton, the butler.

"Oh, good!" said Tom. "Here he is!"

"Looks half-squiffy!" grunted Blake.

"Rot!" said Tom.

But even the good-natured Tom Merry could not help eyeing the old butler rather closely. Certainly Barton looked far from his usual trim and well-groomed self, and he climbed the stairs rather unsteadily. His wrinkled face was white save for a hectic spot on each cheek, and his eyes were strangely bright. Still, even the best of servants might be inclined to indulge themselves on Christmas Eve, reflected Tom. In any case, it was none of his business.

Whatever his condition, Barton's voice was steady and as sedate as ever.

"You have been inquiring for me, I understand, young gentlemen?"

"We only want the key of the door leading to the disused rooms, Barton," said Tom.

"So I understand from James," said Barton suavely. "You are aware, sir, that access to the garrets is forbidden by his lordship?"

"Yes, yes; but Lord Eastwood has given his permission for us to go, Barton. If you have the key—"

"You wish to search for Master Arthur, I presume?" said Barton respectfully. "I fear it is useless, Master Merry. We have already searched the disused garrets—"

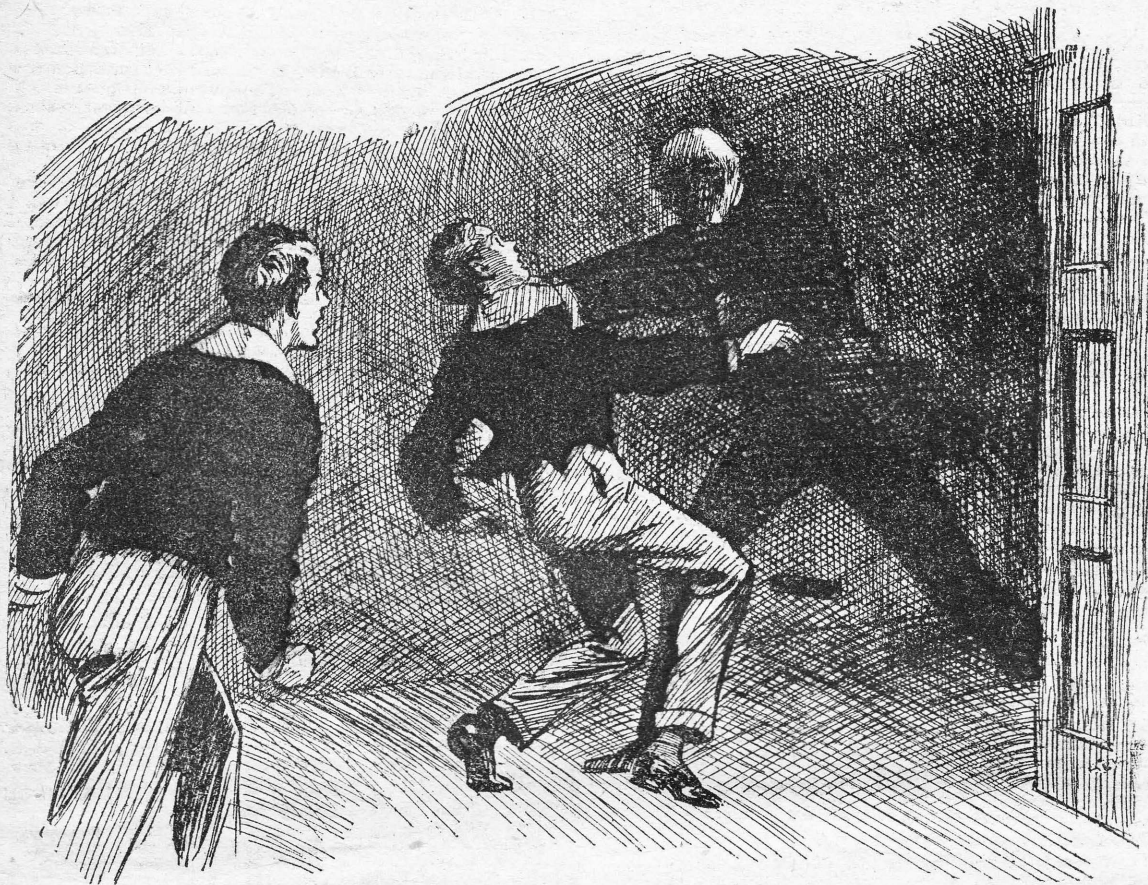
"You—you have?"

"Yes; half an hour ago," said Barton, his wrinkled old cheeks twitching. "We searched them thoroughly, but to no purpose. However, if it would set your minds at rest—"

"It would," said Tom. "We mean to have a look round there, as Lord Eastwood has approved our doing so, Barton."

"Very well, sir. If you will kindly wait here, young gentlemen, I will fetch the key."

With a slight bow, the old man departed on his errand, leaving the juniors waiting on the stairs. He was not away many seconds, and when he returned he had a single key in his hand. In silence the juniors followed Barton upstairs



Before Tom Merry could switch on his torch there came a yell of alarm from Figgins, and next instant a vaguely-seen form leapt at the two juniors from the gloom. The torch went flying from Tom's hand, and then he felt fingers clutch his throat, choking his wild, terrified yell into silence. (See Chapter 2.)

again to the locked door at the end of the dark passage. Soon the door was swinging open, and the juniors' torches were lighting up the panelled passage beyond.

Without hesitation the old manservant led the way along it to the foot of a narrow staircase. On a little landing above was a small window, covered on the inside with cobwebs. Outside showed the dark night, speckled with falling snowflakes.

"Careful, young gentlemen!" said Barton, pausing. "If you would be good enough to allow me a torch—thank you, young sir. The stairs are in a very bad condition, as you see, and are exceedingly treacherous."

He took the torch Tom Merry handed over, and led the way up the stairs, testing each step as he went. These were not so bad, and the top was safely reached at last. But when they stood on the landing above the juniors understood the reason for Lord Eastwood's fear of accidents.

Gaping holes showed in the flooring of the landing and of the rooms beyond. The old butler had referred to them as garrets, but actually they were fair-sized rooms. All were panelled up to the ceiling, and were musty-smelling, while the rotting woodwork was black with age and thick with dust and cobwebs.

With Barton leading the way, the three juniors looked into every one of the gloomy apartments, unused for many long years. All were empty.

The butler paused in the doorway of the last room. His wrinkled features twisted in a strange smile.

"If you are now satisfied, young gentlemen—" he suggested, in his dignified manner.

"There certainly doesn't seem to be anybody here," admitted Tom Merry. "I—I'd rather like to go round and test all the panels in these rooms," he added, tapping the nearest with his knuckles. "Who knows, there may be a secret door in any of these old rooms?"

"It is possible, I suppose, but very unlikely," said Barton. "But it would take weeks to do so, Master Merry. Moreover, Lord Conway, and even Master Arthur, used to amuse themselves by searching here for the legendary secret room. I have no doubt that former generations of D'Arcys have done likewise. In my view, it is a waste of time, sir. But it is cold here. If I may suggest it—"

"Yes, we'll go down," said Tom, aware of the butler's

scarcely veiled impatience. "I suppose we've seen all the rooms—"

"All, sir!"

There seemed nothing else to be done, and they descended the stairs in silence. The juniors were bitterly disappointed. They had had great hopes that in the ruined wing of the great house they would discover something, if only a clue to the strange mystery. They would like to have stayed to investigate the ancient panelling of the rooms. The thought of secret panels and secret rooms intrigued them. But the butler's words put rather a damper on that idea. If Lord Conway and Gussy himself, not to mention former generations of adventurous D'Arcys, had searched for the legendary room, then it was little use their doing so with the short time at their disposal. As Barton had said, it would have taken weeks to make a thorough job of it. Moreover, it was bitterly cold, and the juniors' teeth were already chattering.

In the hallway they parted from Barton, and the juniors were glad to be in the light and warmth again. Tom Merry hurried away to report to Lord Eastwood, while Figgins and Blake joined the waiting party round the great log fire.

"Well," said Cousin Ethel eagerly, as Blake and Figgins were surrounded by the eager, excited company. "Have you discovered anything?"

"Make room for them by the fire!" exclaimed Doris Levison. "They look cold!"

"We are," said Figgins, taking a seat thankfully. "Well, we've had no luck in our search. But—well, we've had rather a queer adventure."

And, helped by Blake, he told of what had happened.

There was a buzz of excitement when he had finished.

"Some rotten sneak-thief who's managed to get into the house," said the matter-of-fact Herries.

"I don't think so—far from it," said Figgins grimly. "If our little adventure hasn't some connection with the disappearance of Baggy and Gussy, then I'm a lobster!"

"And—and you found nothing in the disused rooms?" exclaimed Ethel, her voice showing her deep disappointment.

"Nothing; there's nothing to be seen there excepting dust and cobwebs," said Blake. "It's beginning to get more mysterious than ever. I'd like to have a really good hunt

round those rooms for a secret panel, though. You never know."

"Old Barton's right," put in the youthful voice of Wally D'Arcy, who was looking quite sober and serious for once. "Old Gussy and I tested the panelling when we were kids—"

"Kids!" echoed Lowther. "My hat! What are you now, young shaver?"

"You shut up, Lowther!" sniffed Wally. "Anyway, there's nothing but stone behind the panels—we've tried 'em all. I don't jolly well believe—"

"Here's Tom!" interrupted Cousin Ethel.

Tom Merry entered the hall, and room was made for him round the blazing fire. He was looking grim and thoughtful.

"Well, what did Lord Eastwood say?" demanded Figgins.

"He was like us—disappointed!" said Tom.

"But about that chap who attacked us, I mean. Is Lord Eastwood getting the police—"

"I didn't tell him about that," said Tom quietly. He looked round at the circle of anxious faces in the firelight. "Look here, we're going to solve this mystery on our own!"

"But why—"

"There's no need to worry Lord Eastwood further; he's worried enough," said Tom. "In my view it would only make matters worse to bring the police in on this job. There's some shady game going on in this house—and that ghost is at the bottom of it. I didn't say anything to Lord Eastwood about that chap who attacked us, because we're going to clear this matter up on our own."

"But—but—"

"That's why I didn't tell Barton about it," said Tom, looking at Blake and Figgins. "The way that chap got clear, and the swiftness with which he put the electric lights out, told me that, whoever he was, he was somebody familiar with the house. We don't want to put him on his guard. If I'd told Barton, he would perhaps have talked."

"That's true," chimed in Figgins.

"I'll tell you," said Tom Merry, lowering his voice as he glanced round the big hall. "You fellows don't believe in ghosts no more than I do."

"Less!" grinned Wally.

"Well, we don't!" said Tom grimly. "Yet a ghost has been seen by several—the ghost of Sir Ralph D'Arcy—Wally's ancestor. That means only one thing—that somebody is playing ghost. And that somebody, I believe, is the fellow who attacked us just now, and the fellow who knows where poor old Gussy and Trimble are."

"Looks like it!" said Levison quietly.

"Well, our job is to bowl that ghost out!" resumed Tom. "And I vote that we stay up to-night and have a ghost-hunt, chaps. There are ten of us—"

"Ten?" echoed Cousin Ethel indignantly. "What about Doris and myself?"

"And what about young Manners, and young Levison and myself?" demanded Wally.

"Girls and infants are excluded—" Tom was beginning, with a laugh, when he was interrupted by indignant cries from Cousin Ethel, Doris, and Wally & Co.

"Are we excluded?" said Cousin Ethel emphatically.

"Then Doris and I will hunt the ghost to-night on our own, Tom Merry."

"Yes, rather!" said Doris boyishly. "It isn't fair!"

"We're not going to be out of it, anyway!" snorted young Wally. "Check! I like that! My hat! We'll hunt on our own, too!"

"What-ho!" said Reggie Manners. "You old fogies leave it to us."

"Well, after all, perhaps the more we have on the job the better," said Tom. "We can then split up into parties and keep guard at various points within call of each other. We'll get to bed pretty early, and meet at the head of the stairs at about eleven-thirty. How's that?"

"Good!"

"We'll be there!"

There were no objections—all were only too eager to do anything to help. Moreover, the thought of a ghost-hunt was intriguing on its own account. And so it was settled, and for the rest of that evening the party stayed round the fire discussing the amazing affair with bated breath. It was the strangest, most depressing Christmas Eve any of them remembered.

Where was Gussy, and where was Baggy Trimble? Despite their declaration that they did not believe in ghosts, most of the company could not help that strange feeling of fear creeping over them as the minutes ticked by on that Christmas Eve. The shadow of the dread Curse seemed to hang over them all as they discussed it in low tones, with the flickering firelight playing on their pale, anxious faces.

Only Tom Merry was strangely silent. He was thinking, and his thoughts would have surprised the rest. It was of

Barton, the old butler, of whom Tom was thinking. Was Barton as faithful as the family believed him to be? Tom wondered. On earlier visits to D'Arcy's home Tom had rather liked the dignified old retainer. But this time a strange, unaccountable feeling of distrust had formed in the junior's mind against him. Tom wondered at the old butler's slackness of late—of the fact that he never seemed to be at hand when wanted. Moreover—and this was significant—hadn't Barton intimated that he and the other servants had already searched the disused wing thoroughly? Yet James had suggested doing so to Tom, and the chief footman would surely have known about it if the butler had conducted such a search! In fact, Tom Merry knew well enough that Barton had not done so. It was all very strange, and Tom wondered. But he said nothing to the others of his thoughts—yet!

### CHAPTER 3.

#### Prisoners!

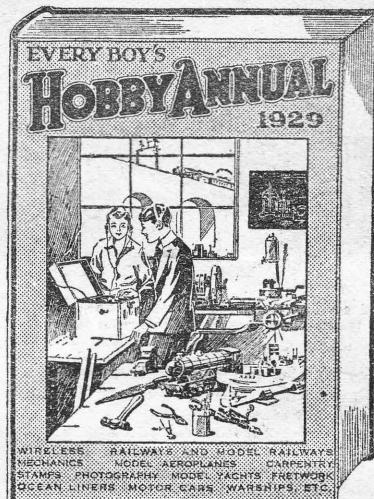
ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY opened his eyes, with a deep groan.

Where was he? What had happened?

From a great distance came a heavy thudding noise, that seemed to shake him from head to foot. But slowly, as his senses cleared, he realised that the hammering came from his own violently aching head. He placed a



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hand to his throbbing temples. What had happened, and where—

Quite suddenly it came back to D'Arcy then, as if in a dream as yet—his entry into the forbidden passage, and then the finding of the finger-marks that had led to his discovery of the secret panel.

Yes, he remembered that; he remembered also climbing through the dark opening, and then—

Arthur Augustus shuddered as it all came back to him in detail; he had stepped through the opening in the panelled wall, the floor had given way, and he had fallen with a terrific thud on to a bare stone floor, and then he had lost consciousness—he must have done.

Yet not immediately; for even as his senses were leaving him Arthur Augustus remembered strong hands gripping him, and the strange figure that had towered over him—the terrifying apparition of a Cavalier of olden times, in plumed hat, cloak, rich lace, and—

That was all the junior saw, for then his reeling senses had left him, and he had known no more.

But that seemed ages and ages ago. Where was he now? Before D'Arcy's blinking eyes could help him, to answer the question something moved close at hand, and he heard a voice—a familiar voice, trembling and shaking with fear.

"Gussy, speak! For goodness' sake speak, Gussy!"

It was Trimble's voice, and Gussy saw him then. The fat Fourth-Former of St. Jim's was crouching, like himself, on a folded blanket on the stone floor. Close by was a guttering lantern, the light from which barely showed half a dozen feet from where they crouched, huddled together.

"Twimble!" panted Arthur Augustus, his voice more like a croak than anything else. "Then—then I was wight, Twimble. But where—"

He glanced about him, half fearfully, scarcely able to repress a shudder.

"He's gone out!" groaned Trimble, his flabby face covered with dirt and tear-stains, looking quite ghastly in the feeble glimmer. "He's gone, but he'll be coming back again soon. Ow! Oh dear! I shall die soon, I know. I'm famished, and I'm frozen stiff! And—and those awful skeletons!"

Trimble broke off with another deep, miserable groan. Never had Arthur Augustus felt so sorry for anyone as he did for the hapless and woebegone Trimble at that moment. He was plainly at the end of his tether—chilled to the bone, hungry and terrified out of his fat wits.

"But—the, the, ghost—"

"It isn't a ghost at all!" wailed Trimble. "It's old—"

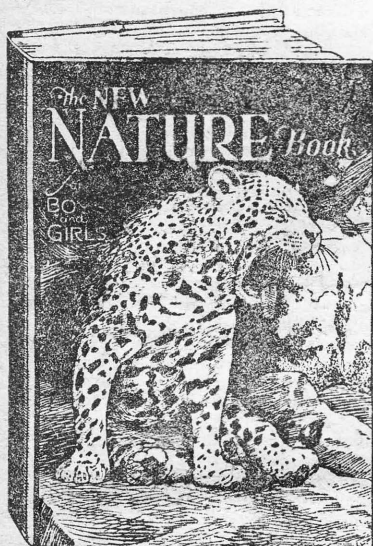
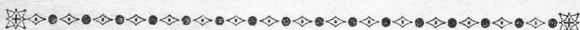
"I know it can't be a ghost, Twimble. I do not believe in ghosts. But who is playin' ghost, who was it who attacked me when I dropped through that fearful hole—"

"It was Barton!" chattered Trimble, glancing about him with a fearful shudder. "It was Barton, the butler, and he's mad. He's going to kill us, and—"

"Wha-a-at?"

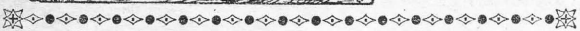
Arthur Augustus stared incredulously at his fat fellow-prisoner. Barton, the faithful old retainer—the man who had lived with the family all his life, who was part and parcel of Eastwood House. It seemed impossible, incredible.

Yet even as he made that startled, astounded ejaculation,



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it was borne in upon Arthur Augustus that Trimble had spoken the truth.

"Barton!" he stuttered. "You say that it was the butler playin' ghost—Barton, who gwipped me as I fell? Uttah wot, Twimble!"

"Well, you'll see soon enough!" sniffed Trimble, with another shuddering glance into the gloom around them.

"It's Barton, and the old brute's gone stark, staring mad! He's going to kill us to-morrow! Oh dear! I wish I'd never come here! O-ooogh! And it's all your fault, D'Arcy!"

"Bai Jove! My fault, Twimble?"

"Of course it is!" groaned Trimble, snivelling dismally. "If you hadn't pressed me to come I should have been safe at home now. I wish I'd never seen the beastly house."

"Oh, bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus blinked at Trimble in the gloom dazedly. It was just like Trimble to blame someone else for the trouble in which he had landed himself, and to tell fearful "whoppers," even when in such a dismal plight as this. Yet Arthur Augustus could not help feeling sorry for the hapless fat youth. He could see only too plainly that Trimble had suffered considerably since he had seen him last.

"Here, take this blanket, Twimble," said Arthur Augustus. "I can manage without it."

The swell of St. Jim's moved off his blanket immediately, though every movement he made was painful to a degree.

Trimble grabbed it eagerly, and with Gussy's aid he got it round his shivering shoulders. Arthur Augustus himself was shivering violently with the damp, icy cold, but he had no thought for himself.

The junior's eyes were getting used to the gloom now, and he glanced about him anxiously and curiously. The room

the juniors were imprisoned in was long and low, musty, and thick with the dust of ages. Here and there the light from the lantern glimmered on panelling, black with age and damp. The ceiling was also panelled, and above his head Gussy could just make out a square in the panelling which he took to be the trapdoor through which he had fallen. At one end of the room he glimpsed a black orifice which he took to be a fireplace.

At the other end of the room was a queerly-shaped heap of—What was that heap?

Arthur Augustus stared and stared, his eyes glowing wide with horror; a queer prickly sensation ran over his scalp, and he shuddered.

"Oh, bai Jove!" he faltered. "Twimble, what—"

"Skeletons!" chattered Trimble, with a shudder. "Barton held up the light and showed them to me! He—he said we'd join them soon. Oh, what shall we d-dud-do?"

Arthur Augustus did not reply for a moment. Then, setting his teeth hard, he got to his feet and grasped the lantern and held it high.

The light shone clearly on the heap at the far end of the room. They were human skeletons—at least a dozen of them, all heaped together. Scraps of faded leather and clothing still adhered to some of the bones. Gussy took another step nearer the grisly relics and the sight of one or two rusted swords, breast-plates and helmets, told him that they had belonged to soldiers of Cromwell's time—Round-heads!

"Oh, bai Jove!" he panted.

Arthur Augustus was a fellow with plenty of nerve, but the sight of the ghastly relics sent an eerie thrill through him. He was still staring in horror at the remains when a sound behind made him wheel round sharply.

He was just in time to see a portion of the opposite wall swinging out into the room, slowly and ponderously, as if attached to a heavy weight.

Arthur Augustus stood thunderstruck.

He had long ago realised that he was in the secret room—the legendary apartment for which he and others long passed away, had searched before in vain.

He had supposed that the trapdoor above was the way into it; but as he watched with staring eyes at the slowly opening panel, he realised there was another entrance. He saw now that the panelled door was backed by stone—part of the stone wall that obviously worked on hinges or a pivot. Even as his eyes took in this fact, a figure entered from the blackness beyond—a grey-haired, stooping figure clad in black livery. It was Barton.

"Barton!" panted Arthur Augustus.

He started towards the old man. Even now Gussy could not believe that Barton—the old family butler, tried and trusted throughout a lifetime—was proving a deadly enemy.

But he soon was forced to believe it.

Barton had an electric torch in his hand, and over his arm were a couple of folded blankets. But as Gussy sprang towards him, the man dropped them and hastily pushed the secret door to, placing his back to it.

Arthur Augustus pulled up short, not because the door was closed, but at the look in the old man's eyes. It was a strange look—wild and menacing to a degree. Arthur Augustus shuddered as he looked into the eyes and remembered Trimble's whimpering words that Barton was mad!

Was Barton mad?

As he stood gazing into the wrinkled face, and the staring menacing eyes, Arthur Augustus knew the truth. The glint, the strange, fixed look of fiendish malice was enough. But the next moment came clear proof as Barton laughed aloud—an unearthly cackle of awful laughter that almost froze the blood in the veins of the imprisoned juniors.

Their awful plight struck Arthur Augustus like a blow.

They were here, prisoners of a madman, in a secret dungeon unknown to the world outside—and with only a pile of skeletons as company! In spite of himself, Arthur Augustus shuddered, and his face went white as chalk!

#### CHAPTER 4.

##### Doomed!

AS he stood thus, trembling in every limb, something like despair crept into the plucky junior's heart.

"Oh, bai Jove!" he panted.

Trimble was whimpering, crouching back in the folds of the blankets. Arthur Augustus knew he could hope for no help from that quarter.

But was it possible? Was the man feigning madness for some unknown purpose? Arthur Augustus stood and eyed him. He did not feel the cold now; the blood seemed to be rushing like fire through his veins in that moment of enlightenment.

"Barton!" he panted. "Barton, you know me—Master Arthur? You would not harm us? What do you mean by this—this swango treatment?"

Again Barton laughed—a queer, blood-curdling cackle of insane laughter that settled any doubts Arthur Augustus might still have had. Then quite suddenly the old man grew serious, with an almost ludicrous gravity.

“Master Arthur,” he said, in his usual smooth, dignified tones. “It is Christmas Eve, and to-morrow is Christmas Day. Before to-morrow night the sacrifice must be made—the Curse of the D’Arcys must be averted. You are aware of that, sir?”

“I—I don’t know what you mean, Barton!” stammered Arthur Augustus shakily.

“You do not know?” echoed the old man. “Yet you, Master Arthur, are a member of the thirteenth generation of the D’Arcys! Strange you should not understand, sir! But perhaps you have not heard the full story—the legend as I now know it?”

“I know the wretched legend only too well!” said Gussy, his voice shaking despite his efforts to control it. “But it is all wubbish! I refuse to allow myself to believe othah-wise, Barton!”

“But it is not rubbish, Master Arthur!” said Barton, with intense earnestness, his voice thrilling with emotion. “It is true—terribly true! Unless the Curse is averted, the House of the D’Arcys is doomed! You do not believe it?”

“I do not, Barton!”

“Yet you know part of the legend!” said Barton. “Sir Ralph D’Arcy, your ancestor, and a very evil man, if I may make bold to remind you, Master D’Arcy, died a violent death long years ago. And the legend states that death will fall upon the thirteenth generation when the ghost of Sir Ralph walks at Christmastide, unless,” said the old butler, pausing impressively, “the mystery of this secret room is discovered, and the Curse averted before Christmas night!”

“I—I suppose this is the secret room, Barton?” stammered Gussy.

Barton nodded, his face twisted with emotion. Beads of perspiration glistened on his brow despite the intense cold of that ghastly death-chamber.

“This is the room, Master Arthur,” he said, pointing with a shaking finger at the sinister pile in the corner. “And there lies its secret—a secret hidden for generations. There lies the Curse of the D’Arcys—twelve men killed by the hand of Sir Ralph, your ancestor!”

“Barton—” faltered Arthur Augustus.

“That is its secret!” said Barton, breaking suddenly into a cackling, crazy laugh. He picked up the lantern and held it high, so that the light fell full upon the heap of human remains. “Look at them, Master Arthur—twelve Roundheads, betrayed after being treacherously promised friendship and shelter by Sir Ralph, your ancestor. Trapped in this dungeon, and condemned to starvation centuries ago! And the curse follows the D’Arcys to this day, sir! But the finding of this secret chamber does not avert it, Master D’Arcy.”

And Barton laughed again, his cackling voice sounding fiddish and strangely unreal in that gloomy apartment of death.

“Then—then—” faltered the junior.

“Only a sacrifice can avert it—can fend off the Curse and its fulfilment!” cried Barton, the shaking lantern in his hand sending ghostly shadows dancing on the panelled walls. “A D’Arcy must die for the D’Arcys, and two others must be found to die with him. At all costs, Master Arthur, the Curse must be averted from the rest of your family—from your father, the earl, from her ladyship, and from Lord Conway and Master Walter, sir!”

The old man paused, and pointed to the shivering, shaking Baggy Trimble.

“There is one to join you, Master Arthur!” he cried, with another crazy laugh. “And before noon to-morrow I must find another. Three lives to avert the Curse—to save the lives of the rest of the family! A D’Arcy must die for the D’Arcys, and two others must die with him—the human sacrifice the legend demands.”

He halted, breathless, his eyes glittering with a demoniacal light.

Arthur Augustus shivered.

He understood now—understood all with a thrill of terrible fear clutching at his heart. Barton was mad—insane; he had brooded over the wretched legend until his reason had given way. In his affection for his youthful masters he had allowed the fear of the Curse to prey on his mind to such an extent that he had lived and breached in fear of it.

A deep pity for the wretched man came to Arthur Augustus; yet the position was deadly grave—terribly real and dangerous.

“Barton,” he exclaimed, trying to steady his trembling voice, “listen to me! The legend is all wot! You’ve been wowwyin’ too much over it, dear boy. Pway allow us to go at once. It is tewwibly cold heah, and we shall catch

chills if we wemain heah longah. You would not harm me? Think of the past, of the years you’ve been with us, and—”

“What? You would try to persuade me to neglect my duty to the family?” exclaimed Barton, becoming suddenly grave again. “You would try to save yourself at the expense of your father, mother, and brothers, Master Arthur,” he went on reproachfully. “You must be brave and unselfish, sir. It will soon be over. At noon to-morrow—Christmas Day—with Sir Ralph’s own blood-stained sword, I will end the Curse once and for all time.”

He stooped to lower the lantern to the floor, and in that instant a wild and frantic desire to escape from that ghastly chamber came to Baggy Trimble, who had listened in horror to the conversation. He had noted that the heavy door in the wall was not quite closed, and, with amazing quickness, Baggy acted.

He sprang up, flinging aside the blankets, and leaped madly for the secret door.

Arthur Augustus grasped his intention in a flash, and he gave an encouraging yell, and jumped to follow.

“Go it, Baggy—wun!” he shrieked.

Baggy did run—but someone else was quicker!

With an agility that was amazing in one of his years, Barton sprang forward with a fierce, terrifying cry. He reached the almost closed door two seconds behind Baggy; but even as the terrified fat youth’s fingers closed on the edge of the massive stone slab, the madman was upon him.

Baggy shrieked as the fierce, strong fingers clutched him, and sent him spinning backwards on to the blankets. Then, with an awful laugh, Barton grasped Arthur Augustus as he rushed up, lifting that junior as easily as if he had been a child. He raised him bodily, and, carrying him to the blankets, lowered him gently upon them.

“I regret to have to use force, Master Arthur,” he said, calming down with remarkable swiftness, “but the sacrifice cannot be avoided, and it is useless to plead or attempt to escape. My duty is clear, unpleasant and exceedingly painful as it is to me. I trust you will not oblige me to make your position more uncomfortable by binding you, sir.”

With that Barton vacated the secret chamber, and, almost before the two juniors were aware of it, the door had moved into place, and they found themselves alone—alone save for the twelve skeletons of the hapless Roundheads, doomed to death by the treacherous Sir Ralph of Cavalier days, and for whose death they themselves were to pay the penalty. It was a terrible thought, and the two hapless juniors groaned in despair. Baggy, indeed, was blubbering loudly. And it was little to be wondered at in the circumstances.

Christmas Eve! The sudden thought brought a flash to the eyes of Arthur Augustus.

“Cheer up, Twimble!” he muttered hopefully. “We’re not done yet, dear boy. Our friends may save us. How long have I been lyin’ here unconscious?”

It was some moments before Trimble could speak.

“Not long—about an hour, I should think!” he sobbed. “But—but it’s no good, D’Arcy, we’re done, and it’s all your fault! Oh dear! Oh, don’t I wish I’d never come here! He’s a madman, and he’ll kill us to-morrow. I’ve seen the sword, and—and it’s awful!”

Baggy shuddered violently.

Arthur Augustus grasped the blankets, and placed them round the fat junior. He was shivering with the cold himself, but he was fully dressed, whilst Trimble had only a dressing-gown over his pyjamas—just as he had left his bed-room the night before.

Then Arthur Augustus stood up, a determined gleam in his eyes. It was not like the swell of St. Jim’s to give in until the game was hopeless—and it was not hopeless yet, he felt sure.

“How did you get here yourself, Twimble?” he asked.

“What’s the good of telling?” growled Trimble. “I—I left my room, if you want to know, to get some chocolates from under Lowther’s bed. Then—then just as I got outside the door—the ghost got me. It was awful!”

“Bai Jove! The ghost—”

“It was Barton, of course!” blubbered Trimble. “He was dressed up as a Cavalier, and he had the sword then. It’s Barton playing ghost, and—and he looked awful. I must have fainted, and he carried me down here.”

Arthur Augustus nodded. He understood all now. The ghost the servants had seen and whom Baggy had encountered on a previous occasion was Barton.

“Stay here a minute, Twimble!” said Arthur Augustus, after a careful glance about the dread apartment. “I’m goin’ to get out of this fearful situation somehow. Bai Jove! What about that fireplace?”

He picked up the lantern and walked over to the fireplace at the end of the room, giving a shiver as he passed the heap of human remains. Trimble gave a frightened



As the old butler stooped to lower the lantern to the floor, Buggy Trimble sprang up and leaped madly for the almost closed door. But even as his fingers closed on the edge of the massive stone slab, the fat junior was caught in a fierce, strong grasp, and sent spinning backwards on to the blankets. (See Chapter 4.)



squeak and followed him instantly, not intending to be left alone.

Arthur Augustus shone the light up the chimney. It was a wide, open chimney like the rest of the fireplaces in the old rooms of the house. Evidently the secret room had been used in times long past as a place of refuge for the family in case of need when peril threatened.

"You'd better come aftar me, Twimble!" breathed Gussy. "I'm goin' to twy to climb up it. Listen out for Barton weturnin'!"

Placing the lantern on the floor, Arthur Augustus started to climb—a far from easy matter in the pitch darkness of the chimney. But he went up inch by inch, pressing his feet against the sides, and clutching with his hands on the brickwork. Quite suddenly Gussy's head struck something above him in the musty blackness. He felt with his hands, and a deep groan of dismay escaped him.

It was an iron bar across the chimney, and after a moment's examination he found others, making escape by that way out of the question—without too's, at all events.

The discovery quite bowled Gussy over in more ways than one—his clutching feet lost hold, and he fell, amid a shower of crumbling mortar and dust. And as he fell, from the ceiling of the room above came a shriek of demoniacal laughter that echoed eerily through that chill chamber of death.

Trimble, frightened out of his fat wits, glanced upwards and glimpsed Barton's face, distorted with fiendish glee, framed in the trapdoor above them.

The madman had been watching them, unseen and unheard. Now he was gloating over their failure.

"No, Master Arthur," he called down in unholy glee. "There is no escape. If twelve strong men—twelve stout Roundheads—could not escape, what hope have you? This trapdoor can only be opened from above, and the secret door in the wall is of solid stone, and cannot be opened from inside. Your fate is sealed. Face it like a true D'Arcy, Master Arthur."

The face vanished and the trapdoor closed. Arthur Augustus, bruised and smothered in dust and dirt, staggered to his feet, and the two prisoners eyed each other hopelessly.

At that moment black despair entered the heart of Arthur Augustus. He crouched down by the lantern with the shaking Trimble to get what faint warmth it afforded, and so the long minutes of that terrible Christmas Eve ticked slowly by.

## CHAPTER 5.

### The Ghost Hunters!

"READY?"

Tom Merry whispered the question softly. Eastwood House lay in deep darkness. Outside the snow was still falling in swirling eddies, deepening the mantle of white on the gaunt trees and frozen ground. An icy wind swept round the old house. It entered through crevices in the big windows, and swept in chill draughts along the spacious corridors.

Tom Merry shivered. It had been an unhappy Christmas Eve for the guests at Eastwood House—though it was not Christmas morning yet. The night had seemed endless. Several groups of cheery, ruddy-checked village waits had visited the house, but their tuneful carols had been interrupted and they had been kindly dismissed with generous gifts by the old earl. Nobody at Eastwood House felt like listening to cheery, hearty voices in their present mood.

All the house had retired to bed rather early—early, that is, for Christmas Eve. But all had been done that could be done. The grounds had been searched again and again by bodies of lynx-eyed keepers and estate servants. Tom Merry & Co. had also searched the grounds and parkland, though they had little hope in that direction. Even the lake had been visited, though the ice was still unbroken everywhere, to the relief of all.

Yet few believed for one moment that either Trimble or Arthur Augustus had ever left the house. That nothing really serious had happened to them the old earl—happily enough—was convinced; there must be some natural and feasible explanation to account for their amazing absence.

And he had retired to bed at last—there was nothing else to be done. And with his going the rest of the excited and distressed household had done likewise.

Few were likely to get much sleep, however. Tom Merry & Co. and their girl chums had no intention of going to sleep—yet. And now, at the appointed time, they had all met together at the head of the great staircase, as silent as ghosts themselves.

All were fully dressed—some of them, indeed, had their outdoor clothes on—excepting for footgear. Most wore bed-room slippers or rubber-soled tennis-shoes. Silently, like shadows, they gathered at the appointed place, their electric torches stabbing the deep darkness.

Eleven-thirty!

The half-hour chimed from the clock-tower even as Tom Merry spoke.

"Ready?" he repeated softly. "You here, Ethel and Doris?"

"Yes, we're here, Tom Merry," came Cousin Ethel's soft voice.

"Wally, and you other kids?"

"Who are you calling kids?" came a youthful grunt from the gloom. "Yes, we're here, old grey-whiskers!"

There was a chuckle in the darkness—the juniors could not help it. But it was no time for exchanging compliments, and soon Tom Merry had divided his force up into five separate parties.

"Now, you know the game?" he whispered. "Just keep watch, and if you see or hear anything at all suspicious, just give the signal. No need to stand still shivering, though; just walk quietly up and down near your post. Got that? Right. Then the sooner we separate and get ready the better."

The group broke up without a sound. Blake, Lowther, and Doris Levison remained at the head of the staircase, whilst the others hastened off to their various posts, all within sound of each other.

Tom Merry had Figgins and young Frank Levison with him, and he had purposely chosen a spot near the passage leading to the old disused part of the west wing.

The light was switched off the moment they reached the spot, and in silence and darkness the three stood waiting and watching. But after some weary minutes they began to feel the chill, warmly wrapped as they were, and at a whisper from Tom they started to pace softly up and down the passage.

Save for the occasional creak of a window or door and the whistle of the wind outside, all was silent and still in the great house. Every minute seemed almost like an eternity to the watchers. But suddenly Tom Merry stiffened.

"Quiet!" he breathed.

Gently he pulled his two companions back against the panelling of the passage.

But they also had heard that faint, soft footfall on the carpet behind them.

Who was it? It might be one of their party, but— They were taking no risks. In breathless silence they waited. Again came the sound, and quite suddenly Tom Merry glimpsed a moving form in the black darkness.

The junior thrilled, and his heart beat fast.

Someone was approaching from the direction of the servants' quarters, and not from the main staircase or front bed-rooms. Was his theory going to prove correct? Who was it prowling about at that hour?

The form came nearer—approaching with a stealthy, slinking caution that in itself was suspicious—and distinctly unnerving to the watchers.

"It's a man!" breathed Tom. "On him when I give the word! Don't hesitate!"

"Right!"

Tom gave the word the next moment.

The dimly-seen form loomed up quite suddenly, and with one accord the three threw themselves upon the unknown, Tom pausing an instant to give a soft, low whistle—the signal agreed upon.

It was well he had the time to do so.

The next moment a fierce, savage struggle was taking place in the blackness. The midnight prowler was a man right enough—a man with almost superhuman strength, or so it seemed to the three juniors.

Over and over the four rolled, crashing against the walls, and mixed up hopelessly in the darkness, amidst stifled gasps and grunts. Several times the unknown cried out, but Tom Merry, Figgins, and Frank Levison were far too excited and desperate to heed, much less recognise, the voice.

Their numbers hampered the juniors, if anything; in the deep blackness it was impossible to tell friend from foe. But the struggle scarcely lasted a minute, for suddenly the patter of hurrying feet sounded.

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Lights flashed, and as their beams rested on the struggling group a cry went up.

"Barton!"

"My hat! It's the butler!"

It was. The old man had ceased to struggle as the other watchers, warned by the whistle, came rushing to the spot. "What is it—what has happened? Oh!"

Cousin Ethel, her face pale, but determined, was one of the first on the spot. She started violently as she recognised the butler. His face was convulsed as the light flashed upon it. Slowly the three juniors released their grip of him and staggered to their feet.

Lowther and Herries helped the old man up.

"Switch the nearest electric-light on, Lowther!" panted Tom. "You all right, Frank?"

"Right as rain!" gasped Levison minor. "Just a bit bruised!"

Short as it was, it had been a vicious struggle, and all three as well as the butler showed signs of it. They looked dishevelled and battered as the brilliant light from the nearest electric light flashed on them.

"Barton!" breathed Tom.

All eyes turned curiously, amazedly upon the butler. The old man seemed to have recovered himself by now. He was breathing hard and fast, but his face swiftly recovered its usual impassive expression, though the eyes glittered strangely.

"Bless me!" he gasped, brushing dust from his clothes with a hand that shook. "Whatever does this extraordinary assault mean, Master Merry? I am amazed and shocked at such conduct on the part of his lordship's guests! Ah, Master Walter—"

"We're ghost-hunting, old bean!" said Wally D'Arcy cheerfully. "Sorry you got biffed over, Barton, but you shouldn't go dodging about the house without a light, old top!"

Evidently Wally had not the slightest suspicion of what was in Tom Merry's mind.

"Perhaps Barton will explain why he was dodging about without a light?" exclaimed Tom quietly.

Barton gave the junior a quick glance, but his impassive features did not change, though anger and surprise showed in his voice.

"That is easily explained, Master Merry!" he said, with dignity. "I also was ghost-hunting!"

"What?"

"Matters have reached a very grave pass!" said Barton, looking round at the white, excited faces. "You are familiar, of course, with the legend, 'The Curse of the D'Arcys'?"

"We believe it's rot!" said Tom Merry curtly.

Barton bowed.

"I myself cannot but believe otherwise!" he said gravely, his voice low and trembling. "The absence of Master Trimble is strange and unaccountable. But the absence of Master Arthur fills me with fear and dread. It seems to me the beginning of the fulfilment of the ancient Curse."

"Rubbish!"

"You may think so, Master Merry!" whispered the old man, his face working with emotion. "But—the ghost has been seen, and it is Christmastide! To-night is Christmas Eve. If any further tragic happening is to take place it will do so this night. Sleep is impossible to me in such circumstances. In my affection—if I may be permitted to call it that—for the family, I determined to stay up and keep watch and ward. I intended to wander round the house and to raise the alarm if anything untoward happened."

"But if it did happen to be a real ghost what would you do?" asked Tom. "As you believe in them—"

"Possibly I could do nothing, sir!" said Barton simply.

"But I should have had the satisfaction, sir, of knowing I had done my duty. Moreover, despite my belief and fears, I could not overlook the possibility that trickery was at work—that someone was playing ghost for wicked purposes of his own. I realise that something must be done. The servants under my charge are terrified, and wish to leave. I feel it my duty to do all in my power, to smother my own fears and comfort in order to solve the strange mystery."

The juniors were impressed deeply by the faithful retainer's emotion and feeling words. Even Tom Merry felt ashamed of himself for his suspicions of the old man. Barton's sincerity, his trembling voice and agitated manner made Tom feel strangely uncomfortable and disturbed. For an old man of his years to leave his bed to keep watch and ward over the family he served seemed pathetic and unselfish to a degree. It was impossible to doubt the old retainer's sincerity.

"You—you shouldn't have attempted such a thing at your age, Barton!" said Tom uncomfortably. "I—we're sorry we attacked you—it was unavoidable. We did not know, of course, who you were. But I think you'd better

return to bed now, and leave this matter to us. You look quite ill, and you must not stay up longer." "Cut off to bed now, there's a good chap!"

Barton bowed in his stately way. "Thank you, Master Walter. I will obey you, of course! But," said the old butler, "I must beg of you to return to your own beds. The night is chilly, and the risk of colds—"

"We're staying up to watch!" said Tom Merry. "Yes, rather!" said Wally. "You buzz off, old sport!" "Very good, sir!" And with a bow to the company in general Barton trod softly away. They watched him until he turned the corner of the passage, and then Tom Merry spoke.

"Poor old chap!" he said. "I felt rather suspicious of him at first, but—well, it's easy to see he was only on the same game as us—out to lay the ghost! Fancy an old chap of his age having the nerve." "He's a decent old bird," said Figgins. "What now, Tommy?"

"Better put the light out again, and have another go!" said Tom grimly. "Phew! It's jolly cold!" Lowther switched off the electric light. One or two torches flashed on.

"Now we'd better separate again!" said Tom Merry. "Same positions as before, only— What's that, Doris?"

"Where's Ethel?" asked Doris, with rather a catch in her voice. "She was here a moment ago, but—"

"What?"

Tom Merry gave a violent start as he flashed round the light from his torch. It shone on the startled faces of the juniors, and on Doris Levison's white face. But—there was no sign of Cousin Ethel in the corridor.

"Ethel!" called Tom Merry, raising his voice cautiously. "Cousin Ethel, where are you?"

No answer came. In breathless silence the party waited, their hearts thumping. A curious sense of uneasiness and oppression came over them, as they eyed each other with scared, white faces.

Where was Cousin Ethel? Surely she would not have gone without speaking to someone? Tom Merry called again—Doris Levison called, her voice trembling with anxiety.

But again no answer came. Silence only—deep, oppressive silence.

Cousin Ethel was gone!

**CHAPTER 6.**

**The Third Victim!**

**C**OUSIN ETHEL breathed hard. She had acted on sudden impulse—though not without reason behind it.

Ethel Cleveland was a deep, thoughtful girl with keen wits and a quick, resourceful mind.

Her eyes had never once left Barton's face while he had been speaking to them. Her keen, clear eyes had taken in every shade of emotion.

Not for one moment did she doubt the old man's emotion, his sincerity. It was not put on—his emotion was real. And he had said what he believed—he had not been knowingly lying.

Ethel Cleveland did not doubt that. What she did doubt was—Barton's sanity!

The suspicion came to Cousin Ethel in a flash, unaccountably, as if by intuition. Those restless eyes, the bright gleam in them had told her much—or had made her suspect much.

She remembered her uncle's remarks about Barton—that he was getting too old for his post—that he was neglecting his duties of late. Yet she knew Barton was always regarded as a valuable servant, as a loyal, dutiful member of the staff. He had always seemed part of the old house itself. What had brought about this sudden change in him? Why was it that, almost invariably of late, he was absent when wanted? She knew that the servants themselves were discussing the old man's queer manners of late. She knew they had tried to shield him with the statement that he was "unwell."

Was he unwell—mentally? The sudden conviction came to Ethel that he was. And with the thought came another.

Was Barton the man who had attacked Tom Merry and Figgins in the passage that evening? Was it Barton who was playing ghost? Tom Merry had stated his belief that it was someone who knew the run of the house well. She saw that Tom had accepted the old man's story—did not suspect anything. But she herself was far from satisfied.

Then the temptation had come to her, even as Barton had turned to go. Why not follow him to see if he really did go to his bed-room? She had intended to mention her suspicion to Tom, but just then Lowther had switched off the electric light.

Not knowing where the old man's room lay, and fearful of losing him, Cousin Ethel acted impulsively. She slipped swiftly away, and the next moment had rounded the corner of the dark corridor, and was treading softly in Barton's wake.

He also had an electric-torch with him, and it was easy enough to follow his dancing light. But suddenly it went out, and Cousin Ethel drew in her breath hard.

Barton had stopped. She could not see him, but she sensed instinctively that he was motionless, listening and watching to see if he was followed.

Cousin Ethel shrank back against the panelling, still as a mouse, scarcely daring to breathe. But the old man only waited for several thrilling seconds, and then he went on again with the stealth and softness of a cat.

Where was he going? It seemed to Ethel that they had traversed endless corridors, and that they must have made a complete circuit of the house. But it was clear now that Barton had no intention of going to his bed-room, and Cousin Ethel set her teeth and stuck to the trail, though she wanted to shriek out, so tense were her nerves.

Then the old man stopped again. The girl was almost upon him before she was aware of it. But Barton was standing motionless again, and had obviously neither seen nor heard her. But now Ethel's eyes were used to the darkness she could faintly make out his vague form ahead. He appeared to be listening intently, and suddenly Ethel realised where she was, for at that instant a voice sounded scarcely a score of yards ahead of them in the blackness.

"Ethel—Cousin Ethel? Where are you?"

It was a cautious, anxious voice, and she easily recognised it as Tom Merry's. So they had missed her, and were searching for her. In that moment Ethel felt a longing to cry out and reveal her presence, but she bit her lips hard and kept silent. She felt certain she was on the verge of discovering something, and she knew a cry from her would spoil all.

Ahead of them several lights were flashing now, and it was clear her friends were getting alarmed. But she kept silent, for Barton was moving again now—swiftly, as if reassured by the voices and lights. Suddenly, his vague form vanished, and following, Cousin Ethel found herself turning a corner into another passage. And this time she felt her soft bed-room slippers on bare boards.

She knew instantly where she was—in fact, she had for

(Continued on next page.)



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**TALES FOR ALL TASTES**

some minutes now guessed Barton's destination. He had been about to visit the deserted wing when Tom Merry and the others had pounced upon him. And now he was having another try, having approached by a devious route this time.

Cousin Ethel was in the passage leading to the deserted garrets, and even now she heard Barton fumbling with the door. It opened, and she felt a sudden rush of colder air on her face. Then she heard the door softly closed, and instantly she was hastening up to it, her bedroom slippers making no sound. She felt for the door-handle, her heart beating almost to suffocation, and then she found it and turned it.

The door was not even fastened, and next instant she was peering through. As she looked she felt thankful she had not attempted to open the door wide to get through herself.

Barton was scarcely a dozen yards from her along the gloomy passage beyond. He had switched on his torch, and its light was playing over the panels of the passage wall. Ethel saw the gleam in the eyes of the old man as he moved his hands over the carving, and then—

Click!

Ethel caught her breath hard.

A large, black panel in the passage wall had slid aside, and as she watched with staring eyes she saw the old man vanish through the opening. Darkness fell on the passage, save for the dim light from the window on the landing above.

What should she do? Should she rush back and tell her friends, or—

The sudden fear of losing the old man came to the girl again, and setting her teeth she went on, reaching the panel in a matter of seconds. The thought of the missing Trimble and Arthur Augustus rushed into Ethel's mind, and she realised that at all costs she must keep the old man in sight—if she could.

To her joy the panel was not closed; a space of an inch or more showed black, and she got her fingers round the edge, and dragged it at gently. It moved soundlessly as if on well-oiled wheels.

A black orifice was before Ethel. On her face was a chill draught that brought with it a musty, earthy smell. Cousin Ethel shivered, and then she drew a deep breath and peered inside. All was dark—no sound came to her from within. She hesitated a moment, and then switched on her tiny pocket-torch. The beam of light shone on the stone wall facing her. To her left there appeared to be another stone wall as if the passage ended on that side; but to the right showed a flight of steep, stone steps leading downwards.

Dare she venture into those black, forbidding depths?

Once again Cousin Ethel set her teeth, and then she clambered through the aperture. One foot rested on the floor beyond, and then—

As she moved to put the other down something happened. The floor gave way below her foot; she overbalanced and fell headlong, a stifled, terrified scream escaping her involuntarily.

Luckily, her fall was not so serious as that of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

It was a sheer, abrupt drop, as sudden as it was unexpected, and before Cousin Ethel had actually realised what had happened she felt herself lying on something soft and yielding, and something that yelped and squealed.

"Yoooooop Ow!"

It was Baggy Trimble, and his yell of alarm and pain was followed by a sudden, startled cry from someone else.

"Oh, bai Jove! What—what— Oh, gweat Scott!"

In the dim, lantern light of the dungeon Arthur Augustus sat up and blinked at Cousin Ethel, who was sprawling across the fat form of Baggy Trimble.

"Oh, bai Jove!" Arthur Augustus was thunder-struck. He had been dozing, miserable with the cold and with thoughts of their hapless position, and the sudden happening startled him almost out of his wits. "Oh, bai Jove! Oh, gweat Scott! Cousin Ethel! Ethel, deah gal, is it you?"

"Ow! Oh dear!"

Cousin Ethel scrambled off Trimble, breathless, and considerably shaken. But the sound of Gussy's voice sent a joyful thrill through her.

"Arthur!" she panted. "So—so I have found you!"

Though she had hoped, had suspected that the trail might lead to her finding the missing juniors, Cousin Ethel was astounded and nearly fainted with the joy of the discovery.

"So you are safe—safe and sound, after all!" she gasped breathlessly, conscious only of Gussy's face before her. "Oh, how splendid! I hoped, I prayed that I might find some clue to where you were. And I have found you both, safe and sound."

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"Ethel, deah gal—"

Arthur Augustus faltered and stopped. He could not bring himself to voice the terrible news—to explain the real state of affairs. His heart was sick within him—Trimble and himself—and now Cousin Ethel.

It was horrible. Gussy forgot his own danger in that moment—one terrible thought hammered at his brain. Ethel was now a prisoner with them—at the mercy of a madman whose avowed aim and object was to kill them, to make a sacrifice of their lives.

Barton had said he wanted a third victim. Had he found a third in Cousin Ethel?

The girl's eyes were fixed on Arthur Augustus in alarm. "Arthur, why—why do you look at me like that?" she stammered. "Oh, don't say that I also am a prisoner here now?"

She glanced about her, and her face went suddenly whiter as she realised something of the truth. She saw it on Gussy's face, and in the hopeless expression on Trimble's ashen features.

"I—I am afraid that you are, Ethel," stammered D'Arcy miserably. "Does anyone know where you are? I mean, will they be able to trace you, deah gal?"

Cousin Ethel's lip trembled. Bitterly she blamed herself in that moment for having acted on her own—for not having left swift word as to her intentions. Now nobody knew where she was, nobody would dream that she was in the west wing at all. She had made a tragic mistake in acting so impulsively.

Almost unconsciously she glanced upwards at the trap-door through which she had fallen. It had gone back into its place soundlessly, as if worked by some hidden mechanism—as, indeed, it was. Then her eyes roved round the dismal chamber, wonder in her face. She noted the great, wide fireplace; and then she gave a sudden start as her eyes fell upon that shapeless pile in the far corner.

Arthur Augustus followed her glance.

"Nevah mind that, deah gal," he said gently. "There is weally nothin' to be afraid of in here; those cannot harm us. But Barton—"

Cousin Ethel was shivering violently; her keen eyes had soon told her what the pile was. But she strove to master herself, and her voice was almost steady as she answered.

"Barton, Arthur—yes, it was Barton I followed. I suspected him! Then it is Barton who holds you prisoners here? But where—"

The question Cousin Ethel was about to ask was answered in a startling manner just then. From behind them came a sudden laugh—a deep, cackling, gloating laugh—that almost froze the blood in Cousin Ethel's veins.

She turned abruptly, and her heart almost stopped beating at what she saw.

Part of the panelling had swung almost silently back; a gaping hole was in the wall. And standing in the aperture thus made was a striking figure—and a terrifying one.

It was that of a Cavalier of olden days—in gay plumed hat and cloak, buckled shoes, and white lace. A gleaming sword was in the apparition's right hand.

An almost inarticulate gasp escaped the frightened girl. In the dim, flickering light from the lantern the figure looked strangely ghostly and weird.

"It's all wight, deah gal!" muttered Arthur Augustus, though his own heart was beating rapidly. "It is onlay Barton. He wanders about the house at night playin' ghost! Don't be afraid—"

"Oh!" panted Ethel.

For one terrifying moment common-sense and reason had almost left her; it had been hard to repress the thought that she was looking upon the ghost of Sir Ralph D'Arcy. Cousin Ethel drew a sobbing breath of relief.

The figure came nearer into the lantern-light, and now the girl could see the face under the plumed, wide-brimmed hat. It was certainly Barton. The look in the old man's eyes sent a deep shudder through the girl.

"Barton!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, his voice shaking a little. "There has been enough of this! Pway listen to me—"

Barton interrupted him with another fearful laugh. He pointed with his gleaming sword at Cousin Ethel. His face was exultant—terrible in its gloating triumph.

"Three!" he cried. "The three victims for the sacrifice are here at last! Fate has aided me once again! Miss Cleveland, to-morrow you will have the honour of giving your life as a sacrifice to save the D'Arcys. And I," he added, raising the gleaming sword aloft, "will have the honour of performing the ceremony to avert the Curse! With this sword—Sir Ralph's own blood-mirched sword—must you be slain!"

The high-pitched, frenzied words reverberated round the vault-like chamber. Then, as the last echo died away, the amazing change that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Trimble had witnessed before came over the old man. In an instant

the contorted, insane expression vanished, and Barton's features had assumed their usual unemotional suavity.

"You will be wise to accept the inevitable, Miss Cleveland," said the old butler, with a sudden return to his usual smooth, respectful tones. "I regret the necessity of this as much as you do, miss. Master Arthur, pray do not think of violence."

Arthur Augustus had thought of it, but just as quickly he decided it unwise. To have attacked the madman alone would have been hopeless, and might only make matters worse.

Barton crossed to the opening in the wall and left the room quietly in his old stately manner. It seemed amazing to think that Barton the madman and Barton the suave, polished, and dignified old manservant, were one and the same person. The sudden change was remarkable and startling. But the hapless victims understood; they knew the craftiness, the cunning of an insane person. And as the door in the wall closed upon them their hearts sank like lead, and they gave themselves up to despair.

CHAPTER 7.

Face to Face!

"WHO saw her last?" asked Tom Merry shakily. Doris Levison answered, her voice trembling with keen anxiety and fear.

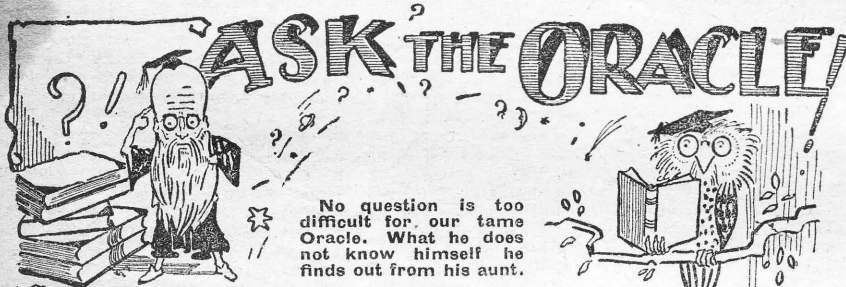
"I did—just before Lowther switched off the light!" she said. "At least, I suppose we all must have seen her then."

"She was standing by me," said Figgins, his face ashen. "Look here, nothing can have happened to her, Tom Merry!" he said fiercely, though his face belied his statement. "She can't be far away. Why, it's only—"

"I'll call again!" said Tom.

He called; and the others also called, not daring to raise their voices high, for fear of disturbing the sleeping. But no answer came in reply. Wherever Ethel Cleveland was, she could not have been within hearing.

"Figgy and Blake, will you run along with Doris to see (Continued on next page.)"



No question is too difficult for our tame Oracle. What he does not know himself he finds out from his aunt.

and a few other parts of South America, and frequents rivers and lake where it lives on fish and small crabs. The female yapok, like the Australian kangaroo, has a pouch in which it carries its young.

Q. What is a bill?

A. I am sure that in sending in this question, William Watney of Macclesfield was not trying to be funny, for he stated that in a historical novel he was reading it said that the soldiery were armed with bills. This sort of bill, William, is an old-fashioned weapon which was also called a halberd. Then there's more than one sort of bill, Will—a bird's beak; the exchange of caresses between doves; a written statement such as a receipt; draft of a proposed Act of Parliament; or an announcement such as the sort which is posted on a hoarding. Oh, yes—and then, of course, there is also you, Bill!

Q. What is a nutrimentum spiritus?

A. A new reader, Jack Bealby, has asked me for this interpretation from the La in. "It is like this," he complains in his letter, "my Form-master found out that I had told a fib about the time I had spent over prep. and, chucking me over a desk, the big bully lammed me with his cane. 'There!' he exclaimed, 'Nutrimentum spiritus!' Do you think he meant anything, or is he really going potty, as I suspect?" Your Form-master, Jack was justified in his use of the phrase which means "food for the soul." Apparently, he thought that a dose of the cane would be good for the welfare of your spirit.

Q. What is a tuba?

A. A young chum of Barnsley, who has kindly sent me a packet of cigarette cards "for my great-grandchildren," included this question in a very matey letter. A tuba, my young Barnsley friend, is a low-pitched kind of trumpet which is used both in orchestras and military bands. In military band parlance, the tenor tuba is called an euphonium and the bass variety is known as a bombardon or helicon—and serve it right! It must not be confused, though, my chum, with the trombone, which is the cheerful old instrument with the slide which so often furnishes amusement to lovers of music by catching the "second violin" in the back of the neck!



Another kind of bill—got the tailor's. This bill was a weapon in use many years ago.

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Q. What is kismet?

A. This question was sent in to me by a Council schoolboy who wishes to be known as "Midnight Oil." It is a Turkish word derived from the Arabic *qismet* and means destiny. Like several of the Eastern races, the Turks are fatalists, and when anything goes seriously wrong in their lives they are apt to shrug their shoulders and say "It is kismet!" In other words, it is fate or something which could not be avoided.

Q. Is there anything that becomes longer when you cut it at the ends?

A. Yes, George T.—a ditch!

Q. Where is Piccalilli?

A. I have received a most interesting letter from a young coloured reader of the GEM, by name of Livingstone Mbombo, who lives at Accra on the Gold Coast. My regret is that I cannot publish it in full, but it consists of fourteen closely-written sheets of paper. "One day," says Mbombo, "it is hopes of mine to come to seat of Empire, and will you kindly advise per return male-boat where



A common sight in Spain. A mantilla, or shawl, the ladies wear over their heads and shoulders.

is Piccalilli, where circus is held, as I should like to go into same? Would rejoice if in answer you could supply any cigarette pictures or specimens of English coins." You shall have my next cigarette card, Mbombo, but it happens that I am collecting English coins myself—or trying to. Moreover, I hope you won't get into any piccalilli when you come over here or else you will be in the pickle! What you are thinking of, I suppose, is Piccadilly Circus in the heart of London. When you arrive, just ask a



A Yapok starting his fish course at dinner. This animal resides in South America on the shores of the rivers.

police-man. The best of luck to you in your law studies at Kudu College.

Q. What is a calumet?

A. A pipe made from a reed called the calumet and smoked by the Red Indians of North America. It was sometimes called the pipe of peace, for when the members of two tribes smoked the calumet together, it meant that they desired to be on friendly terms. If a chief refused to smoke a calumet when offered to him, he was marked as an enemy ready to go on the warpath at any time.

Q. Where is the Louvre?

A. In Paris, Donald MacCracken, of Peebles. Paris is a far cry from Peebles, I know, but I hope you will have your desire and go there one day. If so you will find the Louvre in the heart of the city on the banks of the River Seine. At one time it was an ancient palace and stronghold, and afterwards a royal library. To-day it is a museum, and remarkable for its valuable pictures and other works of art.

Q. What is a mantilla?

A. A large veil worn over the head and shoulders of the women of Spain and elsewhere.

Q. What is a yapok?

A. A Canadian boy who politely signs himself as "One of your Million Readers," says he saw the term "yapok" in a travel book and wants to know what it is. A yapok, my Canadian chum, is a species of water opossum—in Latin we call it *Chironectes minima*. It lives in Brazil

if she's in her room?" said Tom Merry. "There's nothing to be alarmed at yet. But—"

Tom broke off. He realised that nobody was likely to be reassured by his words. That Cousin Ethel could have gone off of her own accord without leaving word, he could not believe. Then what could have happened to her?

In view of recent events, anything seemed possible, and alarm was written on the faces of all the little group. They stood in breathless silence until the return of Doris and her companions; and their faces told the answer without words.

"She isn't in her room!" said Doris. "I—I can't understand it at all! It—it almost seems as though she has been spirited away! I didn't hear her go, or move!"

"Neither did I," said Figgins shakily. "It's queer, Tom Merry. Turn the light on, for goodness' sake, somebody!"

The nearest electric light was switched on, and the company blinked at each other in scared silence.

"No good standing here, though!" said Tom, his voice sounding strangely unlike his usual confident tones. "We'd better scout round a bit and try to find her. If we don't in a reasonable time, then we'd better rouse the house. Most of the rooms in this wing are unoccupied, I believe. Get going, for goodness' sake!"

Everyone was only too eager to do that—anything to break the intolerable suspense of waiting there. Breaking up into parties again, they started a swift search in nearby rooms and passages. Doris, with an escort, went again to Ethel's room, only to come back with the same report. Ethel was not there. They ceased searching at last, and gathered together at the head of the great staircase, under Tom Merry's order.

"No go!" said Tom, a note of despair in his voice. "It—it beats me! We'd better waken Lord Eastwood, I think. No use risking— Wha-what's that?"

It was only the clock in the tower striking the hour. But in the present tense state of nerves the sound was startling, unnerving.

One, two, three, four—

Slowly, eerily, the notes of twelve boomed out, every tone quivering on the night air outside like the notes of a distant organ, telling that Christmas Eve was ended, and Christmas Day had come.

"Midnight!" whispered Lowther.

The last note quivered into silence; and as it did so, without warning the electric light above their heads went out.

Startled gasps came from the ghost-hunters as they stood in the deep gloom. Nobody had been standing near the switch at the moment, yet the light had gone out. Nobody thought of switching on a torch; all were far too startled at the unexpected, unlooked for happening.

"Who-what—" breathed Tom Merry.

"Hush!" came a shaky whisper from someone.

From the dimly seen stairs had come a faint sound. Only a faint glimmer of light came from the tall stained-glass windows above the stairs. The little group stared and stared, hearts thumping violently. Something was coming up the wide staircase; they all had heard that sound. They could see nothing yet, but suddenly Tom Merry felt his arm gripped convulsively.

It was Doris Levison who gripped him, and Tom felt her trembling. Then Tom saw it—a faint, dimly-seen form in the darkness, and he caught a glint of steel.

There was a deathly silence.

Not for worlds could anyone have moved or spoken.

It was standing there, at the top of the stairs. What?

With staring eyes and parted lips the party stood, striving to make out its shape. Tom Merry could hardly keep back the yell that came to his lips. The very stillness of the apparition—whatever it was—was unnerving, uncanny.

Doris Levison could stand it no longer. She clutched Tom Merry, and a half-stifled scream escaped her. Her keen eyes had made out the shape—the shape of a cloak and plumed hat.

The sound broke the spell that gripped Tom. The next second a beam of light flashed out and settled full upon the shape.

If the ghost-hunters had been scared before, they were terrified at what they saw now.

All of them caught their breath. It was the phantom Cavalier!

The face was half hidden by the wide, sweeping hat with its gay plume. But under the brim they caught the glitter of a pair of fierce eyes—eyes that seemed to bore into their very brains.

"Good heavens!" breathed Tom Merry shakily.

It was all very well to scoff at ghosts in the daytime—Tom had scoffed many times and oft. But here, in the deep gloom, with the booming notes of midnight barely silent, after sounding the death-knell of that Christmas Eve, to scoff was not so easy.

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But not for long did the watchers stare at the horrible form.

For suddenly the cloak swished back, and an arm came out and a sword flashed like a streak of light in the air.

"Look out!" shrieked someone.

The ghost of Sir Ralph, the evil Cavalier, moved at last—with terrible swiftness.

As the arm came up with its glittering weapon, the Cavalier leaped towards them.

Who started the mad stampede that followed nobody could say, and nobody could be blamed for it. To face that gleaming steel in the hands of the leaping, terrifying form was more than the watchers could do—any one of them.



Ethel Cleveland caught her breath as she peered along the gloom over the carved panel! Then—click! A large black opening had vanished through

One and all, they bolted for their very lives, Tom Merry gripping the trembling arm of Doris, who could never have moved but for his aid. They flew along the corridor, away from the stairs, with gasps of terror.

A wild, blood-curdling cackle of ghastly laughter followed them, adding to the terror in their hearts.

Fortunately some of the juniors had the presence of mind to switch on their lights, which danced and flickered grotesquely on the panelling as they dashed for safety.

But Tom managed to bring the wild stampede to an end close to the door of his own room.

"Stop!" he panted. "It's not following. Oh, my hat!"

The little party stopped after hasty glances behind them. Tom Merry looked for the passage switch and soon a brilliant, welcome light blazed out. Gasping for breath, the party eyed each other shamefacedly.

"Oh, my hat!" panted Tom Merry. "Nice sort of ghost-hunters we are, I don't think! I don't remember running so fast in my natural."

"Let's go back," suggested Blake.

He scarcely meant the suggestion, it was more out of bravado than anything else. He knew it was unlikely to be taken up. The white faces of his companions told him that.

"It was the sword I didn't like the look of!" gasped Tom. "I'd like to meet the man who could have faced that. But—but what's to be—"

He broke off abruptly, with a sharp intake of breath. "Someone coming!" breathed Blake.

It was from the opposite direction from which they had come, however, and the sight of a beam of white light reassured them. Someone was approaching with an electric lamp, and it proved to be Lord Eastwood himself. The earl was in his dressing-gown, and he eyed the scared group in amazement.

"What does this mean, boys—and you, Doris?" he de-



passage. Barton was scarcely a dozen yards away, his hands moving toward the wall, and as the girl watched with staring eyes, the old man it! (See Chapter 6.)

manded. "Why on earth are you up and about at this hour?"

"We—we've been ghost-hunting, sir," stammered Tom. "And we've just seen the ghost."

"What?"

"At least, it must have been someone playing ghost!" amended Tom, flushing under his lordship's keen glance. "But—but we've bad news for you, sir! Something has happened—something alarming. Cousin Ethel—"

Tom Merry was at a loss to explain matters satisfactorily.

"We—we were about to come for you, sir, when we saw the ghost, or whatever it was!" he went on white-faced and wretched. "I suppose it's all my fault. I suggested that we should all watch to-night. I believed that someone was playing ghost and that he knew where Trimble and Gussy are. I—I hoped we should discover something. Instead—"

"Go on," said Lord Eastwood; he seemed to guess, to anticipate what was coming. His eyes scanned the group with startled intentness. "Go on! And Ethel—where is she?"

Haltingly Tom stammered out the story, aided now and again by the rest. Without a word the old earl motioned to them and led the way to Cousin Ethel's room. They found the door open. Lord Eastwood flashed the light

from his lamp inside the room. It was empty. He then switched on the electric light as if to make doubly sure. It revealed nothing.

The old earl bit his moustache—he was obviously badly shaken and bewildered.

"We will look for this—this ghost first!" he said. "Come! You see that the electric light is on here!"

"It was on in our passage," said Tom.

"The main switch is just under the main staircase," said Lord Eastwood. "If someone was playing tricks he could easily have switched it on again when you fled. If you would rather remain behind—"

"We're coming, sir!" It was a chorus. The quiet tones of the old earl were bringing the juniors' courage back. In any case they would never have allowed him to go alone—though it was clear his lordship believed they had seen nothing—that their nerves had played them tricks, or that someone had, indeed, been playing tricks.

They felt ashamed of their own inglorious flight now, and they accompanied the old earl quickly enough. As they drew near the head of the big staircase they gasped aloud. For the nest of lights above it was burning brilliantly.

There was no sign of anyone about—not a sound broke the stillness. In silence they accompanied Lord Eastwood to the hall below, and the lights were switched on there.

"You are quite sure that you can think of no possible reason for Ethel's absence—you can suggest nothing—"

"Nothing! It's—it's amazing, sir!"

"Then there is nothing else for it," said Lord Eastwood, his face looking worn and anxious. "I cannot bring myself to believe that harm can have befallen any of them, and yet—the house must be roused at once, and a thorough search made. Will you kindly sound the gong there—do not be afraid to make a noise."

"Very well, sir!"

Tom Merry was the first to reach the big Chinese gong hanging on the wall, and the next moment its booming notes were ringing through the silent house. Very soon all was bustle and excitement in the great building. James, the footman, was the first servant to put in an appearance, and he gaped in amazement as the old earl explained. The next to arrive was Barton, who came hastening along from the direction of the back staircase.

He blinked sleepily round in amazement, or so it seemed.

"What is the matter—what—your lordship—"

"Another alarming thing has happened, Barton!" said Lord Eastwood. "Miss Cleveland, one of my guests, has vanished—or so it seems. Will you kindly get the men-servants together and institute a thorough search? No stone must be left unturned to find her."

"Er—very good, sir."

Tom Merry could not help eyeing the old man keenly, but his astonishment was well feigned, and even Tom was disarmed by his acting. The next few minutes all were busy searching, and lights were blazing all over the house. Tired and chilled as they were, Tom Merry & Co. and even Doris Levison joined in, until, after an hour of fruitless searching, Lord Eastwood ordered them to bed.

"The servants and I have had some little measure of sleep," he exclaimed firmly. "You all are tired out and chilled. You must retire to your bed-rooms at once. Kindly obey me!"

They obeyed the agitated old earl. They could do nothing else, for he was obviously firmly determined they should retire. Leaving the rest still searching, the ghost-hunters went to bed. But not to sleep. Few of them got any sleep for the rest of that eventful night, or, rather, morning. And when the winter dawn came at last—Christmas Day—they turned out, weary-eyed and tired, but anxious to learn any news. But there was no news. Cousin Ethel had not been found. A deep gloom had settled on the building, and the Eastwood House guests almost began to believe what most of the domestic staff were already convinced, that the Curse of the D'Arcys was being fulfilled!

## CHAPTER 8.

### A Desperate Plan!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY stirred, and opened his eyes, with a convulsive shiver. He found the tired eyes of Cousin Ethel regarding him.

"You have awakened, then, Arthur," said Ethel, trying to smile. "Trimble is still sleeping. I don't think I ever remember snoring being a comforting sound to me before. But Trimble's snore made me feel less lonely and depressed, somehow. It has quite taken away the eeriness of this awful place."

But, despite her brave words, Cousin Ethel shivered.

Arthur Augustus coloured under the grime on his face.

"My dear gal," he exclaimed in dismay, "have I been asleep? I wearily intended to remain awake, to keep guard

ovah you, you know. But—gweat Scott!—I must have dropped off. I am so vewy sowwy, deah gal!”

“You needed sleep much more than I did,” said Ethel, trying to speak cheerfully. “Don’t worry about that, Arthur. Hallo! Trimble is waking.”

Trimble sat up, rubbing his eyes and shivering violently. He had been lying with blankets wrapped almost round his head as well as his body. The terror of sleeping in that awful death chamber had been a very real terror to Baggy Trimble. But he had dropped off long before either Gussy or Ethel had done so, and he had been the last to wake. Really, it was a wonder any of the three had slept on that awful night, with the terrible prospect of what lay ahead ever before them.

Moreover, though Barton had brought them extra blankets, the chill of the place went to their bones. They had huddled for warmth round the smoky lantern, and now the terrible night had passed at last.

It was Christmas Day! Arthur Augustus paled as he thought of it. Was it to be their last day? Would the madman keep his word? Were they to be sacrifices to his insane imaginings?

Whether the same thought came to Ethel, Arthur Augustus did not know. If it did, the plucky girl showed no signs of it. But Trimble had no sooner opened his eyes and glanced about him than he started to whimper aloud.

“Oh dear! It’s Christmas Day!” he mumbled. “Oh, it’s awful! Can’t you do anything, D’Arcy? It’s all your fault. It’s up to you to get us out of this hole! Oh, don’t I wish I’d never seen the beastly place. Oh dear! I’m frozen to the bone and famished with hunger!”

“Oh, do dwy up, Twimble!” said Gussy. “We’re all thwice in the same boat, but we’re not snivellin’, you feahful funk! Do dwy up!”

Trimble did not answer, save for sundry sniffs and sobs. He wrapped the blanket round him again, and blinked hopelessly at the dim flame of the lantern.

Cousin Ethel looked at Gussy seriously.

“I—suppose there’s no hope of getting out of this, Arthur, before that terrible man comes again?” she asked, her voice trembling a little. “Cannot we try—do something?”

Arthur Augustus shook his head slowly.

“I’m afwaid not, deah gal!” he said thickly. “I’ve already examined the whole place, and I’ve even tried to climb up the chimney. But it is hopeless. Iron bars are across it a few feet up, Ethel. And that door in the wall—Barton claims it cannot be opened from inside, and I myself have tried in vain. Moreovah—”

Arthur Augustus paused, and his glance went to the heap of human remains in the corner. Cousin Ethel repressed a shiver as her eyes followed his. She knew the story now—the story of the twelve Roundheads and of their betrayal by Sir Ralph D’Arcy centuries ago. She had insisted upon asking questions, and Trimble had not been so loath to answer them as was Arthur Augustus.

The story had filled her with horror, but she had got over it somewhat by this.

“You need not fear mentioning them,” she said. “I have got over that. I am not afraid of them, Arthur. Of course, if those twelve men could not force a way out, it is unlikely that we can. I wonder if Barton will bring us any breakfast. Condemned prisoners are generally allowed a good breakfast.”

And the brave girl laughed faintly at her joke.

Gussy smiled grimly.

“I think so,” he said. “He bwrought Twimble some food yesterday. But I am afwaid this place has taken my appetite away, deah gal.” He consulted his wrist-watch in the dim light of the flickering lantern. “Bai Jove! It is neahly half-past eight, Ethel!”

“And here comes our breakfast!” said Cousin Ethel, with a queer catch in her voice.

A slight sound had come from the wall. The trio watched it, fascinated, as the gap widened and the door swung heavily back. It was Barton, and his white shirt-front glimmered in the dim light. He advanced into the room, bearing a basket and a steaming jug. The musty odour of the apartment gave place suddenly to the delicious smell of coffee.

It was breakfast. Baggy Trimble suddenly forgot his terror of the insane butler, and he sat up and took notice, as it were.

“Here is your breakfast,” said Barton, bowing in his dignified manner. “I regret the necessity for you to take the meal in such company as this,” he added, with a ghastly chuckle, pointing at the skeletons in the corner, “but it is unavoidable, and I assure you that you are much more fortunate than those Roundheads were. They were imprisoned without food, and theirs was a lingering death. I may add—No, no, Master Arthur, I would advise you not to get up,” he added, as Arthur Augustus set his teeth and made a movement to get to his feet. “It would grieve me

to use force, and I have no wish to deprive you of the comfort of food during your last hours, especially as it is Christmas Day.”

As he spoke the butler swiftly lowered the basket and jug and stepped back, guarding the doorway. His voice was still suave and dignified, but the insane glint in his piercing eyes made Arthur Augustus shiver.

Slowly the junior sank back on the floor again. The sudden impulse to make a fight for it had come to him, but at the butler’s words it disappeared again. Against the madman he knew he had not an atom of chance of success. Cousin Ethel would have backed him up gallantly enough, he knew. Possibly Trimble, out of sheer terror and desperation, would have aided him also. But even the three of them would have stood no chance in a hand-to-hand conflict with the madman. Old as he was, Gussy had already had evidence that Barton’s frenzied strength was superhuman.

It was a ghastly position, but there was no way out.

Trimble was already diving into the basket, and Cousin Ethel, as calmly as she could, took the three cups from the basket and started to pour out coffee.

How had Barton brought these things through the house from the kitchen without attracting notice? How had he obtained the stuff? A sudden thought occurred to Ethel, just as Barton was going.

“Wait,” she pleaded, her white face turned pleadingly towards the butler, who was backing to the secret door. “You have brought us food, and that is good of you, Barton. Can we have one other concession—a fire? We are half-frozen with the chill of this terrible place. If we are to die—”

She paused, and eyed the butler anxiously. He eyed her in turn, craftily, suspiciously, as if he suspected some reason behind the request. But as he noted the white faces and shivering forms of the prisoners, he nodded.

“Yes, miss,” he exclaimed, “I think I can manage to let you have wood and matches. But you must make the fire yourselves. I regret that I cannot attend to that matter personally. It grieves me greatly to be obliged to bring this discomfort upon you. But it will not be for long; your troubles will soon be over!”

And, with a terrible laugh, the old man shuffled out, and the heavy door closed.

Arthur Augustus looked at Ethel.

“You—you have some ideah in askin’ for a fire, Ethel?” he breathed.

“Yes, I think so, Arthur,” whispered Ethel, her white face thoughtful. “This is the west wing, mostly unoccupied. It is unlikely a single fire will be burning in any room in this part of the house. Do you think so, Arthur?”

“Bai Jove!” Arthur Augustus D’Arcy’s eyes gleamed as he began to see what was working in his cousin’s mind.

“You—you mean—”

“I mean that if Barton allows us a fire then the smoke from it is bound to emerge from a chimney in the west wing—and that chimney is almost certain to be in the ruined part of the wing. If the smoke is seen—”

“Oh, bai Jove!”

“It may attract attention—especially as I’m sure our friends will be on the look-out for anything suspicious,” whispered Ethel. “You—you think I am right!”

“Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!” breathed Arthur Augustus. “I know that no fire is evah lit in the west wing, deah gal! It is a vewy good ideah indeed. And the warmth will be welcome, in any case,” he added grimly. “I wondah— Bai Jove!”

Arthur Augustus paused as a daring idea came to him.

“What is it, Arthur?” asked Cousin Ethel breathlessly.

“I have an ideah, deah gal! I believe, with luck, we can manage to get a message out,” said Gussy, in a thrilling whisper. “Listen! When Barton returns try to get him to come in— I have it! Say that you are feelin’ faint. Get him to stoop ovah you if you can.”

“Yes, but what—”

“He may return at any moment!” panted Arthur Augustus, taking his pocket-book from his pocket frantically. “No time to explain, deah gal. Bai Jove! If it will only come off—”

As he spoke, Arthur Augustus fumbled in his pocket and produced a silver pencil-case. The next moment he was scribbling on a page hastily torn from it. He had just managed to scribble a few lines when again came the faint sound from the wall, and the junior hastily pocketed paper and pencil, and grabbed a sandwich from the bag.

“Bai Jove, weally, Twimble!” he exclaimed in pretended indignation, “you have vewy neahly scoffed the lot already! Ethel, deah gal, you have had scarcely anythin’—cannot you weach—”

“My head is aching terribly,” said Ethel, conscious that the door was opening behind her, and quick-witted enough to follow up Gussy’s lead. There was no need for the plucky girl to feign her suffering. She was already feeling the effects of her confinement in the musty chamber. “I must ask— Ah! Here is Barton!”



The old butler entered a few paces and laid down on the flags a pile of wood—evidently floorboards from the garrets above. He went out for a second again, and then returned bearing a second pile. Then he came over to Arthur Augustus and held out a box of matches.

"Barton!" pleaded Cousin Ethel, placing a hand to her forehead, "I feel so faint! Couldn't you bring me some water?"

Barton came over to the girl—she was the farthest from him—had purposely moved away from her fellow prisoners, in fact. Barton was all unsuspecting; he had heard her words as he entered, and he obviously suspected nothing.

The door was almost closed, and the crazy old man knew that an attempt to escape was hopeless. He stooped over the white-faced girl. His face was almost fatherly as he did so. It seemed strange that such a mixture of fiendish cruelty, and of urbane dignity and kindness, could find place in the same man—insane as he undoubtedly was.

As he stooped, Cousin Ethel, who was half-kneeling, pretended to fall sideways on one elbow.

It was cleverly done, and still without a suspicion, the old man took another step towards her.

His back was now towards Arthur Augustus, and the junior acted swiftly, silently. Here was the chance he had scarcely dared to hope for.

The sheet of notepaper torn from his pocket-book was in Gussy's left hand the next second, and in his right hand was his tiepin.

With a gentle movement—sheer desperation made it swift and sure—Arthur Augustus pinned the sheet of paper to the old man's coat tails as he stooped low over Cousin Ethel.

Trimble almost fainted as he saw it done—so daring, so audacious and simple did it seem. Yet their lives rested on the success of Gussy's ancient and simple trick.

On more than one occasion at St. Jim's, Gussy had had that trick played upon him. Lowther had, more than once, amused himself by pinning a legend to his jacket asking all and sundry to "Kick me hard!"

It was a trick far below the dignity of the noble Arthur Augustus in the ordinary way. But he had played it now to save three lives!

Would it succeed?

Arthur Augustus almost choked with tense anxiety as the old man straightened up after his scrutiny of Cousin Ethel's white face. It was then the girl caught sight of the sheet of paper pinned to his coat tails, and it was all she could do to restrain an hysterical laugh at the sight.

In the doorway Barton paused.

"Enjoy your breakfast?" he exclaimed gravely. "Your lunch will be the last meal on earth for you. After the meal the ceremony will be performed, the sacrifice made, and the curse blotted out."

He passed out with a bow, and the door closed with a heavy thud. Breathlessly the prisoners watched it, scarcely daring to voice their emotion. Trimble had even forgotten to continue eating in his excitement and agitation.

"M-my hat!" he gasped, eyeing Arthur Augustus blankly. "Fancy you having the nerve to do that, Gussy. Oh dear! I say, if he finds out you've played that trick on him he'll kill us without waiting for noon. You—you—"

"Be quiet!" breathed Cousin Ethel warningly. "He may be listening. For Heaven's sake don't spoil everything, Trimble! Be quiet!"

In dead silence they waited, listening intently. But no sound came, and they realised that the old butler had gone. Ethel took a sandwich from the basket—luckily Trimble had not had time to devour the lot, though he had done his best, and started to eat.

"Bai Jove!" breathed Arthur Augustus. "I—I believe it will come off, deah gal. It is a slendah chance, but—"

"I don't think it slender, Arthur," said Cousin Ethel, her voice thrilling with excitement now. "He will go boldly into the house to carry on with his duties, little dreaming of the message he is carrying out with him. Someone will see it—someone is bound to notice it. And if they can get a glimpse at it before he gets the chance to destroy it—"

"That is the danger," said Arthur Augustus, his face falling somewhat. "But there is a chance, and we must hope for the best. Now, what about lightin' a fiah, deah gal?"

And after a hasty drink of coffee they started to light a fire. It was doubly necessary now for it to be done quickly. The wood luckily was dry, and soon a roaring fire was lighting up the room—the first fire to light up that secret chamber probably for centuries. Dragging their blankets nearer to the fireplace they all three crouched in its welcome warmth. There was hope now—a slender hope certainly; but while there was a chance of life they did not intend to despair. Their message had gone out into the world, and they hoped and prayed that it would fall into friendly hands, and bring rescue before it was too late.

## CHAPTER 9.

## The Message!

"I WISH we could do something!"

Doris Levison breathed the words as she joined Tom Merry & Co. on the terrace on Christmas morning. The juniors were strolling up and down. It was a bright December morning, really old-fashioned Christmas weather. The snow had ceased, and the wind had died down with the coming of dawn. The wintry sun shone down on gleaming snow that lay deeply banked round the house and against the black trunks of the trees in the park.

The post had been, bringing presents from parents and greetings from friends from all corners of the kingdom. But on this occasion they brought little pleasure to the guests at Eastwood House. None of them felt like doing anything but wander about, anxiously discussing the shadow that hung over the household.

There had been no news with the coming of daylight. No trace of Cousin Ethel had been found—nor of the missing juniors. All three had vanished as if the very earth had opened and swallowed them. Lord Eastwood had felt obliged to bring the police in, and an inspector had been down, and had made voluminous notes, and had spent an hour while they were at breakfast looking over the house. After breakfast he had questioned every one of the guests. But that was all he had done, and at last he had departed to make further investigations elsewhere.

Tom Merry bit his lip as Doris joined them, and he noted her strained, haggard face.

"I really don't see what else we can do, Doris," he said quietly. "We've searched and we've done all in our power to find them. It's a baffling mystery."

"Lady Eastwood is terribly upset," said Doris, "though the earl hasn't told her all yet. She is keeping to her room, but—but she will have to know all. What a Christmas for them and for us! Cannot we do something more, Tom Merry?"

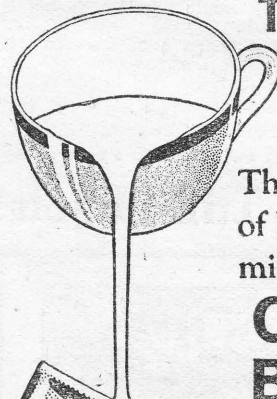
Tom frowned again.

"We could make another search," he said, "but—"

"I—I'm worried about something!" whispered Doris, looking over her shoulder fearfully. "You remember last night—just before Ethel left us? I was watching her. She was staring at Barton all the time—she could not keep her

(Continued on next page.)

# ATHLETES TRAIN ON IT



There is half a cup  
of English full cream  
milk in every

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BIG MILK  
BAR 2<sup>D</sup>**



eyes off him. I—I'm sure she suspects that man of something."

Tom Merry started.

Back into his mind came his own early suspicions of the old manservant. It was curious that they should be shared by Ethel.

"I know that look on her face," went on Doris. "She is very keen-witted, you know, and she had a reason for watching him, I'm sure. And—and she disappeared after he had gone. I'm wondering, Tom Merry, if she followed him, and—and—"

She broke off, and Tom whistled softly.

Was it possible that Doris could be right—had Ethel followed the old butler? And had something happened to her while doing so?

"You—you suspect him, too?" asked Tom, eyeing her.

"I—I feel strangely afraid of him!" faltered Doris. "His eyes—they seem to look through you. They remind me of—of—"

"Go on!" breathed Tom. "Of whom—"

"Of the ghost we saw last night!" gasped Doris, getting it out at last. "The thought came to me even as we turned and ran last night. It—it's silly, but one does get ideas, and—"

"It isn't silly at all!" said Tom quietly. "The fact is, Doris, I suspected that man myself at first. And don't forget that we caught him prowling about in the dark. Phew! If he was spoofing us, then he's a jolly clever actor. But—look here, say nothing to the others of this, Doris. I'll tackle the chap myself—I'll have a good talk with him and see if I can spot something wrong first."

Leaving Doris Levison, Tom hurried indoors and made his way to the servants' quarters below stairs. In the passage leading to the kitchens he met James, the footman.

"Is Barton about, James?"

James halted, and once again Tom noted the strange look at the mention of Barton.

"Mr. Barton is absent at the moment, sir!" he answered hesitatingly. "I myself have been looking for him as his lordship requires him."

"Barton appears to be rather unwell of late, James," said Tom, eyeing the footman narrowly. "It seems strange that he is never to be found when wanted. Can you explain it?"

The man hesitated, his eyes fixed on Tom's face. But what he read there seemed to give him encouragement and he spoke at last.

"Master Merry," he said gravely, "it is not for me to discuss my superior behind his back. But as you have asked me I will tell you my view, and perhaps you can advise me whether to report to Lord Eastwood or not. I have no desire to worry him unnecessarily. But—something is certainly wrong with Mr. Barton. He has been very strange of late, and the cook and the rest of the kitchen staff are afraid of him. We all feel that Lord Eastwood should be told and that a doctor should see Mr. Barton."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

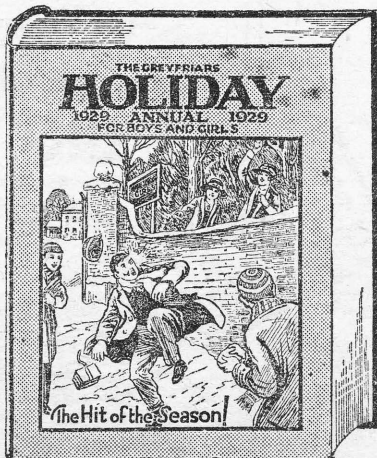
But before he could speak again a step sounded and the old butler himself came along the passage. He was walking quickly, and as he sighted the two he seemed to sense that they were discussing him. A queer glint came into his dark, restless eyes.

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"Master Merry is asking for you, Mr. Barton," said James, his voice showing a trace of uneasiness. "His lordship has also been making inquiries for you."

Barton started.

"You wished to see me, Master Merry?" he asked, recovering himself swiftly.

"I—I was going to ask you if you could tell me more about the disused part of the west wing, Barton!" said Tom, watching the old butler narrowly. "I also wondered if I could have the key again so that we could carry out another search there. I still have a feeling that that part of the house holds the secret of this business!"

Barton did not speak for a moment. James had turned and walked away. Tom felt a shiver run through him as he met the butler's cold, piercing glance. The man seemed to be reading his very thoughts. Tom understood why Doris had seen a connection between the butler's eyes and those of the ghostly form of the night before.

Tom shivered again, and then Barton spoke, as suavely and dignified as ever.

"There is nothing I can tell you that I have not already told you, I am afraid, sir!" he said. "As for visiting the disused garrets again, would it not be a waste of time, Master Merry?"

"I mean to see them again, Barton!" said Tom stubbornly. "Lord Eastwood has given us permission to search there, and I intend to do so again. If you will hand me the key we can search alone without troubling you to accompany us."

There was another silence. Barton's glance was full with deep suspicion now—he did not seem to trouble to hide it. Again Tom shivered at the look in his eyes.

"So you intend to visit the disused part of the house again, Master Merry?"

"Yes."

"You will not heed my warning that it is a waste of time, and that it will be dangerous to anyone unfamiliar with the danger-traps there," said Barton. "The rotting floors, sir—"

"We'll risk that, Barton. If you'll kindly hand me the key—"

"I cannot do that without his lordship's authority, Master Merry!"

"But—"

"I fear I must have his permission personally," said the old butler, a strange gleam in his eyes. "Will you accompany me to his room upstairs, sir—"

"Lord Eastwood is in the library now, Barton," said Tom.

"He has just gone upstairs to his dressing-room, sir!" said Barton smoothly. "I met him on my way here. Without his personal permission I feel I cannot hand you the key, Master Merry."

"Very well!" said Tom, biting his lip.

The butler's eyes glittered strangely and he turned on his heel. Tom followed—a strange feeling of uneasiness and fear taking possession of him. That Barton had some secret to hide he was certain in his own mind now. And that Barton suspected he knew it he was also certain.

Why was the man so anxious for him to accompany him upstairs? Tom was quite certain he was lying—that Lord Eastwood was still in the library. Tom had half a mind to turn back—to refuse to go. And just as the thought struck him Tom saw something—something so ridiculous that it almost took his breath away.

It was a small sheet of paper pinned to the butler's coat-tails!

It wobbled about with every movement of the coat-tails as Barton strode on with his stately, dignified stride.

Tom could have laughed aloud. It looked very funny, and he felt he knew who was responsible. It was just the sort of trick young Wally was inclined to indulge in—or perhaps Lowther had done it for a jape on the stately old manservant.

But even as the thought came to Tom he dismissed it, and his face suddenly grew rigid and serious. He had caught sight of the pin that fastened the paper to the cloth. At a glance he saw that it was a gold pin, and it certainly was unlikely that any practical joker would use a gold pin for such a purpose.

"My—my hat!" breathed Tom.

He recognised that pin the next instant—he had seen it often enough adorning the gorgeous ties of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

What did it mean? Was it—could it be a message?

Full of suspicion now, Tom acted on sudden impulse, and snatched the paper from the coat-tails.

"Hold on, Barton!" he snapped. "What's this?"

Barton wheeled abruptly at the pull on his coat-tails. He stood and stared at the paper in Tom's hand.

"What—what—Master Merry—"

"It was pinned to your coat-tails!" said Tom incautiously. "It looks to me jolly well like— Ah!"

Tom's eyes had scanned the handwriting, and at the first few scribbled words he jumped. Then he stared at Barton—blankly, in horror.

Barton's face twitched. He tried to snatch the paper from Tom Merry's hand, but the junior was a trifle too quick for him.

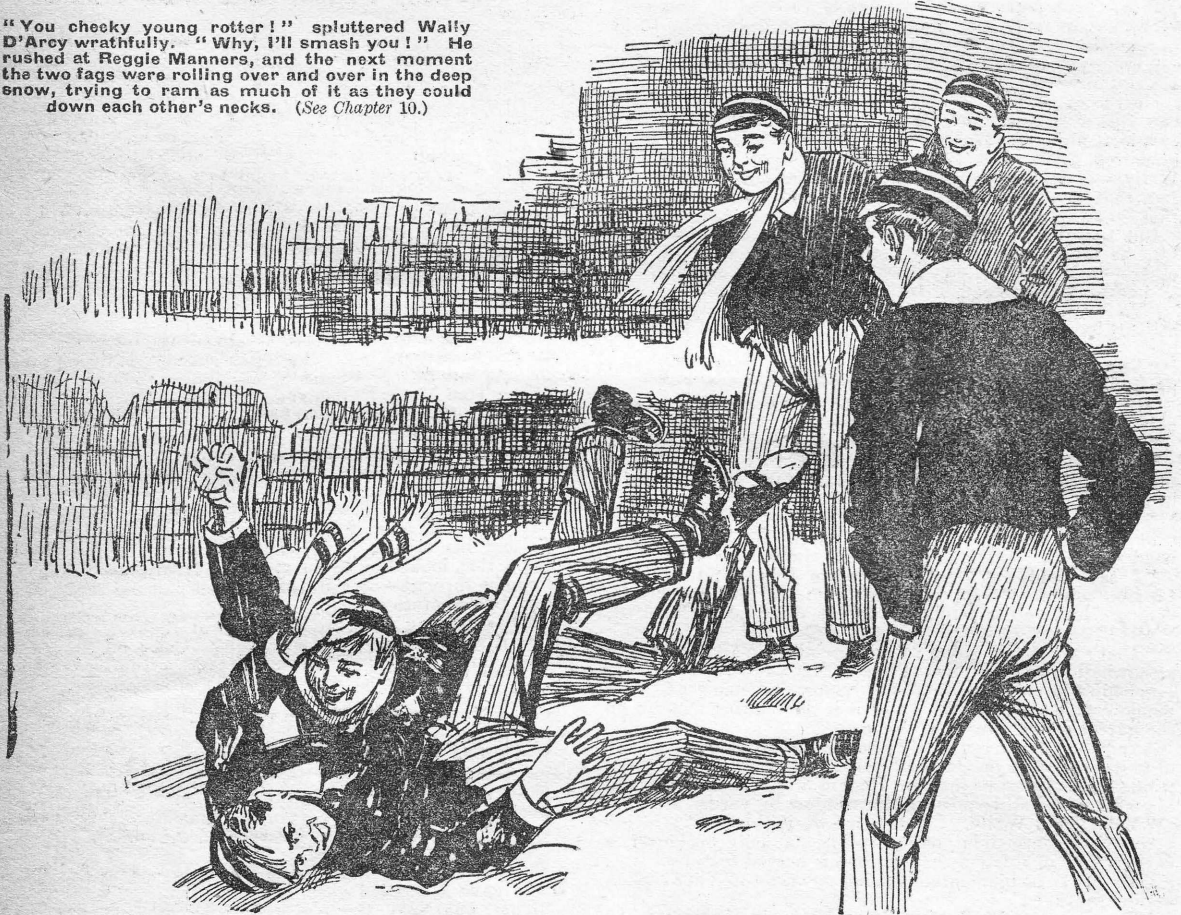
"No, you don't!" he panted. "I—I—this—"

"Give me that paper, boy!" hissed Barton.

It almost seemed that the man knew the truth, or suspected it. For a moment they eyed each other, evil suspicion and rage growing on the old man's wrinkled face—sudden fear and apprehension on the boy's.

It was as if a mask had fallen from the butler's face. Gone was the trained, impassive look of dignity, and in its place was a fierce glare of hatred—terrible and threatening.

"You cheeky young rotter!" spluttered Wally D'Arcy wrathfully. "Why, I'll smash you!" He rushed at Reggie Manners, and the next moment the two fags were rolling over and over in the deep snow, trying to ram as much of it as they could down each other's necks. (See Chapter 10.)



Tom Merry shivered. He knew—he read the truth in the convulsed face now only too clearly. Barton was mad—insane! It was he who had been playing ghost—he who had frightened them the night before. Doris was right in her vague instinct—Cousin Ethel had guessed the truth.

He saw it all now. It was Barton who was responsible for it all—for the missing juniors and Cousin Ethel. He knew the meaning of that strange, wild glint in Barton's eyes now. The man before him was insane.

The old butler's eyes seemed to burn through him. The silence was terrible while it lasted. Tom was alarmed—more than alarmed. He wanted to run—to flee from those staring, menacing eyes. He forgot for the moment that they were standing amidst the bustle of the household. From the kitchen came a clatter of pans—he heard someone talking at the far end of the long passage leading to the kitchen.

There was nothing to fear, and yet—

Tom moved—all he wanted just then was to get away from Barton and to take that precious sheet with him. But even as he moved, Barton's hand, swift as lightning, shot out and grasped him in an iron grip.

"Not yet, Master Merry—not yet!" said the butler in a

voice vibrating with intensity. "So you would rob me of my triumph, would you? You would prevent the sacrifice—"

"I—I don't know what you mean!" panted Tom. "Let me go, Barton—how dare you!"

Hardly knowing what he did, Tom struck at the arm that gripped him so fiercely.

Barton gave a soft, low laugh, and then like lightning he sprang. One strong hand was clapped over the junior's open mouth, and the other swept round him, pinning his arms to his side. Tom Merry strove desperately to free himself—to shout for help!

It was in vain.

He was in a powerful grasp, from which there seemed no escape. The next moment he felt himself lifted, and in another moment he was being borne rapidly up the back stairs close to the bottom of which they had been standing.

The strength of the old man was amazing, and in his grasp Tom Merry was like an infant. Barton went up the

stairs with apparent ease, seeming heedless of the fact that it was broad daylight and that at any moment he might meet someone.

That he would meet someone was Tom Merry's only hope as he struggled and fought in vain to free himself from that terrible grip.

But where was the man taking him? Even as the suspicion came into the junior's dazed mind something happened—a lucky happening for Tom Merry.

They were at the top of the stairs now, and suddenly the old man in his frantic haste tripped suddenly over a strip of loose carpet, and went crashing down with his burden.

Tom Merry was underneath, and the shock was terrific. Yet he kept his head, and as the hand was taken from his mouth he raised his voice in a wild yell:

"Help! Help! Help!"

That was all Tom had the chance to do, for, with a savage snarl Barton grasped him again, stifling his cries, and once again he was lifted and rushed on—where?

He was in the cruel, ruthless hands of a madman, and small wonder was it that at the thought Tom Merry almost fainted away.

## CHAPTER 10

## The Tell-tale Smoke!

"I BET you I can!" said Reggie Manners. "I bet you jolly well can't, young Manners!" sniffed Wally D'Arcy. "My hat! You always were a cocky sort of bounder, Reggie! Why, you couldn't hit the blessed window, never mind send a snowball through the silly hole!"

"Rot!"

"If you say 'rot' to me, young Manners—" "Oh, cheese it!" said Frank Levison. "What's the good of squabbling over that. Look here, you silly asses, let's go in. Something may have been found out—"

"You dry up, young Levison!" snorted Wally D'Arcy. "I bet nothing has been found out. Anyway, I'm fed-up with worrying about the business. Old Gussy's all right so where. I'm certain of that."

"You were jolly near blubbing this morning, anyway, Wally!" said Reggie Manners.

Wally D'Arcy fairly seethed with wrath.

It was true enough—at least Wally realised he had been very near to tears that morning. But he didn't like to be reminded of the fact by the tactless Reggie.

"You—you cheeky young rotter!" he spluttered. "Why, I'll smash you for that!"

He rushed at Reggie Manners, and the next moment the two fags were rolling over and over in the deep snow like a couple of puppies. Wally had forgotten that Reggie was his honoured guest, and Reggie had forgotten the fact that Wally was his respected host. And both had forgotten the fact that it was Christmas morning, and that scraps were "off"—especially in the circumstances.

But they both tired of the game at last, after trying to ram as much snow as they could down the back of each other's necks. At last they drew apart, panting and gasping, and covered from head to foot with powdered snow.

"You—you footling young ass!" spluttered Wally, glaring at Reggie. "I'm going to smash you for that when I get you back to St. Jim's, young Manners!"

"Yah! I'd let you do it, too, young D'Arcy. For two pins—"

"Oh, don't start again!" interrupted Levison minor peacefully. "Let's get indoors and see—"

"I'm not jolly well going in until I've proved what I claim!" said Reggie, in his usual stubborn manner. "I've said I can send a snowball through that hole; and I'm going to do it before I go in."

"You've got no end of an opinion of your blessed self!" said Wally, looking up at the window high above their heads. "Still, I think I could do it. Let's have a go!"

"I say—hold on!" said the more sober and cautious Levison minor. "Supposing you miss and biff a snowball through some other window and hit someone? Chuck it, Wally!"

"That's what I'm going to do," grinned Wally, kneading a snowball rapidly. "You silly ass, that's the deserted wing—nobody's in any of those giddy rooms. Lemme see! That window with the pane smashed out is the landing window on the garret stairs. Just watch me—"

A snowball flew from Wally's hand, and broke in a smother of powdered snow on the old brickwork, just below the small window. At the same moment Reggie Manners sent one, and his went wider still—missing the window by yards.

"Yah!" said Wally. "Watch me do it this—"

Gussy's irrepressible young brother suddenly broke off, a curious look of startled surprise on his heated features.

"My hat!" he ejaculated, staring upwards. "That's queer and no mistake!"

"What's queer, Wally?" exclaimed Reggie Manners.

"There's smoke coming from one of those giddy

chimneys," said Wally grimly. "The pater would be wazy if he knew. What silly chump—"

"What do you mean, Wally?" demanded Frank Levison.

Frank was a more serious and thoughtful youngster than either of the other two scapegraces. The events of the past few days had made a much deeper impression on Frank than on Wally.

"Can't you see?" said Wally, pointing to the cluster of twisted old chimneys above the roof of the wing. "Someone's got a giddy fire going in one of the disused rooms. See, the chimney's nearly above that landing window. Well, this beats cock-fighting!"

Frank Levison clutched his chum by the arm almost fiercely.

"You—you mean that, Wally?" he said. "You mean that there shouldn't be a fire going there?"

"Of course not! I say, you chaps, this is no end rummy!" said Wally. "By James! I wonder—"

He broke off with a sudden start.

"I wonder, too, Wally!" said Frank Levison quietly, his eyes fixed keenly on that spiral of smoke. "If you're certain—"

"Certain!" snorted Wally. "Think I don't know the lay of the place? Ass! Look here—"

"We ought to tell someone," said Frank. "I say, let's hurry in and tell Tom Merry; he'll know what to do."

"Tell your pater!" said Reggie.

"We'll see what Tom Merry says first!" said Wally, frowning. "I can't see any of those fellows lighting a fire up there just for the fun of it, though. Still, we'll see if any of the old fogies know anything about it. Old Barton has the key, but they could easily have got it from him."

"Let's get in!" said Frank Levison.

His eyes were gleaming a little. Somehow he felt instinctively that Wally had made a discovery of importance. Whether it would prove to be in connection with the mystery he could only guess. But he felt that it would.

Wally did not quite know what to think. He led the way round the house to the terrace where several of the juniors were still briskly pacing. The fags went up, scattering snow right and left as they went.

"Seen Tom Merry?" demanded Wally.

"Many a time!" said Lowther.

"Fathead!" sniffed Wally. "Look here, it's jolly important. Is Tom Merry anywhere about?"

"He's gone downstairs," said Doris Levison, eyeing the excited fags curiously. "I—I think he's gone to see Barton."

"Right! Come on, you men!"

Calling his chums, Wally hurried across to the french window that looked on to the terrace. He opened it and led his chums through—only Frank Levison pausing to wipe his snowy boots before entering.

"What's wrong with the kids?" said Blake. "Looks to me as if they've discovered something. Come on!"

They hurried through after the fags. In the corridor beyond the music-room they found the three fags talking to Figgins.

"Seen Tom Merry, Figgy?" Wally was just saying. "We want the silly—"

Wally had just got as far as that when an interruption came as startling as it was unexpected.

From somewhere not very far away came a sudden, faint crash, and it was followed almost immediately by a wild cry—a cry for aid in tones that thrilled the juniors.

"Help, help, help!"

They stood still, thunderstruck for the moment. Then Blake gave a startled gasp.

"That was Tom Merry's voice!" he gasped. "Quick! Something's wrong!"

He dashed away on the instant. After him went the rest at top speed, Doris Levison bringing up the rear, her face white and startled.

Blake had a fairly clear idea from whence the sound of the cries came, and suddenly rounding a corner he fancied he glimpsed a vaguely-seen form vanish along a distant corridor.

He pulled up suddenly at the head of the back staircase.

The carpet here was dragged and rumped in a heap, as if someone had fallen over it. He glanced quickly about him, and then dashed off again, remembering the form he had glimpsed.

Reaching the end of the long corridor, however, he saw nothing. He called Tom Merry's name, but no answer came. His chums came rushing up just then.

"This beats me!" gasped Blake. "I'm sure I spotted someone vanish along here somewhere. You chaps heard the yelling. It was Tom Merry's voice, wasn't it?"

"Not a doubt about that!"

"That's right!" said Wally. "It was Merry's voice. But what the dickens can have happened now? I say, we're fairly amongst it here, and no mistake!"

In bewildered silence they hurried back to the head of

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A hoarse shout of startled fear left Kerr's lips as he looked down through the trap-door into the secret room beneath. Ethel Cleveland and Baggy Trimble were there—crouching in terror behind Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. But it was the figure standing in front of the three prisoners that held Kerr's staring eyes—the terrifying figure of a Cavalier with upraised sword! (See Chapter 12.)



the staircase. Blake paused and glanced at the rumpled carpet. Then he suddenly stooped and picked up something from the floor, with a low whistle.

It was a small sheet of notepaper—obviously torn hastily from a notebook. And through it was stuck a gold tiepin. The juniors gasped aloud—more than one of them recognised that gold tiepin.

"Gussy's!" breathed Blake. "I say, look here! Phew!" Blake whistled long as he glanced over the scribbled words on the sheet. They were fraught with significance, and ran as follows:

"Help! Barton is mad. He is holding us prisoners in the secret room, and intends to kill us. The room is——"

The message broke off abruptly there—at the vital point. "That looks something like old Gussy's fist!" whispered Blake. "And he says 'us'—I bet that means himself, Trimble, and Cousin Ethel. What do you make of it, chaps?"

The juniors stared at each other in dumbfounded wonder. Barton mad? Holding the missing trio prisoners with the intention of killing them? What on earth did it all mean?

Doris Levison broke the silence as she took the sheet from Blake's hand and read it swiftly.

"I—I knew it!" she panted. "I knew that terrible man had a hand in this! His eyes—they reminded me of the eyes of the ghost last night. Barton was the ghost—I'm sure of it!"

"Barton!" came the astounded chorus.

"Yes. Ethel suspected it, I'm sure. I know Tom Merry did. He went down a few minutes ago to see Barton—to try to get something tangible out of the old man. But—but you heard that cry for help," went on Doris, with a shiver.

"It—it makes me fear that Barton has captured Tom Merry, too!"

"But—but——"

Blake faltered and stopped.

It all seemed absurd on the face of it—wildly improbable. Yet—he began to remember several curious things now. Barton was a little strange in his manner—Blake had thought him a very queer old card! And wasn't it Barton they had caught prowling about at dead of night without a light?

The true significance struck Blake then like a blow.

And the eyes—Blake remembered the strange thrill he had felt on meeting those restless, glittering eyes of the aged butler's.

"It's true!" panted Blake. "I know it must be true, you fellows. We've stumbled on the truth at last. And he's got Tom Merry now as well as the others, as Doris says," he added, a curious break in his voice. "We—we've got to do something, chaps!"

"What can we do?" muttered Herries. "I believe it now, but——"

"We must find the secret room," said Doris shakily.

"And to find that we've got to find old Barton and follow him," said Kerr quietly. "No good rushing into this—we'll have to play a waiting game and watch Barton. I suppose we ought to——"

Kerr was interrupted by the excited Wally, who was trembling as a glimmering of the truth came to him.

"You've no need to follow him!" he panted. "I believe I know where the blessed secret room is!"

"What?"

## CHAPTER 11.

### On the Trail!

"WALLY!" breathed Doris.

All eyes were turned upon the Honourable Walter D'Arcy. That cheeky-faced youngster nodded, his eyes gleaming brightly with the excitement that gripped him.

"Yes, I believe I know," he said. "At least, I know whereabouts to look for it. Where there's smoke there's fire, my infants!"

"What the dickens do you mean?" snapped Blake impatiently. "Out with it, Wally! If you know where to look——"

"In the blessed ruined wing," said Wally, lowering his voice mysteriously. "That is," he added suddenly, "unless some of you idiots have built a fire in one of the empty rooms there!"

"What the thump——"

"Let me explain, Wally——" began Frank Levison.

"But——"

"Ring off! You choose it, too, young Manners!" said

Wally warningly. "This is where I shine, my pippins! Think I can't tell a yarn as well—"

"Oh, cut the cackle, Wally, you young ass!" snapped Blake. "What do you know?"

"Only what I've just seen with my own peepers!" said Wally. "We were chucking snowballs outside a few minutes ago, and I spotted smoke coming from one of the chimneys in the ruined wing."

"Oh!"

"I thought it rummy!" said Wally. "And at first I only thought about the pater being waxy if he knew. Then I realised that nobody but a silly ass would light a fire in any of those rooms." The cluster of chimneys is just above the disused garrets—which are kept locked up, as you merchants know. Supposing the smoke wasn't coming from one of the garrets at all—supposing it's from a fireplace in the giddy secret room—what?"

"Phew!"

"But—but hold on!" said Kerr. "Is Barton—if he is their gaoler—likely to light a fire for them?"

"Blessed if I can tell that!" said Wally. "He used to be a decent old bean. And he was a chap who liked to be comely himself like the rest of 'em. If he's spending a lot of his giddy time there—and it looks as if he has been doing—then I bet he had a fire going!"

"That's likely!" agreed Blake, nodding.

"And another thing!" said the sharp-witted Wally. "Gussy's an awful ass, but Cousin Ethel's no end of a cute card—for a girl, anyway. She may have got the idea of making a fire as a signal to us—to let us know where they are. See? She'd know somebody would spot the smoke—somebody who'd think it queer, just as I did."

"Jove!" exclaimed Blake. "I believe you've hit it, Wally. But we can soon prove it. If there isn't a fire in any of the disused rooms, then it's a certainty it comes from the secret room. Let's go and explore—and the sooner the better."

"Hold on!" said Kerr. "What about the key? Barton keeps that, I believe. And we don't know where he is."

"We've got to find out!" snapped Blake.

"Well, don't rush into a thing like this!" said Kerr sagely. "If Barton is a madman, then it will take more than us chaps to deal with him. I vote we get a couple of footmen on the job. That chap James is a decent sort and pretty hefty."

"I think Kerr is right!" said Doris, her eyes shining with excitement and renewed hope. "Please don't risk failure by rushing a matter of this kind, Blake."

Jack Blake nodded after a pause. He was eager to get to work, but he realised the wisdom of Kerr's words.

"We won't warn Lord Eastwood till afterwards, though," he said, with a grim laugh. "He'll only tell us to keep out of the way until the police come to make a muck of it all. You come below stairs with me, Kerr, and we'll tackle James."

They hurried away, and scudded down the back stairs. In the butler's pantry they found James busy at work, and he stared as they rushed in on him.

"Where's Barton, James?"

"I do not know, Master Blake," said James, raising his eyebrows. "He was here a short time ago, but I think he went off with Master Merry!"

Blake gave Kerr a glance, and the Scottish junior nodded. Blake decided to tell the footman all, and that astonished worthy gasped as he listened to their suspicions.

"This is a great shock to me, sir!" he said, at length. "I have noticed for some days that Mr. Barton was strange in his manner, and there seemed to me to be a risk of his losing his mental balance. But—but I never dreamed of this. I will certainly call Thomas, and we will come upstairs at once."

Thomas' stolid features also lost their habitual impassiveness when he heard what was afoot. The two footmen hurried upstairs on the heels of the excited juniors, and a combined move was made for the passage leading to the garrets.

To their great relief the party found the big dividing door unlocked—and they guessed why. Barton had been carrying a burden when he had passed through, and he had forgotten to come back and lock it!

The juniors thrilled as they crept through on the heels of the two footmen. The very fact that the door was unlocked told them that the insane butler had passed through—that he was even now somewhere beyond that door.

There was quite a crowd in the gloomy passage now. Blake and the others had tried to persuade Doris Levison to stay behind, but she had indignantly refused—as had Wally & Co. Hearts beat fast as the group of searchers stared round at the black panelling—at the bare, ancient stairs and the broken window above them.

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"Better make for the garrets and have a good squint round!" said Blake. "Better not make too much row, either."

"Hold on!" said Kerr, his sharp eyes scanning the panelling of the passage. "I think some of us had better remain on guard in the passage here! No reason why there shouldn't be a secret door in the panelling here, any more than upstairs."

"My hat! You're right!"

"We don't want the Barton merchant to give us the slip while we're poking about upstairs," said Kerr. "We'll wait here—Hallo, what's that?"

He stooped and picked something up from the floor. Thomas, the footman, and most of the crowd had followed Blake as he gingerly picked his way up the rotting stairs. But Fatty Wynn, Figgins, Doris Levison, and James had stayed behind with Kerr. They gathered round him curiously as he gave that exclamation and held up what he had found on the floor.

It was a handkerchief rolled up in a ball. Kerr's eyes gleamed as he unrolled it and looked in one corner at the initials printed there.

"T. M.," he pronounced, with a grunt of satisfaction.

"That means Tom Merry, or my name's not what it is! This wasn't dropped here accidentally, you fellows; it was dropped on purpose by cute old Tommy, if I'm not mistaken. Now, why should he drop it just here?"

Apparently, Kerr had quite made up his mind that Tom Merry had dropped it purposely as a clue for them to follow up. It was clear also that Kerr had a good idea why it had been dropped just in that spot, quite close to the skirting.

The next moment the junior was examining the panelling above the spot, tapping it gently, and then tapping the panel next to it. The second sounded dull and heavy—the first one gave forth a hollow, empty echo.

Kerr was sure of it, and his eyes gleamed with excitement as he started to feel over the beading round the panel. Quite suddenly he made another discovery.

His fingers came away suddenly, quite sticky, and the next moment Kerr was examining intently a set of sticky fingermarks on the edge of the beading.

"My hat!" breathed Figgins. "I see 'em! That's dear old—"

"Trimble!" said Kerr. "He clutched at the edge of the beading for some reason or other, Figg. We're getting hot, old chap! James, I think you'd better fetch those chaps down again—they're wasting their time up there."

"Very good, sir!"

There was a deep respect in James' voice. He had been watching the amateur sleuth with growing admiration and excitement. A couple of minutes later Blake and the rest came hurrying down the rickety stairs, heedless of danger.

"There's nothing up there!" grunted Blake. "No fire in any of the rooms, anyway. That means—What's that?"

It was a sharp click, as the secret panel Kerr was busy at slid back.

There was a simultaneous gasp from the little group of investigators. And as they stood staring blankly at the aperture in the wall, there came a sudden sound to their ears—alarmingly close it seemed—that made their blood seem to run cold.

It was a shriek of demoniacal laughter that came from the aperture and echoed and re-echoed along the crowded passage.

It was followed by another shriek—a shriek of terror in a familiar voice:

"Yarroooooogh! Help! Murder! Help!"

"Trimble!" gasped Blake. "Oh, my hat! Come on!"

And, in his usual impetuous manner, Blake leaped through the opening in the wall.

## CHAPTER 12.

### In the Nick of Time!

WHAT happened next Jack Blake realised less than anyone—he was not in a condition to realise anything for some moments after that.

For as he leaped through the opening in the panelled wall and his feet touched the floor beyond he had exactly the same experience that had befallen the other victims of that treacherous trapdoor.

It gave way beneath his feet and he fell headlong.

"Good heavens!" panted Kerr.

From somewhere below the gaping hole in the floor of the stone passage sounded a sudden bump and a wild yell. It came from Jack Blake as he landed on the floor of the room beneath. It was followed by cries of amazement in familiar voices, and then by a savage snarl of rage.

Kerr caught his breath as he heard it, and then he leaned out through the aperture and looked downwards into that

death-vault. What he saw brought a hoarse shout of fear to his lips.

Cousin Ethel was there. She was crouching behind Arthur Augustus, as was also Baggy Trimble, who looked in the biggest funk of his fat life. But it was the figure standing in front of the three prisoners, sword upraised, that held Kerr's staring eyes—the figure of a Cavalier.

Even as Kerr took in the terrifying scene, combined shrieks came from Baggy Trimble and Cousin Ethel as Barton leaped at them, his sword whirling.

But the gallant Arthur Augustus was ready. His face was pale as death, but his lips were tightly clenched, and as the madman charged he ducked and leaped in himself. A spring, and his hand clutched the madman's sword arm.

"Hold on, Gussy!" howled Blake. "Oh, good man! Hold on!"

Blake himself had been dazed by the shock of his heavy fall, but the sight of the prisoners' peril gave him the strength of sheer desperation. He leaped up madly, and the next instant the sword had whirled away with a clatter into a corner of the room, and the three—Barton, Gussy, and Blake—were rolling over and over in a desperate, deadly embrace.

"Quick!" shouted Kerr. "After me, chaps—quick!"

The Scottish junior woke up then, and in a flash he was through the secret trapdoor and dropping neatly into the chamber below.

He landed on his feet, staggered a step, and then jumped to the rescue. And then, one after another, as the startled investigators grasped the terrible position, they came swarming to join the fight, heedless of bruises and knocks. James came first, and then Thomas and the rest of the crowd. Even Wally & Co. followed without a second's hesitation.

But their aid was scarcely needed. Badly shaken, bewildered by the sudden turn of events, Barton, strong as he was with a madman's strength, had little chance against two grown men and a crowd of plucky, reckless boys.

Slowly Barton's struggles grew weaker and weaker, and at last he collapsed and lay still, with James and Thomas holding his arms down and a swarm of bruised and gasping juniors sprawling across his legs. Then cord was quickly produced, and Barton was secured.

"Phew!" breathed Figgins, as he staggered to his feet. "That was warm work while it lasted. But—but where's Tom Merry?"

"He's somewhere outside," panted Arthur Augustus, who was half-fainting with exhaustion. "I—I hope—"

He paused, too afraid to word his meaning. But even as he spoke a faint cry broke the sudden, scared silence in the secret room.

"That's Tommy!" said Lowther, almost hysterically. "Oh, thank goodness he's all right! Come on!"

The juniors had already become aware of the half-opened door in the wall, and they rushed through it. They found themselves at the bottom of a steep flight of steps that led from the sliding panel up to the trapdoor above. In the other direction was a short passage.

"This way!" gasped Lowther.

A glimmer of light showed, and the next moment they reached another chamber, much smaller and with walls of stone. In the corner, bound hand and foot, was Tom Merry. His eyes danced with joy as he sighted his chums again.

"Oh, thank goodness!" he panted. "I yelled and yelled, but you couldn't have heard me. Is—is everything all right?"

"Yes, yes. Barton's safely trussed up, old chap."

"Just my luck to miss the finish!" said Tom.

The sight of the pile of human remains in the corner of the long, death chamber filled the crowd of excited juniors with horror, but James quickly covered the bones with blankets, and then Arthur Augustus D'Arcy told the story of his adventures.

In the second chamber were found a spirit-stove, a supply of water and food. Arthur Augustus and his fellow-prisoners understood now where their breakfast had come from. It was clear, also, that Barton kept the clothes he had used when impersonating the "ghost" there, and had changed there before starting out on his nightly "walk." Gussy soon recognised the Cavalier's outfit and sword as belonging to their private theatrical outfit—it had been used even by Lord Conway. An examination of the trapdoor, above soon disclosed how easy it was for the old man to avoid the treacherous trap, knowing it was there, for there was a good foot of stone floor on either side to step on.

That was the end of the Curse of the D'Arcys. Barton was taken away and placed in safe hands, and with his going Tom Merry & Co. tried to forget it all. All felt happy at the merciful ending of an adventure that might have ended in a terrible tragedy; happy, also, in the knowledge that Lord Eastwood intended to see that Barton had every possible comfort and medical attention.

As regards the reward, in the shape of a kiss from Cousin Ethel and Doris, which had been promised to the junior who solved the mystery of Eastwood House, that was completely forgotten.

There was joy and good cheer at Eastwood House for the rest of that memorable Christmas Day. Laughter was soon ringing through the house, and every face was bright and smiling. And at the festive board that evening, when the turkey and Christmas-pudding were brought in by the smiling James and Thomas, even Baggy Trimble managed to banish from his mind the shadow of the Curse of the D'Arcys.

THE END.

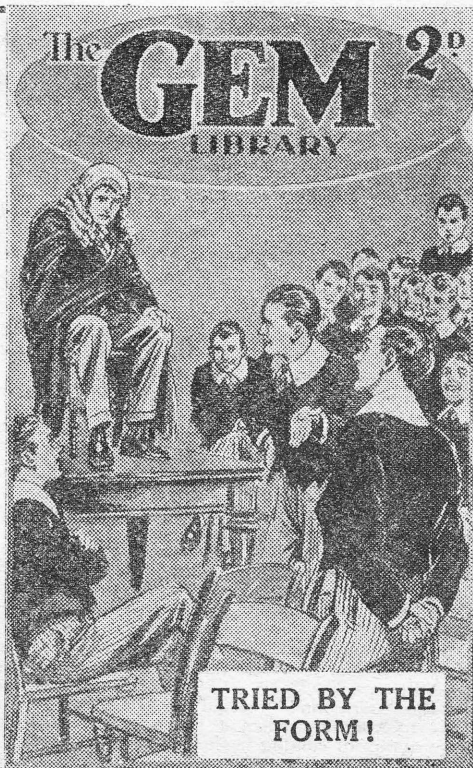
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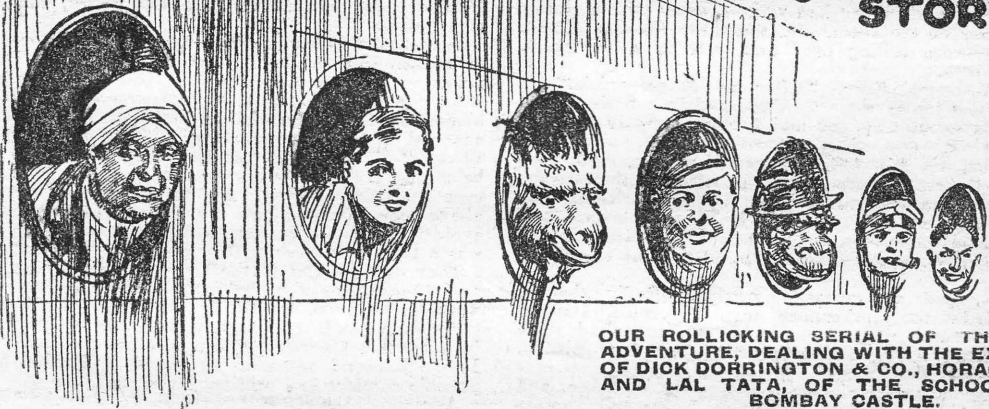
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# CHUMS of the BOMBAY CASTLE

by DUNCAN STORM



OUR ROLLICKING SERIAL OF THRILLING ADVENTURE, DEALING WITH THE EXPLOITS OF DICK DORRINGTON & CO., HORACE, GUS AND LAL TATA, OF THE SCHOOL SHIP BOMBAY CASTLE.

## Pugsley the Sleuth!

**D**ICK DORRINGTON & CO. climbed up on the deserted liner. Everything had been stripped, and only a few old mats lying in corners showed what had been the cargo.

"Rice and pepper!" said Mr. Pugsley briefly. Then he slung himself over the stern in a sling and scraped with a knife at some paint which had a fresher look than the rest. He did not waste much time over this job.

In five minutes under his scraping he had come on the white-painted letters of a ship's name and port of register.

"M N M B N O K."

"O.K. is right!" mused Mr. Pugsley. "If that's not Menam, Bangkok, I'm no good at missing letter competitions! But, 'arf a mo! We'll confirm it."

Under the painted name Mr. Pugsley had discovered marks where raised letters of an original name had been chiselled off by the dockyard mateys.

Mr. Pugsley drew a notebook and carpenter's pencil from his pocket and took a rubbing, and soon, as large as life, he had collected the letters:

"R-O-S-Y D-A-W-N, L-O-N-D-O-N."

"What are you doing over the stern there, Mr. Pugsley?" asked Mr. Lal Tata, who was fussing about the bleached decks, wishing to get away from this ill-omened craft as quickly as possible.

"I'm playing the Big Five!" replied Mr. Pugsley.

"But what do we want with this ship?" demanded Mr. Lal Tata impatiently. "You say she is not the Star of the East. She has nothing to do with Claude Fairbrother or his cinema actors. Why do we waste time here?"

"You never waste time looking round!" said Mr. Pugsley, looking up. "We've got to pick up our clues same as the sleuths in them 'detective stories you are so fond of reading!"

"I have been detective myself," replied Mr. Lal Tata, "in most distinguished service in the world—Indian Secret Service. But I do not see what we do here save to scare up clouds of shrieking gulls, who will bring pirates down on us like millions of bricks!"

"Don't you worry!" replied Mr. Pugsley, climbing aboard. "I have found out that this is not the Star of the East and that she is the Menam of Bangkok, formerly the Rosy Dawn, of London. And you can see that she's been loo-tooted!"

"Anyone can see that she's been looted!" replied Mr. Lal Tata impatiently. "All the more reason for getting away from her quickly!"

"But 'arf a mo!" replied Mr. Pugsley. "I dessay you have noticed that when a ship's been cleaned out pirates have a way of coming back to take a bit more."

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"They will come back and take us!" said Mr. Lal Tata gloomily.

"I have a notion that the original looting of this ship took place three years ago," said Mr. Pugsley. "They looted 'er of 'er cargo first, and came back for the wire ropes. Then they came back for 'er brass and for such of the timber work as they could pinch. You see, they didn't take the teak planks or the rails, 'cause why? 'Cause they've got all the teak they want. They've pinched the soft woods. But what interests me most," said Mr. Pugsley, "is this." And he pointed to the scarred deck planks.

Mr. Lal Tata stared down at them, expecting to see a blood-stained footprint, or something of the sort.

All he saw was the marks of a crowbar driven deep into the teak planking, some splinters and rust-marks, where a pair of heavy boat-chocks had been removed.

He looked at Mr. Pugsley.

"I see nothing of great interest!" said he.

"Stir up the ole grey brain matter," said Mr. Pugsley encouragingly. "Use the intellocks with which Nature 'as endowed you!"

"I fail to see anything which could be brought as evidence to a court of law!" said Lal stiffly.

"All right, then," said Mr. Pugsley. "Let me tell you that someone's collected these boat chocks off this ole hooker inside the last week. If you look at yonder stanchions, you'll see the brightness where tackle was rigged round them. If you look at yonder eye, you'll find that a snatch-block was shackled on there, and some of the paint is now on the deck, a white-painted snatch-block, taken from the mast-head tackle of a steamer, with a band of yellow paint round the strop. You got your magnifying-glass?"

"Yes," said Mr. Lal Tata unwillingly.

"Have a look on the deck there, and see if you can't find a grain or two of chrome yeller in the bruise of some white-lead paint."

Mr. Pugsley watched Mr. Lal Tata as he went down on his hands and knees and brought his magnifying-glass to bear on the faint bruise of fresh paint.

"Upon my word, you are right!" he said unwillingly.

"Right!" said Pugsley, with great satisfaction.

"What do you deduce from your observations?" demanded Mr. Lal Tata.

"If you look alongside," said Mr. Pugsley, "you will see that those boat-chocks were lowered with the tackle into a boat that came alongside, and, in doing so, they scored the old paint in lowering, and the boat alongside rubbed off some of 'er paint from the rubbing-streak, an' that paint was gold leaf on chrome yellow!"

Mr. Lal Tata gave a sigh of exasperation.



"I think you are Big Sixes and Sevens, more than Big Fives, Mr. Pugsley," said he. "I fail to see what you are driving at!"

"Ever 'eard of Ike Goldberg, the Movie King?" asked Pugsley patiently.

"Of course!" replied Mr. Lal Tata acidly.

"Of Claude Fairbrother, the flappers' 'ero?"

"Are we not searching for him now?" said Mr. Lal Tata, in a fully-flavoured lemon tone.

"Right-ho! Now we are getting on!" said Mr. Pugsley.

"Then you will 'ave 'eard of Jane Paterson, who is Claude Fairbrother's wife and 'is leading lady, 'cause she takes jolly good care that she always stars in Claude's big six-reelers!"

"I have heard of the lady!" said Lal, in a snuffy tone, as much as to intimate that he had also heard of the decease of the late Queen Anne.

"Well," said Mr. Pugsley, "Jane Paterson's got golden 'air. She's always been known as America's Golden 'Aired Darling!"

"I fail to see—" began Lal.

"You would!" said Mr. Pugsley. "But it was well boomed when Ike Goldberg fitted out the Star of the East for these picture 'ounds that Jane Paterson insisted on everything in the ship being gold and white, which she wanted to match 'er air an 'er ten-thousand-guinea gold tissue evening-gown. Even the masts were painted white, and the blocks and tackle and boats' fall-blocks carried a yellow streak with a bit of gold over it. They say that Ike Goldberg near went barmy at what that ship cost 'im in gold leaf. They slapped on book after book. Now, per'aps, Mr. Lal Tata, you'll begin to catch the smoke of that yellow paint on the deck and just a bit of yellow paint off some boat's rubbing-streak alongside!"

"You mean—"

"I mean that the Star of the East is neither stranded or sunk," answered Mr. Pugsley, "and that she's been close alongside this ship in the last week or so, using 'er boat and 'er tackle to take away a pair of boat-chocks from this deck. Only a steamer would want to loot another steamer's boat-chocks—and for 'why?"

Mr. Pugsley shook his finger at Mr. Lal Tata, who looked stupid—just as Pongo Walker did when he could not give an answer in class and was told to use his brains.

The boys stood round delighted.

It was a treat to see old Lal going through the same hoop as he had put them through himself so many times.

"Upon my word, Mr. Pugsley," said he, "your theory is admirably built up! I congratulate you on finding evidence in a few grains of yellow paint!"

"Men 'ave been 'ung on less!" said Mr. Pugsley, shaking his finger impressively. "You remember that chap who pinched the car and shot the lady in the tobacco-shop what wouldn't change the half-cracker note for 'im. You remember the little girl that was going to get 'er father's supper beer in a sealed bottle at the off licence, and stopped to get herself a pennorth o' chips with the change, and noticed the number of the car as being the same as the number of 'er father, which was a rozzer! All little bits of nothing; but they all came together into a rope strong enough to 'ang a chap what was wanted for another job of the same sort. And if you want to know why the Star of the East came 'ere to get a spare pair of boat-chocks, it means that she is shifting one of 'er boats to change 'er appearance."

Mr. Pugsley paused.

"That's only done in war or piracy," said he. "Now, boys, scatter yourselves round the ship to find any sort of evidence you can get. Remember that anything that might not be expected to be found in or on a ship in the state of this ship is evidence!"

The boys fell apart and started over the ship like a pack

of hounds. They climbed down into the stripped holes and searched among the dunnage of bamboos on which the mats of rice and bags of pepper had been stowed. They worked through the dismantled cabins, which had been robbed of every scrap of metal they had possessed, and through the dicalidated engine-room, where the sad-looking, rusting engines had been battered for their brasses.

Hamish MacCosh, working through the hold, saw a rat as big as a tom-cat. It had red eyes, and was as thin as a lath.

"Losh, I'll no' be likin' the look o' the beastie!" said Hamish, when he came up on deck. "What, have ye hoisted auld Horace aboard?"

"Yes," answered Dick. "He was making such a fuss at being left behind."

Horace was nosing round the deck, apparently joining in the search. He nibbled at a bit of matting from a rice-bag, and didn't like it much; then he leaped up the ladder on to the stripped boat-deck and nosed behind the funnel.

Cecil, the orang-outan, followed him.

Soon the boys noticed Cecil struggling with Horace, who resented having something taken from his mouth.

It was a bit of crumpled, printed paper that was already half-way down Horace's throat.

But Cecil, forcing the jaws of the goat apart, speedily pulled the paper out.

Cecil was turning away, when Horace, following him up, gave him a biff in the seat of his new Eton trousers that tore them apart like tissue paper.

Up went Cecil in the air, and down he came sprawling on the after well-deck, where the engineers take their fresh air at nights.

"Ullo, Cecil!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley. "'Orace been giving you an Irish 'Ome, Sweet 'Ome? What you got in your 'air?"

He took the paper from Cecil's paw, whilst Cecil nearly dislocated his neck trying to discover how much damage Horace had done to the sternsheets of his new pants. Mr. Pugsley took the crumpled printed paper and straightened it out carefully.

Then, as he read it, he started to dance a mild hornpipe.

"What is it?" demanded Mr. Lal Tata.

"Told you so!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley. "If you're doing sleuth work, you gotta use your brain-pan! Listen to this!"

He started reading aloud:

"**"THE RIVER PIRATE."** Fox American A. Featuring Victor McLaglen, Lois Moran, and Nick Stuart; 6,910 feet. Released January 21st. The part of a crook with a heart of gold suits the star, and he is the main reason for the picture's success. Production values are good, and there are some thrilling moments.

"The star performance is the big attraction. The underworld story and its sentiment have their interest, and the supporting cast is a strong one."

"I do not understand," said Mr. Lal Tata, with his mouth open.

"Listen some more, then," answered Mr. Pugsley.

"**"The Prince and the Dancer."** British and Foreign. German (U). Featuring Vivian Gibson and Paul Richter; 6,500 feet. Release date not fixed. This romantic comedy-drama, adapted from the comic opera by Jean Gilbert, lacks that smoothness and delicate subtlety which usually characterise German light features. However, as a booking for a two-feature programme it should serve a useful purpose. Good cast in a fairly entertaining adaptation of a light opera."

"I fail to see—" began Mr. Lal Tata. "I do not see the reference. The goat picks up a piece of paper. The orang-outan takes it out of his mouth. The goat hits the orang-outan a kick with his head, and the orang falls down here with the piece of paper. But that is not evidence!"

"'Pon my word, Mr. Lal Tata," said Mr. Pugsley, more in sorrow than in anger, "if you can't see wot this means, you can't see the nose on your own face—not even with a lookin'-glass! Why, this is a bit of a film booker's trade paper. Do you think pirates go cruising about these seas readin' up what they can book for their movie theatres? Go on! You must be silly! What this piece o' paper means

is that someone interested in the movie trade's been aboard this ship in the last week or so—one of the party that came to pinch that pair of chocks!"

Mr. Lal Tata said nothing. He was dumbfounded at Mr. Pugsley's astuteness.

"Look at the paper!" said Mr. Pugsley, holding out the sheet. "What colour is it?"

"White!" said Mr. Lal Tata.

"Right!" agreed Mr. Pugsley. "And it's paper that is made of mixed sulphite and mechanical wood pulp. The sulphite pulp is put in to make the paper white. If it had

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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—Horace, 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 steel chest taken from the sultan's bedroom, the *Bombay Castle* party reach their boat in safety. With full steam up they are racing away from the Island of Bungalow when they come across a deserted liner the name of which is obliterated and all her fittings missing. With a coil of rope over his shoulders, Cecil climbs up the liner's ladder, scaring away flocks of squawking seabirds.

(Now read on.)

been long in this sunshine the paper would have been scorched brown. Now, what about it? We are getting a smell at this missing movie crowd. It's my belief that they are 'eld prisoners on that craft which has turned pirate!"

"It all seems very slender threads!" sighed Mr. Lal Tata. "Pore ole Charley Peace was 'ung on nothing much thicker!" said Mr. Pugsley stubbornly. "You mark my words, I'm getting the stuff together for this click—and 'ere comes a few of 'em!"

Mr. Pugsley pointed to an apparently solid wall of ochre-coloured cliff up the bay.

Out from its face shot a large prahu, rowed by twenty rowers a-side. Then another, and another.

"Lummy!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley. "'Ere comes the Canjee Island Rowing Club! We'd best beat it while the going is good!"

His whistle shrilled along the decks, and the boys came running from all parts of the ship.

"Pirates coming off from the shore, boys!" said Mr. Pugsley. "We must be going now! All here?"

Everyone was there, including Horace, who was searching about for some more paper, and who seemed half inclined to let Cecil have another biff for taking away his bit of lunch.

But Horace was hustled into a sling and lowered on to the D.S.B.

The boys swarmed down on to her decks and got ready to cast off.

Mr. Pugsley set his engine running and took the steering-wheel.

"We are just in time. See how they are coming on!"

This was true. The prahus, manned by splendid crews of rowers, were coming across the glassy waters of the bay at an amazing speed.

A yell of anger went up as they saw the D.S.B. casting off from the anchored wreck.

"They are annoyed with us," remarked Mr. Pugsley. "Think we are finding something more to pinch. That's what they think. Shove off, boys!"

He set his engine at full speed. But the leading prahu had evidently anticipated this move.

Now Mr. Pugsley, however, was a true naval commander. He never did what his adversary expected him to do.

There was a flash and a puff of smoke from the bows of the leading prahu, and a shower of jingal balls splattered on the rusty plates of the anchored steamer, well ahead of the D.S.B.

Away they went, backing before the second prahu could bring her long brass cannon to bear on them.

Bang went the cannon, sending her volley of leaden balls wide of the little vessel as she popped round under the stern of the Menam, putting her hull in between them and their pursuers.

Mr. Pugsley had got his start. By the time the hornets' nest of pirates had raced round the Menam, the D.S.B. was racing away seaward, leaving a long streak of foam behind her.

Their brass guns barked, scaring up the echoes of the headland, but their shots fell far astern.

But at the same time three thick columns of black smoke rose like pillars from the headland, spreading out like mushrooms in the still air.

"Now we can begin to look out," said Mr. Pugsley. "That means that war is declared. You'd better cut some sandwiches, Skeleton. We may not 'ave time to stop for lunch to-day!"

### The Castaway!

AS the launch sped away over a sea of oily smoothness, Mr. Pugsley looked back at Canjee Island with a frown in his brow.

Many people would have thought that Canjee Island, that morning, was a very beautiful place.

It was something like Heligoland; a bit like Margate as well, with its creamy, rugged cliffs all aswim in the heat haze that was on the sea of mother-of-pearl.

But Mr. Pugsley was not admiring the landscape. He was regarding those three black columns of smoke which rose in the still air, dark and greasy, and which spread out atop like mushrooms in a dull brown cloud, till an upper current of air took them and drifted them to the south in streamers.

"That's a bit of all right," said he. "Anyone can see those smokes for twenty-five miles, hazy though it is on the sea-line. All we can hope for is that this haze is the beginning of a few banks of sea-mist."

"What are you looking for, Puggo?" asked Dick Dorrington.

"Trouble!" replied Mr. Pugsley laconically.

"What from?" asked Dick.

"Something like an armed cruiser," answered Mr. Pugsley, "except that she'll be a pirate, and they lads aboard, if they catch us, may treat us to the good ole pastime o' walking the plank-o!"

"Go on!" said Dick. "There's nothing like that going on nowadays. That's all past and done with. The days of Captain Kidd are over!"

Mr. Pugsley grinned ruefully.

"Look 'ere," said he, "don't you kid yourself that there aren't no Kidds left in the world. We are on the fringe o' the China Seas 'ere. And the Chinks and yellow men in these parts learn nothing and forget nothing. They got all their ole 'abits strong in them, and I'm looking out for the Star of the East turned pirate. As a matter of fac', I am just going to station two of you lads to watch the sea. Three pairs of eyes are better than one. And you are named for duty, Master Dick—you and young Waffles. He's got a good eye."

"All right," answered Dick. "What's the job?"

"Same as it was in war-time," answered Mr. Pugsley. "You'll stand one each side of the ship, and keep a sharp look-out for anything that floats."

"Anything?" asked Dick.

"Anything," said Mr. Pugsley firmly. "A smudge of oil; a floating cork; a scrap of paper. When I was in Andrew Miller—which is to say, the Senior Service—I once knowed six cruisers and a flotilla o' destroyers put out of action because some dirty little ship's boy hadn't got no more savvy than to chuck a bullseye bag overboard bearing the name of a Chatham sweetstuff shop!"



"How was that?" asked Dick.

"Why," said Mr. Pugsley, "we was the Blue Fleet out of Chatham and Rosyth, and other side in the manoeuvres was west country and Portsmouth ships. One o' their destroyers spotted the sweet-bag a-floating on the sea, 'bout two 'undred miles from where they were expectin' to find us. And the bag was 'ardly wet! Stands to reason. They wasn't silly. 'What-ho!' says the skipper of the destroyer. And 'e gets 'is wireless to work. And 'fore we knowed where we was 'ad 'arf the British Navy round us; and the umpires gave us out of action, and back we went to our 'ome port, with our tail atween our legs!"

"What happened to the boy?" asked Dick.

"Something like what'll happen to you, if you and your swell friend don't keep a sharp look-out!" answered Mr. Pugsley darkly.

And Dick and Willie Waffles went forward to stare at the sea, whilst Skeleton cut sandwiches as if he had served in a ham-and-beef shop all his life.

Cecil, the orang, slouched forward to join Dick and Willie in their look-out.

Cecil knew as well as a human being that there was something doing, and his eyes were better than any human being's.

But Dick and Willie found look-out work rather hard going. The glare from the sea strained their eyes, and the monotony of the job palled on them as Mr. Pugsley ran away from Canjee Island in a bee-line, soon leaving it below the horizon.

The three pillars of smoke were not, however, left beyond the sea-line, and presently they picked up another column of smoke rising from the sea itself.

"Thought as much!" said Mr. Pugsley. "They got their spies out everywhere. That's Bungo Reef ten miles to starboard there, and they've got signal fires laid on it. They are signalling us along."

The distant column of smoke was joined by two others.

Dick and Willie blinked the perspiration out of their eyes as they kept watch over the unbroken oily sea that was sliding past.

It was quite a relief when a shoal of flying fish fluttered up under their bows and went scattering right and left, their brilliant azure backs shining like those of swallows in flight.

Presently Skeleton came round with a large jug of lemonade and a pile of sandwiches.

"Have a sandwich?" said Skeleton.

"Can't eat," said Dick. "It's too hot!"

"Go on," said Skeleton. "It'll do you good. You want to stoke up in hot weather; it keeps you cool."

"Lemonade for me, thanks!" said Dick. "Give me the jug."

Skeleton handed him the quart jug. Skeleton had made the lemonade himself, and he made lemonade as well as he

"Looks like a man walking on the water," said Dick. "He's about twenty feet high! And I've only been drinking lemonade!" he added.

"That's mirage!" said Mr. Pugsley comfortably, in matter-of-fact tones. "Keep your eye on him. We'll soon be up with him. Did Cecil see him, too?"

"Ay, ay, sir!" answered Dick.

"All right. If Cecil saw 'im, it's all right!" said Mr. Pugsley. "I'll see if we can kick another mile an 'our out of the ole engine!"

The D.S.B. increased her pace and was soon racing through the water at her contract speed and a bit over.

The object which Dick had sighted in the mirage disappeared.

"He's gone!" he cried, in disappointed tones.

"That's all right!" said Mr. Pugsley. "If you saw 'im, he'll bob up again like a bad penny bimeby. That's the way of mirages and of life. What you think is ten pound turns up tenpence!"



Mr. Pugsley slowed down the engine, and the boat drew towards the man in the barrel. "That's an English nut!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley. "What's 'e doing in that barrel with only a window pane in 'is eye, and a dish-cloth?" (See this page.)

made sandwiches. It was no bottled stuff or crystals, but straight from the lemon of the spicy East.

"Here's looking towards you, old Bones!" said Dick, with a grin. And, getting on to the edge of the jug, he slowly tilted it up.

Skeleton regarded his chum with admiration. Skeleton had a great respect for Dick Dorrington. He said that one of these days Dick would become a leader of men.

Slowly the jug tilted, and, hardly stopping for breath, Dick demolished the quart.

"That's the stuff for the eyesight!" said he approvingly.

"My hat, Dick!" said Skeleton, "I believe you are made of blotting-paper. Good thing it was only lemonade. Do you want another gallon or two? I can soon make it. Lemonade is only lemons and water, y'know, and lemons, in these parts, are near as cheap as the water."

"Enough is as good as a feast, Skeleton, old chap!" said Dick, laughing. "And it has cleared my eyesight."

Cecil, at the same moment as Dick, had sighted something on the sea ahead.

He squeezed Dick's arm in his paw, and gave a little grunt—one of those queer little grunts that always gave you the idea that old Cecil was going to start talking like a human being.

"All right, Cecil," said Dick, "I've spotted it—with the help of the lemonade." Then he called out aloud to Mr. Pugsley.

"Something afloat on the sea ahead, sir!" he called, in correct fashion.

"Off duty it might be 'Puggo,' or 'Puggerino,' or 'Pug-gibus,' or even 'Pug.' But, on duty, the boys never failed to address Mr. Pugsley in the proper form.

"What d'you make of it?" asked Mr. Pugsley.

And Mr. Pugsley kept course.

His words proved true.

In a quarter of an hour Dick called out:

"Something straight ahead, sir!"

"Something straight ahead, sir!" echoed Willy Waffles.

"Can you make out what it is?" asked Mr. Pugsley.

"Only a speck, sir!" said Dick.

"Just a tiny dot, sir!" added Willie Waffles. "By Jove," he added, "it is a man! He is waving a cloth!"

"Right-ho!" said Mr. Pugsley. "What's 'e afloat on?"

"It looks like a barrel!" said Dick. "Yes, it is a barrel!"

"Is he a white man?"

"Can't see at this distance. Looks black against the sunblink!" said Dick.

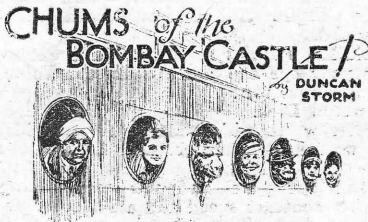
"White!" said Willie Waffles, as the little vessel raced towards the barrelled castaway. "He's white. He knows we've seen him. He's wrapping his waistcloth round him again!"

Mr. Pugsley slowed his engine. The white bow wave of the D.S.B. died down, and she ripped towards the man on the barrel.

Soon he was plainly in sight.

With the exception of a Malay silk sarong, or waistcloth, and a single eyeglass mounted in tortoiseshell, and strung on a wide black riband, he might have been old Adam himself, for this and the barrel was apparently the whole of his worldly wealth.

"That's an English nut!" exclaimed Mr. Pugsley, leaning over the side of the steering-well and taxiing gently down on the castaway. "You'd never find anyone but an English nutski, sticking a window-pane in his eye, with nothing but a dishcloth to save 'is dignity! Ahoy, there!"



(Continued  
from  
previous  
page.)

The gentleman in the barrel was apparently not in a very good temper.

"Shan't ahoy, there!" he called. "I wish you'd stop making those beastly marine noises! I hate the sea and everything connected with it! And look out with your boat! Don't run me down!"

"All right, Archibald!" replied Mr. Pugsley, rather nettled, for he prided himself on having been one of the smartest boatmen in the Navy. "Don't worry yourself. We won't upset you. And this is not a boat. She is now a ship cruising independent, the D.S.B. of the school-ship Bombay Castle. Stand by, boys, to help the gentleman aboard."

He brought the D.S.B. alongside the barrel as tenderly as if it were an egg. Hands were reached out to the young man in the eyeglass, and he was dragged aboard.

"Anything in that cask?" asked Mr. Pugsley.

"Of course there isn't anything in the beastly thing!" replied the young man sourly. "You took a long time coming along!" he added pettishly. "I've been waving for hours. I thought you were a liner!"

"That was the mirage," explained Mr. Pugsley. "When we saw you first, you looked twenty feet high. But who are you? Where do you come from in that rig? Where's your ship?"

"I am Lionel Love!" said the young man complacently, as if that were the most important piece of information he had to offer.

"Hey?" demanded Mr. Pugsley, pretending not to hear.

"Lionel Love!" repeated the young man, as if he were announcing that he was the Prince of Wales.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Love!" said Mr. Pugsley.

"But—"

"Of course you know me!" said the young man. "I am Lionel Love, the cinema star!"

"Never heard of you afore," said Mr. Pugsley calmly, "but that's my misfortune and not my fault, as the monkey said when 'e got 'is foot in the rabbit trap. But we are looking for a movie outfit! Do you know a ship called the Star of the East?"

The young man made a dramatic gesture.

"Do I know a ship called the Star of the East!" he echoed. "Do I know a ship called the Star of the East? Oh, my hat!"

"Well, go on!" said Mr. Pugsley impatiently.

"I was thrown overboard from her last night!" said Lionel Love excitedly. "I was thrown overboard—like Jonah, by a lot of beastly Chinese and Arabs. The Star of the East has mutinied. By Jove! They had the audacity to throw me overboard—me, Lionel Love—the greatest film star in the firmament!"

"Well, I've heard of Charlie Chaplin and Doug Fairbanks, and Claude Fairbrother as well," said Mr. Pugsley quietly. "And I'll always pay money to go and see Arold Lloyd—I like Arold—makes me laugh; but what did they throw you over for?"

"Why, they wanted me to grease their beastly engines," exclaimed Mr. Lionel Love indignantly, "and I wouldn't. So they threw me overboard!"

Mr. Pugsley might have answered that he did not wonder at it.

"They threw a barrel after yer, at any rate!" said he. "But what were you doing on the Star of the East? How did she turn pirate?"

"Why, we had finished the great six-reeler and there were

still a few weeks left of our contract time," said Lionel Love, "so we went to a rotten place where there were all coconut-trees, don't you know, just a beastly ring of coral in the sea, only five-foot above high tide!"

"An atoll!" said Mr. Pugsley.

"I don't know if that's what you call the beastly place," said Lionel Love, "but we were going to shoot a few short stories in which I was, of course, going to play the lead with Jane Paterson; for, of course, you know, my man, dear old Claude Fairbrother, though he is a very good producer, is no actor at all. His love scenes with Jane Paterson are simply—well, of course—"

"Yes, I can quite understand that it's a bit up-hill, as you might say, for a movie star to make love to 'is wife," agreed Mr. Pugsley. "But what I am after is to know what's become of Claude Fairbrother, what's become of Miss Jane Paterson, 'is wife, and the company of actors? And where is Mr. Goldberg, the famous cinema baron who was with them bossing the show?"

"I am sure I don't know what became of Mr. Goldberg!" exclaimed Mr. Love. "He simply disappeared the night that the native crew mutinied, and the native actors took charge of the ship. They were not actors, they were pirates! I always warned Mr. Goldberg and Claude Fairbrother what would happen. 'My dear old chappie,' I said to Claude only three weeks ago, 'let us pack up and go home now that we have finished the great six-reeler. These native fellows you have engaged are dangerous. First of all, it is degrading to the profession to employ such riffraff as actors. They are not actors! That's what I said to Claude!'"

"But I thought you said just now that Mr. Claude Fairbrother ain't no actor 'imself," said Mr. Pugsley, who did not much like this fellow. "As for actors, I only knows what I 'eard a porter call to a signalman one Sunday when I was at Rugby Junction. 'What you got on the sidings, 'Arry,' he calls. 'Nothing,' says the signalman—'only actors and fish!'"

Mr. Lionel Love did not look disconcerted even by this swift sum up of Mr. Pugsley's opinion of him.

"Haven't you got some clothes on board this beastly little boat?" he demanded. "Look at me—I have no clothes."

By now Mr. Pugsley was getting a little annoyed.

"When you tell us a little bit more about where your ship's company is and a little bit less about yourself," he answered, "you can have your clothes. Meantime, I'm going to sink that cask of yours."

"Let the beastly thing float!" said Mr. Love.

"No blooming fear!" said Mr. Pugsley. "I'm not leaving anything about that's going to act as a buoy or a tell-tale on us!"

He edged the D.S.B. towards the barrel.

"Ayee, boys!" said he. "And chuck a few tumps of ballast in to take her down!"

The boys swiftly obeyed him. They roped in the barrel, smashed a couple of staves, dropped in a few of the heavy burned-out firebars which served the D.S.B. as ballast, and down went the barrel to the bottom, throwing up a few gurgles and bubbles as she went.

"There, young feller, that's what would 'ave appened to you, if we hadn't come along!" said Mr. Pugsley, regarding Mr. Love, severely. "Now, I want you to think a little bit less about yourself and a little bit more of the ship's company you've left behind you. Where was the island that they was left on when the crew mutinied?"

Mr. Love stared at him and smoothed back his hair in a bewildered fashion.

"I don't know," said he.

"Stir up the old grey brain matter," said Mr. Pugsley encouragingly. "Try, and think. Stop pulling those dramatic mugs, and use your brains as well as the brown paper they are wrapped in."

"But, my dear old chappie," protested the actor, "I've been at sea for weeks and we've been twiddling and turning about all over the place. Sometimes I've been seasick, too. And we've burned six Chinese junks."

(There will be another lively instalment of this adventure serial in next week's tip-top issue, so be sure and order your copy of the GEM in advance.)

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