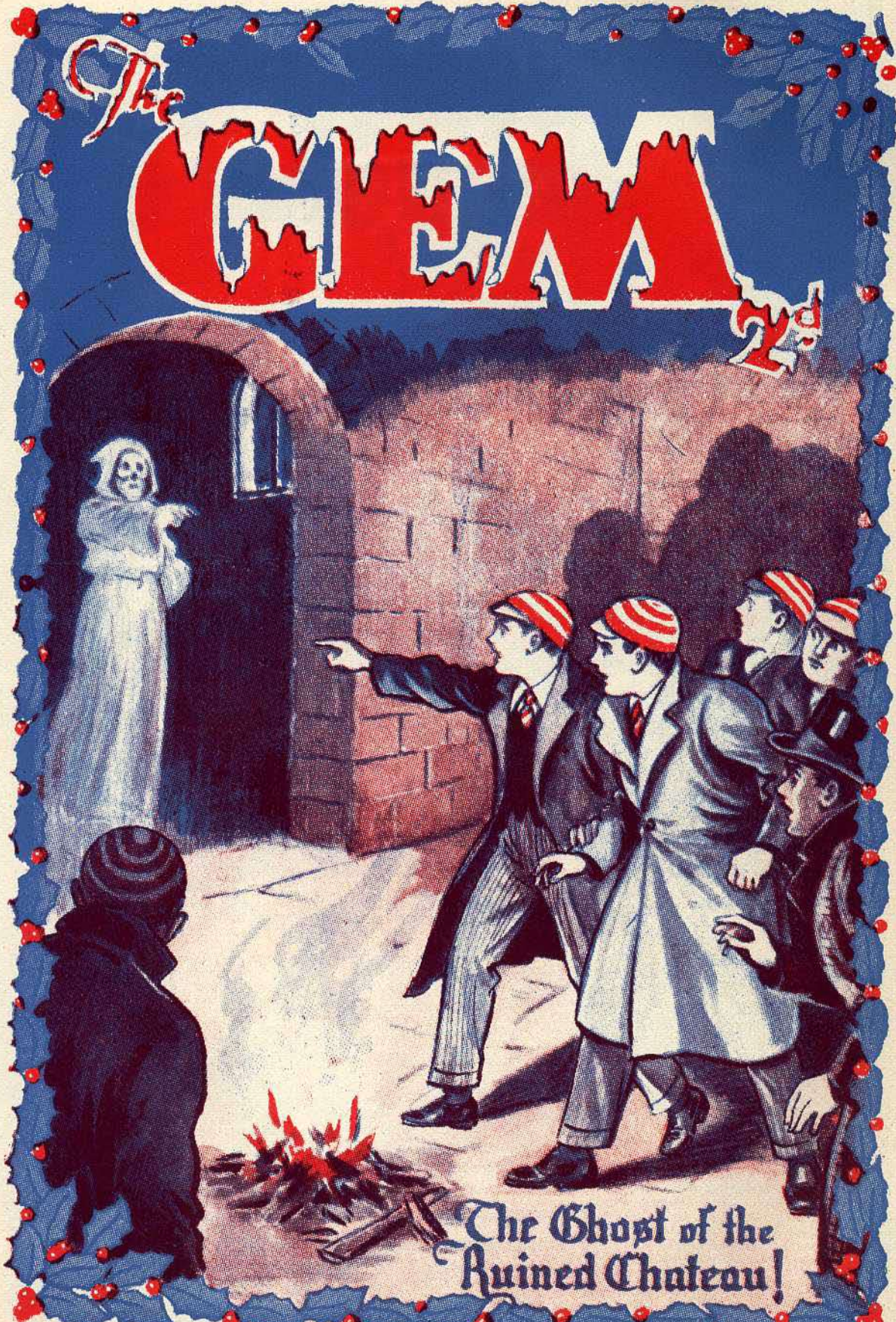


Grand Christmas Number!

The

GEM

2d



The Ghost of the
Ruined Chateau!

Eerie Groans—Strains of Sinister Music—and a Ghostly Monk with a Death's Head!
Such is Tom Merry & Co.'s Welcome at the Old Chateau!

The Ghost of the



There came a sound of eerie groaning—so close, so deep and thrilling, that the juniors started and turned pale, and looked about them nervously. "Where is the rotter?" muttered Blake.

CHAPTER 1.

Gussy is a Little Hasty!

"**B**AI Jove, it's cold!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's made that really undeniable statement.

It was cold!

Eleven juniors of St. Jim's were packed in the railway carriage. They all wore overcoats and scarves; but, al' the same, they were certainly cold.

The juniors were bound for Proly, where they were to alight for the Chateau Cernay. The chums of St. Jim's had been spending a holiday in Paris, and they had become acquainted with a French youth, Auguste Cernay. The latter had invited them to spend a few days at his home in Proly, and the juniors had gladly accepted.

Tom Merry's Uncle Frank, who had been looking after them in Paris, had given his consent, and the holiday

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party was now in the train on its way to the Chateau Cernay.

Tom Merry stamped his feet, and Monty Lowther was beating a tattoo with his boots, which kept up an accompaniment to the rattle and the roar of the French train. Manners was reading—a text-book on photography, of course.

Figgins, Kerr, and Wynn were jammed together on the opposite seat with Harry Noble, Blake, and Digby. The Terrible Three occupied one side, with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and his minor Wally.

And it was cold. There was no doubt about that. Monty Lowther

said it was on account of the weather not being warm, a feeble attempt at humour that was greeted with a general grunt.

"Don't you be funny, Lowther," implored Jack Blake. "There are enough discomforts in travelling in the winter without that."

"Oh, rats!" said Lowther.

"I must wepeat and approve of the wemarks of my fwiend Blake," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, jamming his eyeglass into his eye and glancing at Lowther. "I appeal to the fellows—is this a time to be funny?"

"Certainly not!" said Figgins. "Lowther's jokes are barred."

"We ought to be getting near the station for Cernay's digs," remarked Arthur Augustus.

"I'm getting hungry," said Fatty Wynn.

"Only getting!" exclaimed Blake, in astonishment. "Why, it's nearly a quarter of an hour since you had your last meal."

IMPORTANT NEWS
for all Readers
ON PAGE 13!

Here's the Yarn of the Year Bar None! Telling of the Thrilling Yuletide Adventures of the St. Jim's Chums in France!



By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

Fatty Wynn grunted. "I get so jolly hungry in this cold weather," he remarked. "It's a time of the year when I get a specially good appetite."

"Is there a time of the year when you don't?" asked Monty Lowther, with an air of affectionate interest.

"Well, I can always keep my end up at dinner-time," said Fatty Wynn modestly. "There's no fairy appetite rot about me."

"No, by Jove, there isn't!"

"It's cold, deah boys."

"I believe I've heard that before," said Figgins, stamping his feet. "That's the way to keep your tootsies warm. Hallo!"

"Yawwoh!"

Arthur Augustus jumped up with an agonised howl, and danced on one leg. The juniors gazed at him in astonishment.

"Jolly good!" said Lowther. "But, really, you know, the carriage is too crowded for any dancing exhibition just now, Gussy. You ought to leave it till we get out at the station."

"You uttah ass!"

"Now, I put it to you, Gussy, is this a place to dance in?" remonstrated Lowther.

"I'm not dancin', you duffah! Figgins stamped on my foot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's no laughin' mattah, you ass! He has hurt my toe, and uttaly wuined the polish on my shoe."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I decline to have my wemarks gweeted with waucous laughtah. I should be sowwy to have to give you fellows a feaful thwashin' all wound."

Jack Blake pulled the swell of St. Jim's back into his seat.

~~~~~

Lost somewhere in France late at night, the chums of St. Jim's seek shelter in a deserted and desolate chateau—to find that the old ruin has a grisly ghostly guardian!

~~~~~

"Sit down, Gussy," he remarked. "I can't have you making rows like this. As your keeper, I feel responsible for you."

"I wefuse to wegard you in the light of a keepah, you uttah ass!"

"Shoo!"

"If you make that impertinent noise again, Blake, I shall have no wesource but to thwash you."

"Shoo!"

Arthur Augustus jumped up and pushed back his cuffs.

"Pway put your hands up, deah boy!"

"Shoo!"

"You—you uttah wottah——"

"Shoo!"

It was exasperating to the swell of St. Jim's to be "shooed" as if he were a chicken in a farmyard. He gave a tap on Blake's nose.

"Now, you ass——"

"Shoo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

Arthur Augustus turned round upon the long-legged junior. As Blake was

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his own chum and studymate at home at St. Jim's, he didn't want to "thwash" him, as he expressed it; but he had no hesitation about thrashing Figgins, who was a New House fellow, and an ancient rival at St. Jim's.

"Figgins—"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Pway shut up, Figgins, or I shall give you a feahful thwashin'!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
Tap!

There was a forcible tap on Figgins' nose. It brought the water to Figgys' eyes, and he gave a roar.

"There! Now pewwaps—"
Arthur Augustus had no time to say more.

The long-limbed and lengthy body of Figgins rose, and his arms were thrown round the elegant form of the swell of St. Jim's, imprisoning him in a tight grasp.

"Ow!" gasped D'Arcy. "Wefuse me, you wuff beast! You are wump-in' my necktie and jacket."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Wefuse me at once!"

"Are you going to sit down and be quiet like a good boy?" demanded Figgins.

"Ow! Certainly not! I uttahly wefuse to be a good boy! I weguard you as an ass. I'm goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

And Arthur Augustus, whose indignation was rising to boiling point, made a terrific effort, taking Figgins somewhat by surprise, and they rolled over together.

In that crowded French railway carriage there wasn't much room to roll over, and the two falling juniors crashed upon a seat full of other fellows.

There was a general roar.

"Ow!"
"Oh!"
"Yaroooh!"
"Groogh!"
"Bai Jove!"

Kerr, Wynn, Noble, and Blake roared together, and struggled out from under the struggling combatants.

They laid violent hands upon them and wrenched them apart. Figgins was laughing so much that he couldn't resist; but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was quite excited, and he refused to give in.

"Chuck it!" roared Kangaroo, pushing a red and heated face up from underneath Gussy's left boot.

"Wats!"
"Stop it!"
"I wefuse to stop it!"
"Will you ring off?" yelled Blake.
"I uttahly decline to wing off! I am goin' to thwash Figgins!"

"Then we'll jolly well squash you," said Kerr. "Shove him down on the floor, and all of you put your feet on him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Good egg!"
"Ow! I wefuse—I decline—"
Bump!
Down went the elegant form of the swell of St. Jim's.

Wally kindly rescued his topper. As a rule, Wally did not show a proper respect for his major's toppers, but perhaps his heart was softened by the approach of Christmas. He placed the topper in safety upon the rack, and then lent a brotherly hand in shoving Gussy down upon the dusty floor of the railway carriage.

The elegant form of the swell of St. Jim's disappeared under countless feet.

"Ow! Yow! Gr-r-r-r!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Help! Wescue! Yah!"
"Will you keep the peace?"
"No. Yow! No! Wats!"
"Then you'll stay there," grinned Tom Merry.

There was a rattle and a bump as the train slackened and stopped. The door of the carriage flew open.

In a moment the juniors drew their feet away from Arthur Augustus, to allow him to rise. A new passenger—a man in a thick coat, with a black, pointed beard—was stepping into the carriage.

But D'Arcy was too bewildered to notice that the train had stopped, or that the door of the carriage had opened.

As soon as the feet were withdrawn he struggled up blindly, and hit out with equal blindness.

"Look out!" yelled Tom Merry. But the warning came too late.

Arthur Augustus' blow thumped upon the chest of the new passenger and sent him whirling out of the carriage door and staggering back on the platform, where he sat down, with a bump and a gasp.

CHAPTER 2.

An Angry Fellow-Passenger!

COM MERRY sprang to his feet. "You ass!" he roared. "You've done it now!"
"Weally—"

"Look what you've done!"
Arthur Augustus already saw what he had done.

His excitement passed, to be replaced by dismay and contrition. He had biffed a stranger, and knocked him out of the carriage—an offending stranger—and a foreigner, to whom it would be difficult to explain.

How could the swell of St. Jim's ever sufficiently apologise for that unlucky assault?

"My hat!" murmured Blake. "Sling out your French, Kerr; it's wanted now."

"Yes, rather!"
Kerr cleared his throat. The Scottish junior could talk—his friends said jabber—French like any Frenchman, but never had his services as an interpreter been in greater demand than now.

They were within a few stations now of their destination, and, as Blake remarked, it was just like Gussy to signalise their arrival by an affray of this sort.

French politeness had greatly impressed the chums of St. Jim's during their visit to Paris. But it was soon evident that they were not to receive any further samples of it from the man D'Arcy had inadvertently knocked down.

Undoubtedly the man had good cause for losing his temper, but that was no excuse for the towering rage he was in, and the torrent of abusive language that poured from his lips.

Fortunately, the chums were too little acquainted with colloquial French fully to understand what he said; but they understood enough to make them feel less apologetic.

Several porters had rushed up and raised the unfortunate stranger to his feet, and he was swearing and gesticulating like a lunatic.

"Bai Jove!" gasped D'Arcy. "I'm sowwy! I'm awfully sowwy! Tell him I'm sowwy, Kerr."

"All right. Shut up!"

"Weally, Kerr—"
"Give me a chance to speak."
"Certainly! Tell him—"
Blake gave D'Arcy a tap on the mouth as a hint to ring off, and Kerr spoke to the stranger in French at express speed.

Kerr put it very nicely, but the stranger did not take it in good part. "Ah, bah!" he exclaimed. "Fools—dolts—English dolts!"

"Bai Jove! He speaks English!"
"Nice, polite English, too!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Learned it in Billingsgate, I suppose," remarked Tom Merry. "Go on, old chap, get some more off your chest if it relieves you."

The stranger ground his teeth. "Fools! Cochons! Idiots!"
"Go hon!"

Arthur Augustus adjusted his eyeglass and turned it severely upon the stranger.

"I have already apologised," he said, with dignity. "I weguard you as bein' no gentleman. A fellow can't do more than apologise for an accident."

"Fool!"
"I wefuse—"

The engine shrieked, and the porters bundled the man into the carriage. It was already over full, but there was no time for him to seek another.

Tom Merry & Co., after what had happened, did not exactly like him for a travelling companion, but there was no help for it now.

The train rolled out of the country station.

The Frenchman glared round at the boys, expecting somebody to make room for him to sit down. As he had entered a crowded carriage he had no right to expect anything of the sort; but after the accident they felt he was entitled to some concession.

"Your seat, Gussy," said Blake. "You can't do less."
"Yaas, wathah! I quite agwee with you, deah boy. I—"
"Well, get up!"

"Certainly. Will you pway do me the honah of acceptin' my seat, sir?"

The Frenchman sat down without a word.

He was evidently still in a savage temper, but he kept it under control now. His annoyance was natural, but his looks showed that he was anything but a good-tempered man. His thick black brows, drawn closely together, gave him a hard and harsh look, which was added to by a long scar on his left cheek, which puckered up the skin.

Arthur Augustus, who was still considerably ruffled, stood up in the carriage, dusting himself, while the train rolled on.

The black-bearded Frenchman sat silent, scowling. He had taken some papers from his pocket, and his scowl died away gradually as he became interested in them.

But all the time his face never lost its grim, forbidding look.

Tom Merry glanced at him once or twice casually.

The man was well dressed and did not appear to be poor; yet, as Tom looked at his face, it occurred to him that he would not care to meet him alone in a lonely place at night.

The Frenchman looked up irritably several times as Figgins stamped his feet to warm them.

It was certainly cold weather. And suddenly Fatty Wynn, as he looked out of the window, uttered an exclamation of pleasure and surprise.

"Snow!"



"Look out!" yelled Tom Merry, as Arthur Augustus hit out blindly. But the warning came too late. Gussy's blow thumped on the chest of the new passenger, and sent him staggering out of the carriage.

"Bai Jove! Snow!"

It was snow—an early, flaky fall of snow. The train was climbing into a hilly region, amid which the Chateau Cernay stood. Down from the hills came a bitter wind, and upon it were borne white flakes that flew round the train like tiny birds.

Rattle, rattle!

The train stopped.

The winter dusk had fallen, and as Tom Merry looked out of the damp windows he failed to see the name of the station.

The scarred Frenchman rose, thrust himself past Tom Merry, opened the door, and alighted. It was a little country station, and dim lights flickered on the platform.

"Blessed if I can see the name of the station!" growled Tom Merry. "Porter!"

"Ours is Proly," said Blake. "We ought to be near it by this time. The train's late, too. But I suppose Cernay will wait for us at Proly."

"Sure to."

"Est-il Proly?" called out Tom Merry, as the porter came up.

The man shook his head and pointed along the line and jabbered.

"What's he saying, Kerr?"

"It's the next station."

"Oh, good!"

The porter closed the door, and the train rolled on again.

The juniors caught a glimpse of the

scarred Frenchman leaving the station. He did not glance towards them, having apparently already forgotten their existence.

The train rushed on through the dark.

"You can sit down now, Gus," said Wally. "I must say you've made a good beginning."

"Weally, Wally——"

"Next time you'd better think twice before you hit once," said Wally, with an air of severe admonition.

"Weally——"

"Well, it won't be long to the next station, and Cernay will be waiting for us in the car," said Tom Merry. "I shall be jolly glad when the journey's over, though Gussy has made it exciting."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"These French trains are jolly slow," said Blake, with a yawn. "I don't believe this wretched rattletrap will ever stop——"

Bump!

Crun-n-n-neh!

"Bai Jove, what's that?"

"The train's stopping."

"But it's not the station!" exclaimed Blake. "It's only a few minutes since we left the last."

"Gweat Scott, there's somethin' w'ong!"

Tom Merry looked grim.

"That's it," he said quietly. "There's something wrong on the line."

"Bai Jove!"

CHAPTER 3.

Stopped on the Line!

TOM MERRY flung the window down and looked out. There was blackness outside, broken only by the glimmer of whirling flakes.

Hoarse voices shouted along the line, but Tom could not make out what they were saying. The train jolted again, and then was quite still.

Passengers looked out of the other carriages, doors were opened, and a hundred voices added to the din.

"Bai Jove, there's somethin' weally w'ong!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Pewwaps I had better get out and see if I can do anythin'."

"You might get behind the train and shove!" suggested Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Or you might sing one of your tenor solos. That would make anything go further on if it could."

"I wegard you as an ass, and I wefuso to weply to your wudicrous remarks. Pway let me pass, Tom Mewwy."

"We may as well get out, you chaps," said Tom Merry. "The other passengers are getting out. I hope it's nothing serious. No fun in being stuck up here on a freezing night."

"By George, no!"

"Wathah not!"

The St. Jim's juniors crowded out of

the carriage. They took their small personal belongings with them. Their trunks were in the luggage-van, and if the train was held up, would be held up with it.

Tom Merry hurried along to the crowd that was gathering round the halted engine.

The engine-driver was making hopeless gestures.

"Something wrong with the line," said Kerr, after listening for a few minutes to the excited hubbub of talk. "A bridge has given way in a flood."

"Phew!"

"From what I can gather, we've had a narrow escape from going to kingdom come, here," said Kerr. "But the engine-driver was warned in time. The bridge isn't down, but it's unsafe. Looks as if we shan't get through to-night, my sons."

"But it is impos for us to remain here."

Kerr shrugged his shoulders. "Better whistle for an aeroplane, then."

"Weally, Kerr—"

Some of the passengers were getting back into the carriages, as the warmest place. Others were already walking back along the line towards the station they had left. The hubbub of voices subsided a little.

Tom Merry wrinkled his brow thoughtfully.

"Look here, you chaps, we can't stay here, that's certain," he said. "And Cernay's waiting for us at Proly, too, in his governor's car—"

"He'll hear of the accident," said Blake. "He'll go home when he knows that the line is blocked and we can't come through!"

"Yes; but what are we to do? No good going back, and hanging up at a draughty railway station all night. If we're going to walk, we may as well walk forward."

"Forward's the word!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I don't know about getting along the line, if the bridge is unsafe," said Tom Merry. "But there is some road or other, I suppose. Find somebody who hasn't lost his head, Kerr, and pitch it to him. Ask if there's a road direct to the Chateau Cernay. No good going to Proly if we can get direct to Cernay's place."

"Yaas, wathah!"

Kerr inquired in spite of the excitement of the accident, the national politeness of the French made a dozen people ready to afford the boys any assistance in their power, and Kerr extracted the information that if they followed the line for a short distance, and then took a road which they would perceive at a curve, and followed that road, it would lead them within sight of the lights of the Chateau Cernay—a building which seemed to be well known in the district.

"Jolly good!" said Tom Merry, when Kerr reported. "Let's bunk!"

And the juniors of St. Jim's marched on through the darkness and the falling flakes.

It was evidently the best thing to be done; but the boys soon found that they had not undertaken an easy task.

There was no danger of a train coming along the line, in the circumstances, and so long as they kept to the railway track all was plain sailing, though even there it was not easy to find one's way in the darkness. But the metals guided them, and they reached the curve of the track.

"Here's the curve," said Tom Merry, halting. "Now, where's the road?"

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"Puzzle," said Lowther—"find the road."

"It's on the right of the track," said Kerr.

"Here's a blessed embankment—careful how you get down."

"Yaas, wathah! Shall I help you, Tom Mewwy?"

"Better help yourself, Gussy."

"Oh, I'm all wight. I'm wemarkably surefooted in a place like this. You see, I—"

Arthur Augustus suddenly broke off, and there was a sound of rolling and scrambling.

Tom Merry burst into a roar.

"Ha, ha, ha! Where are you, Gussy?"

"Ow!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Ya-as, wathah!"

The swell of St. Jim's had disappeared. The juniors followed him down the slope more cautiously, and groping for him in the dark, dragged him out of a hedge.

Arthur Augustus gasped for breath.

"Bai Jove!"

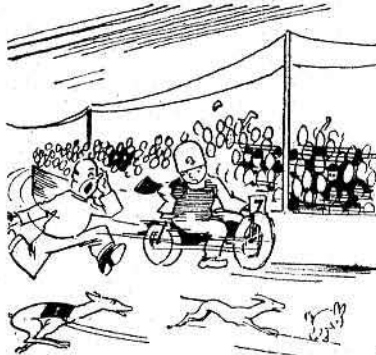
"Are you damaged?"

"I feah that my toppah is wuined."

"Never mind your topper. What about your bones?"

"My toppah—"

"Blow your topper!"



"I tell you there isn't any dirt-track racing to-night!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to D. Tyler, 20, Sandfield Road, Headington, Oxford.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I cannot proceed without my toppah, and as a maffah of fact—"

"Any bones broken?" demanded Blake.

"No," said D'Arcy peevishly. "Nevah mind my bones. My toppah is somewhere on the othah side of that beastly hedge."

"Better leave it behind," said Fatty Wynn. "We ought to get on as soon as possible. We don't want to keep them waiting supper."

"Weally, Wynn—"

"I wish I had Pongo here," said Wally. "He'd soon find a topper. He'd guide us, too, in this rotten dark."

"Here's the topper," said Blake, who was groping for it. "It feels a bit squashy, but it's all right. Now, come on."

They squeezed through the hedge into the lane. It was a narrow, dark lane, and there was no glimmer of light.

"Now, then, Kerr, which way?"

"Left, after leaving the line."

"Right-ho! Come on!"

They marched on.

The darkness was hardly broken by a glimmer in the sky; round them the light flakes were still falling, and the

ground was assuming a ghostly glimmer of white. Progress was still slow, but the St. Jim's juniors stuck it out manfully.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "This is a wathah owiginal way of goin' to a Chwistmas party, and no mistake!"

"I only hope we shall get there," grunted Manners. "Here's a blessed crossroad! Which one do we take, Kerr?"

The juniors halted. A lane crossed the one they were following at almost right angles, and although they struck matches and groped, they could find no traces whatever of a signboard. There was no indication of any sort. Kerr rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"Well, which way, Kerr?" demanded half a dozen voices.

"Don't ask me!"

"But you found out the way, didn't you?"

"They never told me anything about this crossroad. I suppose they didn't think of it."

"And you didn't?" said Kangaroo.

"Well, hang it," said Kerr warmly, "how the dickens was I to think of it?"

"This is what comes of trusting a New House chap to do the interpreting!" said Blake. "We've really got ourselves to thank."

"Look here, you School House ass, I—"

"Oh, don't jaw—that won't make it any better! Kerr has got us into a hole—"

"You dummy!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wegard Kerr as havin' got us into this hole! The best thing Kerr can do is to apologise to all the gentlemen pvesent."

"Fat lot of good that would do!" remarked Wally.

"Wally, I object to those vulgah expressions! I—"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy! What the dence are we to do?" said Tom Merry.

"We've got the choice of three ways, and one's as good as another!"

And the juniors looked at one another grinnily, while the whirling flakes dropped thicker and thicker about them.

CHAPTER 4.

The Mysterious Light!

HERE was a silence for some moments. The predicament was a serious one. The juniors of St. Jim's were fond of adventure, true; but, as Blake said, this was a little too thick.

They were out in the snow and darkness, at a late hour, in a foreign country, and they hadn't the faintest idea which road to take of the three. And if they found the right one, there was still a long and weary tramp before them to reach the hospitable roof of their French chum.

"Most enjoyable Christmas party, I must say!" said Blake, at last.

"Oh, rats!"

"Looks like being a frost!" ventured Lowther.

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass in the direction of Monty Lowther's voice, not being able to see Lowther himself.

"Lowthah, I object vewy much to your wotten jokes at a time like this! I object—"

"The question is, what's to be done?" said Noble.

"You are intewwuptin' me, Kangaroo!"

"Yes, I know that, Gussy. What's to be done?"

"Toss up for it," said Dig.
 "Well, that really seems the only thing to do," said Tom Merry. "Anybody got a coin handy?"
 "Yaas, I've got a five-franc piece here."

"Get a match out, Blake."
 Blake struck a match, and D'Arcy tossed up the coin. Of course, he missed it coming down, and the coin dropped to the ground.

"Bai Jove!"
 "A guess for each turning," said Tom Merry, "and the odd man wins."
 "I've dwopped the coin!"
 "Ass!"

"Get another!" said Blake. "Look sharp!"
 "It would be vewy extwavgant to lose five fwancs that way, Blake."

"Well, you always were an ass, you know! Let it be a lesson to you not to be an ass, and it will be worth the five francs. Here's a franc. I'll toss."

"But I've lost—"
 "Well, look for it, duffer!"
 Blake tossed the coin and caught it in his palms.

"Now, then, Tommy!"
 "Head for the left turning!" said Tom.

Blake showed the coin in the glimmer of a match. It was tail.
 "Left turning's barred," he said.
 "Try again."
 "Head for the middle turning."
 "Tail again."

"Then we take the right one," said Tom Merry. "Well, it's as good a way of deciding as any other, but I wish we had a surer one. Anyway, it's settled now—the right turning. Come on!"

"If it turns out to be right—" began Lowther.
 "Oh, don't be funny now! March!"
 "I haven't found that coin yet!"
 "Leave it there!"
 "Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Well, you'll have to stay and look for it alone!" grinned Blake. "Good-bye!"

Taking the turning to the right, the juniors marched on. Arthur Augustus hesitated a moment, and then followed them, leaving his five-franc piece reposing somewhere amid the mud and snow on the road.

The middle turning and the turning to the right parted at an obtuse angle, and there really seemed little to choose between them.

But at a short distance from the cross-roads the lane the juniors were following wound round farther to the right. This was hardly to be observed by the party, encompassed in darkness as they were.

They followed the road, tramping steadily in hopes of meeting someone who could direct them more surely, or of seeing the lights of a cottage where they could make inquiries.

But no pedestrian on the road, no glimmer of light from the wayside, gladdened their eyes. The country seemed to be deserted.

Tom Merry struck a match and looked at his watch at last.

"My hat! Guess the time!"
 "Oh, give it up!"
 "Half-past eleven."
 "Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "It will be wathah bad form pwsentin' ourselves at a fellow's house at this time of night."

"We haven't much chance of presenting ourselves there!" growled Figgins. "More likely to present ourselves in a snowdrift!"

"Cernay will think we've stayed

ST. JIM'S JINGLES. No. 9.



ERIC KILDARE.

*THE shining star of all the school
 Is good and genial Eric,
 Whose influence to reign and rule
 Is mighty and mesmeric.
 A thorough sportsman—fair and free—
 He makes a splendid skipper;
 And boys and "beaks" alike agree
 That Kildare is a "ripper"!*

*His winning ways and sunny smiles
 Have often times succeeded
 In lifting others over stiles
 When help was sorely needed.
 And many, by misfortune wrecked,
 Their own depression wrapt in,
 Have learned to honour and respect
 Their sympathetic captain.*

*"Uneasy lies the kingly head,"
 Was Shakespeare's sad admission;
 And Kildare stands in daily dread
 Of losing his position.
 For others in the Sixth enrolled,
 Who shine in skill and knowledge,
 Would give a wealth of good red gold
 To rule the famous college.*

*Monteith was one who tried the most,
 And oft his brain was teeming
 With ways and means to get the post
 Of which he'd long been dreaming.
 His prospects for a while were bright,
 Till Fate's mysterious finger
 Brought all his cunning schemes to light,
 And not a hope did linger.*

*In summer-time the skipper turns
 His thoughts to other channels,
 For then his manly bosom burns
 To garb himself in flannels.
 In healthy sport he soon forgets
 Each former care and worry,
 And posing proudly at the nets,
 He smiles like Holmes of Surrey.*

*To coach his team he always strives
 With patience and precision;
 While all his daisy-cutting drives
 Are pleasing to the vision.
 And when his side seems doomed and done
 No foolish fear attacks him;
 "A game's not lost until it's won,"
 Is Eric's sporting maxim.*

*Here's health to him! May nothing mar
 His glorious reputation!
 Young England views him from afar
 With pride and admiration.
 Long may he stand for what is good,
 Abhor the mean and brutal,
 And play the game, as sportsmen should,
 Until the final "tootle."*

Next Week: GEORGE FIGGINS.

somewhere for the night owing to the breakdown," said Kangaroo. "I wonder if we could find shelter?"

"I've been looking for a light, a cottage, or something," said Tom Merry. "But there doesn't seem to be anything. Of course, there might be a building within a few yards of us, and we shouldn't see it. There would be no light at this hour."

"Well, we can only keep on." Their limbs were growing heavy with fatigue, and sleep weighed down their eyelids. The snow was still falling with a steady persistence, and the roads and hedges and trees glimmered white in the darkness.

The juniors had welcomed the sight of the snow when it began to fall as seasonable for a Christmas holiday. They were changing their minds now as it settled upon them, and clung to them and blew round their faces and ears.

Arthur Augustus uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Stop, deah boys!"
 "What's wrong?"
 "Nothin'."
 "Then keep on, ass!" growled Blake. "There's no time to waste now."
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "Oh, come on!"
 "I tell you—"

"Well, you can stand there and jaw in the snow!" said Blake, who was a little crusty, perhaps. "I hope you'll enjoy it. Good-bye!"

"But—"
 "Why don't you come on?" shouted Tom Merry.

"Because I've seen a light, deah boy!"
 "Oh! Why didn't you say so, then?"
 "Weally, you didn't give me a chance. You—"

"Oh, never mind! Where's the light?"

The juniors halted eagerly. Any glimmer of light in that dense and snowy darkness was a blessing to them. If they could get into any shelter for the night—even if it were only a cattle-shed—they would be glad. In the dawn they would be able to find their way to the chateau, or get a conveyance.

"Where is the light, Gussy?"
 Arthur Augustus pointed across the level land beside the lane, separated from them only by a row of low trees.

"It was there, deah boy."
 "I can't see it."
 "Neithah can I now. But it was there. I saw it distinctly."
 Jack Blake growled.

"You ass! It's only a false alarm. There's no light. It's only Gussy going to sleep and dreaming he sees things."
 "Weally, Blake—"

"Let's get on," grunted Digby. "If we stay here while Gussy talks, we shan't get a move on till morning."
 "Weally, Dig—"

"There's no light, that's certain," said Tom Merry, straining his eyes into the gloom. "You must have been mistaken, Gussy."

"I decline to admit the possibility of my bein' mistaken, Tom Mewwy. The light has disappeared now, I know, but I certainly did see it."

"Was it moving, or still?"
 "Moving, I think; but I caught sight of it only for a moment."

"It might have been some chap out to get cattle in, or something," said Manners hopefully. "Better make sure before we go on."
 "Well, I suppose so," agreed Tom Merry doubtfully. "If it was a chap

with a lantern, he might have passed behind something. There may be a farm here, for all we know. Keep your eyes on the spot."

Jack Blake caught his arm quickly. "Look!"

From the darkness of the night gleamed a sudden light—bright, flashing like a searchlight through the gloom.

It was only for an instant, and then it vanished, and the darkness of the night seemed darker than before.

CHAPTER 5.

The Ruined Chateau!

COM MERRY drew a quick, deep breath. The juniors had all seen the light this time, and there was no possibility of a mistake about it.

The light was there, and what did it mean?

That was a question which, Tom Merry thought, needed an answer.

"Betah shout," said Arthur Augustus. "The chap is bound to hear us if we bawl loud enough, you know, and then he'll come out and show us a light."

Tom Merry caught him by the shoulder.

"Silence—silence!"

"Bai Jove! What do you mean?"

"Not a sound!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"There's something odd about this," said Tom Merry, in a low tone. "Don't make a row, any of you. That may be a place for us to give a wide berth to."

"It struck me the same," said Figgins. "There's something jolly mysterious in those flashes. There it goes again!"

The light flashed out of the heart of the gloom again. It blazed straight towards the juniors, turned in a half-circle, and disappeared.

Blackness again.

"It's a signal," said Blake.

"Bai Jove! They know we're here, then."

"Rats! It's a signal to somebody else."

"Gweat Scott! I nevah thought of that, you know."

Tom Merry's face was very serious.

"That light is too bright for a farmer's lantern," he said. "It is either electric or acetylene, and it can't belong to a farm-hand. It's not a chap looking for cattle."

"Not likely!"

"Besides, at this hour—"

"Looks fishy."

"There may be something fishy going on, or there may not," said Tom Merry; "but, in any case, we may as well be careful. No good running one's head into trouble."

"Wathah not."

"Footpads are a bit out of date, I know, but there might be one or two in a lonely region like this. One never knows."

"The light doesn't seem to be coming again," said Blake, after a pause.

"No. We don't know how long it's been going on, though. The chap it's a signal to may have arrived."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The St. Jim's juniors waited and watched, with the flakes of snow settling thickly round them. They were anxious

and curious. They needed shelter, for the most hopeful had given up hope of reaching the Chateau Cernay that night.

They did not want to spend six or seven hours wandering in the snowy lanes, but shelter in this spot might mean worse for them.

"Well, what's going to be done?" said Blake at last. "Forward, or halt?"

"Halt, deah boys!" said D'Arcy. "I wathah fancy myself as a walkah, but, weally, I am gettin' vewy fatigued now. I would wathah wun any wisk than spend the west of the night in twampin' about."

"Well, I feel like that, too," said Figgins. "We can't get to Cernay's, that's a dead cert. My belief is that we took the wrong turning; but if we go back, we don't know which of the others to take."

"We may be on the right road and only a few minutes from the chateau."

"Or a few hours."

"Well, there's no telling."

"I'm tired," said Fatty Wynn. "The only thing is, if we put up in a barn or something, what are we going to have for supper?"

"Oh, let's risk it!" said Wally. "I can't go on tramping much farther, and the snow's coming down thicker than ever."

"Well, I'm willing to take the risk, whatever it is, if you chaps are," said Tom Merry thoughtfully. "After all, there are eleven of us. We ought to be able to take care of ourselves."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Only don't make a row; we don't want any trouble if we can help it."

"Wight-ho!"

"You fellows all agreed?" asked Tom Merry.

They were all agreed. They felt that they would rather risk footpads than continue the weary tramp through the snow and the dark.

"What is it?" asked Kerr.

"A big chunk of stone," said Tom Merry, in perplexity. "I don't know what it can be doing here, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Well, if we were at home, on Rylcombe Hill, I should think we were running into the ruins of the old castle," said Tom Merry. "I don't know if there's any ruined buildings about here. I wish I knew where we were!"

Blake uttered a slight exclamation.

"By George! I remember now Cernay telling us something about a ruined chateau—a building destroyed by the mob in the French Revolution and never rebuilt. It's in the same neighbourhood as the Chateau Cernay—how near I don't know."

"This might be the place, then?"

"Quite likely."

They moved on cautiously. Blake's surmise was probably correct, for as they went on they stumbled many times against masses of masonry, and once they almost fell down a flight of several stone steps. They were evidently passing over ground that had once been occupied by an extensive building, of which the fragments still remained.

A dark mass looked up before the juniors, and they stopped at last. The mass, darker than the surrounding darkness, showed them that they had reached a building.

"Look out!" whispered Tom Merry.

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

"Musical! Hark!"

"My hat!"

The juniors stood spellbound.

From the silence and the dimness of the night, proceeding whence they could not tell, came strange sounds of music.

Now high, now low, now almost inaudible, the strains came softly through the night to the ears of the astounded juniors.

"It's a violin," said Kerr.

"My hat! Here, at this hour?"

"Well, the light showed there was someone in the building," said Blake. "I suppose the chap is keeping it up, as Christmas is coming."

"It's pretty certain, as I said, that it wasn't a farm-hand with the light," said Tom Merry. "A farmer's man wouldn't have a violin, and certainly wouldn't be playing it here at this time of night."

"Nor a tramp, either, nor a footpad," said Kerr.

"Well, no," said Tom Merry, puzzled. "Have you got the faintest idea what it may mean, Blake?"

"I only remember what Cernay told me."

"Cernay?"

"Yes. I suppose this is the building he was speaking of—the ruined chateau," said Blake in a low voice.

"Most likely. What about it?"

"He told me something about it," said Blake hesitatingly.

"Oh! What was it?"

"Well, it's not a cheerful sort of thing, considering where we are, and the time of night," said Blake.

"Oh, go ahead!"

"Well, he said the chateau was supposed to be—"

"What?"

"Haunted!" said Blake.

"Bai Jove!"



"Come on, then," said Tom Merry—"and quiet!"

"Right-ho!"

"Betah let me lead the way; Tom Mewwy!"

"Rats!"

And Tom Merry marched ahead into the trees. He had to feel his way carefully, for the ground was rough and hilly, and, as far as he could ascertain, uncultivated.

He stumbled presently over an invisible mass in the darkness, and uttered a slight exclamation.

"Anythin' w'ong?"

"Stop a minute!"

Tom Merry felt over the obstruction with his hand. It was a huge block of stone, covered, of course, with snow.

Tom Merry's Christmas Message



CHRISTMAS!

There's magic in the word. It at once conjures up visions of plump turkeys, plum puddings, mince pies, crackers, mistle-toe, holly, and blazing log fires. And if the Clerk of the Weather is in good humour we may get snow. How jolly that will be! It would be ripping to have one of the old-time Christmases, with snow-covered fields and frozen ponds. But alas, the aforementioned Clerk of the Weather is such a treacherous old gent that he will possibly serve up a heat wave! You never can tell.

Christmas is not here yet, but the spirit of Christmas was in the air before we left for Paris. St. Jim's was about to break up for the vacation and everybody was in a happy humour.

Even Mr. Ratcliff, the sour, ill-humoured master of the New House, actually smiled the day before we went away. I saw him myself, and I wish I had had a camera handy. It was the only time Ratty had been known to smile this term! A snapshot of Ratty's smiling visage would indeed be a rare curiosity.

And Knox of the Sixth was smiling, too! As a rule Knox goes about with a fierce, forbidding frown. Jove of old is celebrated for his frowns, but he would have to play second fiddle to Knox. However, the bully of the Sixth was simply wreathed in smiles the morning we left, and he went so far as to wish me a happy Christmas in Paris! Good old Knox! I had always thought he was drained dry of the milk of human kindness, and I'm pleased to find this is not so.

Furthermore and moreover—as the lawyers say—I saw Taggles, the porter, smiling. In the ordinary course of events you will find Taggles grunting and growling and sulking and scowling. But Taggles, like everybody else, was infected with the spirit of Christmas. Doubtless he had visions of receiving numerous tips on breaking-up day.

It's a wonderful thing, this Christmas spirit. It changes pessimists into optimists, and growlers into sunbeams, and selfish people into Good Samaritans. I really don't know what we should do without Christmas, with its chimes and carols, its romps and revels, and its heritage of happy laughter.

If only peace on earth and good will towards all men prevailed not only at Christmas-time, but all the year round, what a jolly world it would be! People wouldn't need to look forward to the millennium. It would be already here!

To my loyal reader-chums all over the world let me echo the same old wish in the same old way :

"A Right Merry Christmas and a Happy and Prosperous New Year!"

"The seigneur and his family were keeping up some festival, with music and dancing, when the Jacobin mob broke in on them," said Blake, in a hushed voice. "They were all murdered. Since then, so the country people say, Cernay told me, though he laughed at the story himself—since then the ghosts have haunted the place, and the music is often heard on a winter night."

"Phew!"
"I—I—I think we'd better get on," said Fatty Wynn. "I—I—I'm not superstitious, you know, but—but—" "Ghosts are all bosh!" said Tom Merry decidedly.

"Yes, of course they are, in the daytime, but—"

"The music's stopped," said Kangaroo.

"Perhaps the ghosts have heard us," suggested Monty Lowther. "Anyway, it wasn't a ghost who was waving that light about, I suppose."

"Ha, ha, ha! Hardly!"
"We'll go on," said Tom Merry determinedly. "Most likely the music is somebody playing a trick to scare off people for some reason."

"But whoever it is, he wouldn't expect people to be prowling round to hear music at this time of night."

"Well, no. Anyway, we want shelter, and we're not going to be frightened away by a squeak of a violin."

"No fear!"
"Come on, then."

And the juniors, feeling their way in the darkness, moved on. But their hearts were beating faster now.

CHAPTER 6. Camping Out!

DARK and gloomy was the building as the juniors cautiously approached through the fast-falling flakes.

The mysterious sound of music had died away, and a silence as of the grave had fallen over the ruined building.

It was only broken by the slight sounds made by the boys as they

stumbled among the masses of fallen masonry, and brushed against the massive walls of the old chateau in the darkness.

Suddenly they became aware that the snow was no longer falling upon them.

"Bai Jove, it's left off snowin'!" Arthur Augustus remarked.

"No, it hasn't, duffer!" grunted Blake. "We're under a roof now."

"Bai Jove!"
The wind still swept about them, but the snow was gone. They were under a roof of some kind, but they could see nothing.

On every side darkness and silence—darkness that could be felt, silence as of the grave. The uncanny place was having a strange effect upon their nerves. They were silent, with fast-beating hearts.

They stopped under the shelter of the unseen roof, and Tom Merry broke the silence.

"We can't stay here," he said. "We've got to find some place more comfy to camp for the night. We must get a light."

"But that will give the alarm."

"I know—but it can't be helped. We're not afraid of ghosts, I suppose; and as for human beings, there are coven of us."

"That's so," said Kangaroo. "Let's get a light. There may be a corner of this place where we can be quite comfy for the night. There might be fuel, too—old doors and windows—to make a fire."

"Bai Jove. I should be glad of a warm!"

"We—we might find some grub, too, if there's anybody digging here," said Fatty Wynn. "I'm awfully hungry, you know—I get very hungry at this time of the year, and—"

"Not much chance of grub," said Tom Merry. "Lucky we've some matches."

He struck a match. The juniors looked round them eagerly in the glimmering light of the match. It showed large, damp stone walls, and gave them a glimpse of an arched roof over them.

All was cold, desolate, dark.
"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy, with a shiver. "It's a place for ghosts, you know. I wish we had an electric torch."

"We can make a torch," said Lowther.

"Bai Jove! How?"
"You could burn your topper—"

"Pway don't be an ass!"
"We'll burn a handkerchief, anyway, and get a look round," said Tom Merry. "Come farther in—it's more sheltered."

A handkerchief was twisted round the end of a stick and set fire to. The light blazed up and illuminated the strange quarters in which the juniors found themselves.

It was a large room, and seemed to have been an ante-chamber to the great hall of the chateau, over the ruins of which they had stumbled into their present refuge.

Windowless openings gave admittance to the wind and to stray flakes of snow, but the roof of the room seemed to be almost intact, only here and there fugitive flakes coming in. Three or four doorways—bare of doors—opened on various sides, giving admittance to what had been other apartments of the chateau—now windowless ruins—walls, and fragments of the roofs, alone remaining.

The juniors looked about them—with curiosity—and with anxiety, too. In the light of the improvised torch, they did not know what strange sights might meet their gaze. That there were others besides themselves in the ruined chateau they were certain. Others—at least one other. Where was he?

Not a wayfarer like themselves—the light signals showed that. Whom, then, was in this desolate ruin?

But there was safety in numbers. Even if the denizens of the chateau were thieves, eleven sturdy fellows ought to be able to take care of themselves.

"Can't see anything of his ghostship," said Monty Lowther. "The fellow with the lamp is lying low, too."

"Suppose we call to them?" suggested Blake.

Tom Merry nodded thoughtfully.

"Well, it wouldn't do any harm. After all, they must know we are here—so we shan't be giving ourselves away."

"Wathah not."

"Let's give them a yell," said Blake. "It will break this horrible silence, anyway."

"Good! All together!"

And with one voice the St. Jim's juniors roared:

"Hallo!"

The echoes of the shout came thundering back.

But nothing else answered them. If there was another occupant of the ruined chateau he could not have failed to hear that shout; but he did not care to show himself.

"Hallo, hallo!" roared the eleven powerful voices again.

Again the thundering echoes were the only answer. The torch was burning out.

"Call out in French, Kerr."

Kerr obeyed. He called out to anybody who was there to show himself and help lost travellers who wanted shelter and rest. But only the echoes replied.

Blake snorted.

"The bounders are lying low," he said. "That's pretty certain proof that they're no class. We shall remain here, in spite of them; but we'd better keep watch, and keep our eyes peeled."

"Yaas, wathah!"

The last flicker of the torch died out. Darkness rushed upon them once again. The juniors instinctively drew closer together.

"The first thing is to get a fire," said Tom Merry. "There must be some wood of some sort left here, if it's only a window-frame. I've got a newspaper in my pocket; we'll burn it for a light."

And a newspaper was twisted into a torch and lighted. By its light the juniors hunted for fuel.

The chateau had probably been stripped of its woodwork by the peasants of the surrounding country for fuel, for it was a difficult task to find any left. But they found a window-frame at last, and dragged it from the almost inaccessible casement where it was still jammed, and brought down a shower of stones with it.

There was no axe to chop it with, and they smashed it as small as possible with heavy stones, and then set to work chipping it with their pocket-knives.

It was weary work; but there was an adventurous excitement about it that banished sleep and fatigue. After all, it was a ripping adventure to camp for the night in a ruined chateau in the heart of France. There were a good many fellows at St. Jim's who would have given a term's pocket-money for the chance.

When a pile of chips, large and small, had been accumulated, Blake extracted from his pocket the last number of the "Magnet," and it was sacrificed to the fire. The paper burned up cheerily, and a dozen matches laid on it blazed up, and then the smaller of the chips were fed upon it, burning freely. Then the larger chips were laid carefully on the fire, and, finally, chunks of wood.

It was a labour of time, but the fire burned up, and soon the ruddy gleams of it were reflected on all sides, casting strange shadows into the recesses of the old chateau.

"We shall want some more fuel, though," said Fatty Wynn, warming his

hands at the blaze. "Where the dickens are we to get it?"

"Use your head," said Lowther.

"Bai Jove, it's the tenth time I've heard Lowthah make that wotten joke!"

"Oh, rats! Let's look for some more wood."

They hunted high and low for wood. Figgins came upon a stone staircase leading downwards into impenetrable darkness, and he struck a match and descended.

Then he suddenly stopped.

From below him, in the dense darkness, came a strange sound—the sound of a deep groan, as of a man in agony.

Then silence again.

Figgins stood for a moment, the blood running cold in his veins, and the hair standing on end upon his head.

Only for a moment; then he turned and raced up the stairs again at top speed, his heart thumping against his ribs like a hammer.

He dashed back into the light thrown by the fire, and the ghastly hue of his face drew every glance upon him at once.

CHAPTER 7.

Haunted!

FIGGINS gasped for breath.

That terrible sound from the darkness on the staircase was ringing in his ears still. He could not speak.

Kerr tapped him on the shoulder.

"What's the matter, Figgy?"

"Oh!"

"I say, old chap, what on earth—"

"My hat!" gasped Figgins. "It—it gave me a turn."

The juniors gathered quickly round.

Tom Merry grasped his stick tightly.

"What was it, Figgy? Have you seen anything?"

"N—no!"

"Then what—"

"I—I heard something," gasped Figgins. "A—a groan—an awful groan."

"Phew! Where?"

"There's a stair just outside this room—leads downwards. I was going down for fuel, and—and I heard it—"

"Gweat Scott! What did you do?"

"Bunked!" said Figgins laconically.

Tom Merry grinned.

"I think I should have done the same," he remarked. "It must have been startling; but—but it must be somebody playing a trick."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Or else somebody tumbled down the steps, and broken his leg," suggested Blake. "That's as likely as the other."

"Ah! Possibly. We—we ought to look."

Figgins' face grew longer. He did not like the idea of going down those steps again. But he would not draw back.

"Right you are!" he said. "I'm game, if you are."

"Anybody got a newspaper for a torch?"

Fatty Wynn had the "Petit Journal," and it was sacrificed to the cause. With the paper torch in his hand, blazing brightly, Tom Merry followed Figgins, who showed the way to the stone stair, the other juniors bringing up the rear.

"Here we are," said Figgins.

Tom Merry led the way downward.

The stone stair apparently led to the old vaults beneath the chateau. The torch illuminated the narrow staircase, and revealed the dark stones, the moss of ages, but nothing living.

There was no sign of a human being.

At the bottom of the staircase, Tom Merry flashed the light to right and

left. It flickered dimly into wide, dark vaults.

But there was no one to be seen.

"It wasn't a chap hurt himself here, then," said Tom Merry, in a low tone. "It must have been a trick to frighten us away."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Hark!"

From the darkness of the vaults came a repetition of the sound which had so alarmed Figgins—the deep, terrible groan.

The juniors started and changed colour.

"Great—great Scott! What is it?"

"A trick," said Tom Merry firmly. "It's a trick. Hallo, here! Hallo, hallo! We know you are playing a silly trick, and you may as well drop it!"

"Tell him in French, Kerr."

Kerr sang out the same words in French. No reply came to either—only the booming echoes of the great vaults.

"Let's get up," said Fatty Wynn.

They ascended to the upper floor. Convinced as they were that the groan was merely a trick, they were glad enough to get back to the light of the fire.

Tom Merry piled on the rest of the fuel.

"They can keep up that game as long as they like," he said, with knitted brow. "They won't make us leave here till the morning. If we had torches, I'd be jolly well inclined to go on a ghost hunt."

"Better go on a fuel hunt," said Blake. "This fire won't last long. We must have some more wood from somewhere."

And the search for wood recommenced. They did not go near the stair again.

After all, they were not likely to find wood in the vaults.

Several heavy fragments of wood were discovered at last and dragged to the fire, and, judging that there was sufficient to last until morning, they gave up further search. The fire was replenished and piled high, and the cheerful blaze changed the aspect of the room and made the spirits of the juniors rise.

Outside, amid the ruins of the chateau, the wind howled and the snow was falling more thickly.

But the snow could not reach them, and they were sheltered from most of the wind, which only made the fire flicker and waver, and caused strange shadows to dance on the walls.

Shelter and warmth they had obtained, but supper was another matter. The juniors were all hungry, but where was food to come from?

"We shall have to take it in turns to sleep!" grinned Figgins. "Poor old Fatty! Look at his face!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was thinking—" said Fatty Wynn slowly.

"Go hon!"

"I suppose it wouldn't be cricket?"

"What wouldn't?"

"Yet I'm hungrier than any of you chaps—I always get specially hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn.

Blake gave a shout.

"My hat! He's got some grub."

"Bai Jove!"

"Only a packet of sandwiches," said Fatty Wynn. "I—I'm willing to share them all round. It—it's a bit of a struggle, but— Here you are!"

And he extracted a fat packet from the pocket of his coat.



The engine-driver was making hopeless gestures to the passengers when the juniors came along. "A bridge has given way in a flood!" said Kerr, after listening for a few minutes. "From what I can gather, we've had a narrow escape from going to kingdom come!"

Figgins gave him a slap on the back in great appreciation.

"Bravo, Fatty!"

"Ow!"

"Bravo! I know it must be like having a tooth out to part with the grub."

"Worse!" said Fatty.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, Fatty shall have the lion's share," said Tom Merry, as he unfastened the packet. "That's only fair."

"Yaas, wathah!"

There were a good many sandwiches in the packet enough for one each all round and a couple over. Fatty Wynn had heroically refrained from devouring them, as he might easily have done, unseen in the darkness. And the chums of St. Jim's fully appreciated that self-denial on the part of the Welsh junior.

They knew how much it must have cost him to hand out the provisions for a fair division, instead of bolting them alone.

The couple over were handed to Fatty, who had three to his share, and his three disappeared before the others had got through their one each.

Then Fatty Wynn gave a deep sigh.

"Well, it was cricket," he said.

"Yaas, wathah! It was cwicket, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Considerin' what a fealfully hungry beast you are, it was a great sacrifice to make. I wegard Fatty Wynn as havin' played the game."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Blake, with a

very good imitation of D'Arcy's beautiful accent, which drew the elegant junior's eyeglass in his direction.

"Weally Blake—"

"A voto of thanks to Fatty Wynn!" said Kangaroo.

"Passed unanimously."

"I have somethin' bettah than that," said Arthur Augustus, fumbling in his coat pocket. "Fatty Wynn, pway accept this bar of milk chocolate as a sign of my appreciation of your extwaordinawy self-denial."

"What-ho!" said Fatty Wynn.

"It is too small to share out," said D'Arcy. "But we will watch Fatty Wynn eat it, and I weally think the expwession of his face will be weward enough."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Fatty!"

The bar of milk chocolate followed the three sandwiches.

Fatty Wynn smiled a beaming smile.

"Well, it does make a chap feel better to get even an instalment of grub inside him," he remarked. "I feel as if I could face a thousand ghosts now, you know. I— Oh!"

Even as Fatty Wynn spoke, there came a sound of eerie groaning—so close, so deep and thrilling, that the juniors started and turned pale, and looked about them nervously.

"Wh-wh-what—" began Fatty Wynn.

"Where is the rotter?" muttered

Blake, looking round him with wide, scared eyes.

There was no reply to that question. The fire cast a ruddy light for a dozen yards round, and there was no one in sight.

Yet the groan had seemed to be quite close to them.

The juniors gazed at one another with startled eyes. What did it mean? Was it—was it possible, after all, that the ruined chateau was haunted?

CHAPTER 8.

A Sudden Flight!

"WH-WH-WHAT can it mean?" said Figgins.

"Ow! There it is again!" gasped Fatty Wynn.

"Gweat Scott!"

Groan!

Deep and terrible was the sound, and it sent a shudder through the juniors. Whence did it come? There was no one within the circle of the ruddy fire-light—yet that terrible sound was close at hand.

Tom Merry looked downward.

The ground was of huge blocks of stone, moss-covered. Once there had been a floor, but that was long torn away to be burned for firewood. The rough stones were revealed; and they were evidently thick, solid. No sound uttered in the vaults below could penetrate through them.

Yet whence came that fearful sound? The St. Jim's juniors were all on their feet now—pale, shaken.

Groan!
The sound died away, faintly, tremulously.

"My only hat!" said Tom Merry, and he could not prevent his voice shaking. "I—I begin to wish we hadn't come to this place. But—it must all be a trick."

They gazed round them.
Solid stone floor, solid walls—firelight playing for a dozen yards round—where was the room for trickery? Yet it—

"It's no ghost!" said Blake.

"Hark!"
Through the night came that strange wail of music once more—the weird music that they had heard when they reached the ruined chateau.

Low and faint, then swelling higher, it penetrated to their ears. But from which direction it came, not one of them could tell.

The juniors shuddered.
In the daylight it was all very well to laugh at ghost stories, but in the mysterious shadows of the ruined chateau, in the blackest hours of the night—

"Let's get out," said Dig.

Tom Merry shook his head.
"They're not going to frighten us away."

"But—the storm," said Figgins. "The snow's thicker than ever. We can't get through it—and where are we to go?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We'll stick it out!" said Tom Merry between his teeth. "It must be trickery."

Blake suddenly gripped his arm.

"Look! Look!"

"Good heavens!"

In the distance, through a shattered doorway, a strange and terrible figure appeared. It was a ghostly form in white monk's robes, and its face was a skull! It was moving with a slow and gliding motion towards them.

Near the broken portal it stopped and stood motionless.

The juniors felt the blood freeze in their veins.

Tom Merry stood for a moment spell-bound.

Then, stooping, he seized a stick and hurled it through the broken doorway with all the force of his arm, full at the ghostly monk.

Dim as was the light at the distance, the straining eyes of the juniors saw the heavy, whirling stick strike the white figure full in the chest.

It struck with a crash that would have sent any man staggering; but the ghostly form did not fall—there was no sound from it.

It remained perfectly motionless.

Tom Merry's teeth came together with a click.

"Good heavens!"

"It's—it's a ghost!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"Impossible!" shouted Tom Merry desperately.

He seized a heavy, jagged stone; he swung it into the air with both hands, and hurled it with all his force.

Crash!
There was a loud crash as the stone smashed upon the blank wall beyond—but the white form never moved.

From the darkness came a wailing sound.

"That was all!"

"I—I can't stand this!" muttered

Figgins through his ashen lips. "I—I—"

"It's coming!"

"Oh!"

The monk was moving!

For a single instant the juniors stood spellbound. Then, with one accord, without waiting to speak, they dashed away.

Away from the cheerful fire—away from the sheltering roof—anywhere to escape that fearful vision.

The cold wind and snow dashing in their faces recalled them to themselves. Tom Merry was the first to stop.

"Hold on!"

"Oh, come on!" muttered Manners.

"Stop, I say!"

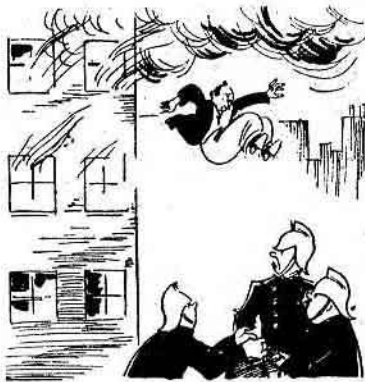
They stopped. Tom Merry gasped for breath—the bitter wind was lashing in his face.

"I—I won't go!" he said, between his teeth. "Man or ghost, I'll stick it out! Come back!"

"But—"

"Then I'll go back alone!"

And he turned.



Fireman: "Get back! Can't you see we haven't got the jumping-sheet ready!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to B. Brassell, "St. Denis," First Avenue, Fish Hoek, Cape Province, South Africa.

"That you jolly well won't!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "Come on, you chaps!"

"Wight-ho!"

And they all turned back. How far they had run, in those few minutes of panic, they did not know.

Tom Merry looked for the ruddy glow of the fire to guide them—but the fire had disappeared.

He stopped and rubbed his eyes and looked again.

There was not a gleam from the fire.

"I can't understand this!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "The fire must show to a great distance, and we haven't come far."

"It's gone out."

"There was enough to last for hours—"

Blake uttered an exclamation.

"They've put it out, of course!"

"Ghosts don't put out fires," said Tom Merry between his teeth. "I was sure it was a trick—only—I lost my head for the minute."

Blake laughed ruefully.

"I think we all lost our heads," he remarked.

"Yaas, wathah! Even I must have lost my head, deah boys! But in the circus—"

"If they've put the fire out they're human enough," said Figgins. "But

the question is, can we find our way back without the light?"

"Can't strike a match in this wind," said Kerr.

"We'll find the chateau somewhere."

They plunged on in the thick gloom. The wind had risen and it was whirling thick flakes round their ears. There was not a glimmer of light to guide them—the fire in the ruined chateau had evidently been extinguished.

"Hallo, here's something!" exclaimed Blake. "Was there a hedge near that blessed chateau, chaps?"

"I don't remember seeing one; but there might have been," said Tom Merry. "Is it a road?"

"On the other side of the hedge, I think."

"It may be the lane we left—we may be able to work our way from it again."

"Well, we'll try."

They scrambled through the hedge. Were they in the lane from which they had sought the chateau? They could not tell. There was no guessing in the darkness.

"Hark!" said Tom Merry abruptly.

"By Jove! I can hear—"

"It's somebody coming!"

The juniors listened intently, as well as they could in the wind. A sound came to them—heavy footsteps grinding in the mud and snow of the lane, and a muttering voice in French.

"What is he saying, Kerr?"

Kerr chuckled softly.

"I can repeat it; but he's annoyed by the wind, whoever he is, and he's saying things. Seems to me I have heard that voice before."

"He's close to us now. Mind—"

Bump!

The invisible form ran right into Tom Merry. Tom staggered under the unexpected impact as a sharp voice cried in French:

"Gaston! C'est bien!"

It was the voice of the scarred Frenchman—their disagreeable fellow-passenger of the railway train!

CHAPTER 9.

A Night Out!

"GASTON!"

The Frenchman was peering through the darkness at Tom Merry—trying to make him out—already suspecting that he had made a mistake as the boy did not answer.

Tom felt a strong grasp laid upon his shoulder.

"Let me go!" he said quietly.

There was an oath in French.

"Parbleu! Vat—vat—who are you?"

The grasp on Tom's shoulder tightened. But the others were gathering round now. They all knew that sharp, unpleasant voice, and they were ready for trouble. The scarred Frenchman was evidently alone.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "It's the chap I thumped, you know! How extraordinary!"

"Ah, cochon!"

"I wefuse to be called a cochong!" said D'Arcy indignantly. "I wegard you as a vewy bad-mannahed boundah!"

"You again!"

"Yes, here we are again," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Will you let go of my shoulder? I am not used to being handled like that."

The Frenchman released him. He peered at the boys in the gloom for a few moments, and then, with another oath, he strode away.

"Bon soir!" said Tom Merry.

There was no answer to that.

GRAND NEWS FOR ALL READERS!

Commencing Next Week—

BETTER AND BRIGHTER POCKET EDITION OF THE "GEM"!

Hallo, Chums! I'll bet the above news surprises you! Yes, to meet modern requirements the old paper is changing to a more convenient size—a pocket edition, with 36 pages instead of 28. It will in future be more handy to read and carry about. You won't need a large atlas to conceal it when you want a quiet read in school!

And what is most important, the new pocket edition will contain more reading matter! But the price will be the same—2d.—and, of course, the long St. Jim's yarn and the Greyfriars story will still be the big features of the programme.

To mark such an important event in the history of the GEM, I have arranged for two new features, in addition to those already running. Feature No. 1 will "tell the fortunes" of readers for the week, as read from the stars and planets



by an astrologer. I feel sure that "How's Your Luck This Week?" will be of great interest to all readers.

Feature No. 2 is not exactly new to GEM readers. It is the revival of the stamp corner which ran for a few weeks recently and was so tremendously popular. Our expert will have many informative and interesting things to tell readers each week about stamps and stamp collecting. Look out for his helpful tips.

Alongside, you see a reproduction in miniature of next Wednesday's cover, which will in future be printed in bronze blue on a buff-coloured paper.

Now turn to page 20, where you will find all the details of next week's programme. But one last word, don't forget to

ORDER YOUR "GEM" EARLY!
The Editor.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "This is a most surprisin' meetin'. I weally wondah how that chap came here, you know?"

"Walked, I suppose," said Wally. "Pwaw don't be fivivolous, Wally! It is vewy wemarkable that he got out of the twain before Pwoly, and yet we find him in this diwection."

"Perhaps we've been going the wrong way."

"Bai Jove!" "Well, I haven't the faintest idea where we are," said Tom Merry. "It seems impossible to find the chateau again. What silly asses we were to run!"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Blake, with a shiver. "It was enough to make anybody cut and run, I think. I can't make it out yet!"

"Wathah not!" "Bless this wind—how it cuts!" said Figgins. "We can't find the chateau, but we shall have to find some shelter or other, or be blown to bits!"

"Well, we can only keep on." They kept on. The lane they were in had dwindled to a rutty track and evidently led nowhere, unless to some farm or cottage. Arthur Augustus uttered a sudden exclamation and stopped.

"Oh, what's the matter now?" demanded Blake crossly.

"I've stumbled against somethin'."

"Never mind—"

"It feels like a wall—a wooden wall," said D'Arcy, groping in the darkness.

"Bai Jove, it's a building of some kind!"

"Good egg!"

They groped at the wall and felt their way round it till they came to a door. Tom Merry pushed it open, and there was a smell of hay.

"It's a barn, I suppose," said Tom. "Thank goodness!"

They crowded in and closed the door. Tom Merry struck a match, and shaded it with his hand. They were in a wooden building, with several bales of hay in one corner.

"My hat!" said Tom Merry. "This is luck, and heaps of it! I'm ready to drop."

"Yaas, wathah!" "Yank out the hay, and make beds of it. We can pay the owner to-morrow; if he turns up. By Jove, this is luck!"

In five minutes the juniors were buried in the hay, and fast asleep. Strange as their quarters were, the boys slept as soundly as they had ever done in their own beds in the dormitories at St. Jim's. They were too cold and fatigued to think of anything but warmth and sleep, and the hay afforded them both.

From the darkness of the barn came nothing but sounds of regular breathing, save when Fatty Wynn broke into a melodious snore.

When Tom Merry, the first to awake, opened his eyes, the sun was streaming into the building through a dozen chinks in the walls. It was bright sunlight, and it dazzled him as he opened his eyes in the rays.

The snow had ceased to fall; there was no sound of the wind. It was a calm, bright winter's morning.

Tom Merry sat up and pushed away the hay. What the hour was he had no idea, but it was evidently full day. He looked at his watch—ten o'clock.

"My hat!" He jumped up. Ten o'clock! It was not surprising, considering the fatigue of the previous night; but Tom was thinking of the anxiety his friends would be feeling at the Chateau Cernay.

"Wake up, you chaps!" "Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, sitting up in the hay. "Bai Jove, deah boys, I—I hardly know where I am! Have I weally passed a night sleeping in hay in a barn?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Looks like it, Gussy!"

"Gweat Scott! I feel most disweputable, you know!" said D'Arcy, dragging his elegant limbs from the

hay. "My hat is wuined! I am afraid my clothes are done for."

"Lucky we weren't done for ourselves," said Blake. "Here, wake up, you lazy slackers! Are you going to sleep there all day?"

This was a little cool, as Blake had only risen that moment.

"Tumble up, you lubbers!"

"Yaw-aw-aw!" said Figgins. "Sleepy, Figgins?"

"Oh, yes—awfully!"

"Poor kid! I'll help you up, then."

And Blake kindly laid hold of Figgins' ankles, and dragged him bodily out of the hay, and Figgins yelled furiously.

"Ow! Oh! Leggo, you lunatic!"

"I'm helping you."

"I'll help you to a thick ear if you don't chuck it!" yelled Figgins.

"I suppose that's what you call gratitude in the New House?" said Blake, letting Figgys' big feet drop to the ground.

"Gr-r-r!"

"Hallo! Here's a visitor!"

The barn door opened, and a fat, red-cheeked country labourer put his head in. He had a pitchfork in his hand, and he stared at the boys in blank amazement.

"Hallo!" said Tom Merry.

"Comment!" gasped the native.

"Pitch it to him, Kerr!"

Kerr advanced towards the labourer, spreading out his hands, French fashion, for a start.

The man raised his pitchfork threateningly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake. "He takes us for tramps, you know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I refuse to be taken for a twamp!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy indignantly. "I wegard the man as an ass!"

"Go it, Kerr!"

Kerr waved his hands and jabbered. The labourer's expression became a little less truculent, and he lowered the pitchfork. Finally he grinned.

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"Well, what's the verdict?" demanded Figgins.

"We're on a farm on the Cernay estate," said Kerr, "so this chap says. We're less than a mile from Cernay's house."

"Bai Jove!"

"Ask him where the haunted chateau is," said Tom Merry.

Kerr jabbered on again, and the labourer gesticulated and babbled.

"Good as a comedy, isn't it?" said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha! Better!"

"The ruined chateau is nearer Cernay's place than this. We seem to have done all our wandering last night within the radius of about a mile."

"Gweat Scott!"

"Well, we couldn't see in pitch darkness," said Tom Merry. "Has he got a cart or anything he can drive us to the chateau in—that's the question?"

"Yes, a farm wagon."

"Well, that's better than nothing."

"I've promised him fifty francs," said Kerr. "He's going to get the wagon."

"Jolly good!"

"Bai Jove! I don't feel much like pwsentin' myself at Cernay's house in this fashion," said D'Arcy, looking down disconsolately at his muddy, dragged, hay-speckled attire. "We shall look an awful lot of guys."

"Nothing new to you, old chap."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"I don't see that there's much choice in the matter," said Tom Merry.

"Cernay will be anxious about us. He will know that if we stayed anywhere for the night we should have wired him. He'll think we've been lost in the snow—perhaps buried in a snow-drift. We ought to get up to the chateau as quickly as we can."

"Yaas, but—"

"Here, I'll dust you down!" said Blake.

"Thank you, deah boy! That will be bettah than nothin'. But you haven't a bwush."

"That's all right."

Blake began to dust down D'Arcy's clothes with his open hand. He dealt the swell of St. Jim's several hearty smacks, which certainly made the dry mud fly in clouds.

"Ow! Not so hard, deah boy!"

"I hope you're not afraid of a little pain in the cause of cleanliness, Gussy?" said Blake severely.

"N-no, but—"

Smack, smack, smack!

"Ow! Ow!"

Arthur Augustus retreated precipitately.

"Stand still, you ass!" said Blake.

"I haven't finished yet."

"If you stwike me again, Blake, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'! I uttably disappwove of this spiwit of pwaetical joking."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you—"

"Hallo, here's the wagon!"

There was a trampling of horses outside, and a rumbling and creaking of clumsy wheels. The juniors crowded out of the barn.

CHAPTER 10.

The Arrival!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS had his misgivings, as was only natural, about presenting himself at the Chateau Cernay in such a state, but there was clearly no help for it.

The juniors clambered into the farm wagon, and the farmer's man, with a broad grin, drove off with his two lumbering horses. The native seemed to be very much amused at the appearance of the chums of St. Jim's, and that was not surprising.

They were certainly not looking their best.

A night out—such a night—did not agree with them. They were muddy from head to foot, dirty and dishevelled, their hair tousled, their clothes rumpled, their linen decidedly soiled.

D'Arcy was as bad as the rest. The sleep in the hay had left them covered with clinging particles, which gave them a curiously speckled appearance.

Arthur Augustus looked round the wagon-load of dishevelled juniors with a glance of great disapproval.

"Bai Jove!" he remarked. "You fellows do look a lot of w'ecks!"

"Have you any idea what you look like yourself?" asked Lowther politely.

"I am afwaid I look a feahful sight."

"Yes, rather. Much worse than usual," said Lowther.

"Weally, you know—"

"Well, Cernay will forgive us when he hears the circumstances," said Tom Merry. "We could have got a clean-up at the farm, but it would have taken time, and Cernay must be anxious."

"Of course, we want a clean-up," said Fatty Wynn. "But what I feel most is the need of brekker."

"You would!" said Kangaroo. "Why didn't you have a go at the hay for a start?"

"Or we might have found you some thistles," said Lowther.

"I get awfully hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn, unheeding.

"I suppose it's the weather, you know. I always notice it."

"Yaas, I've noticed it, too."

The wagon rumbled on. Round the juniors was a typical French country landscape—level fields, rows of trees, cultivation carried into every possible corner. In the distance was a thick wood of a park, and amid the trees they could catch a glimpse of

"Ciel! Mes amis—mes amis! Bon Dieu!"

"Here we are, old chap," said Tom Merry.

"Ciel! I have to zink zat you are dead in ze snow!"

"Not quite dead yet, thank goodness!"

"Ah, I have been anxious! It is zat mon pere has gone to ze station to inquire again—encore—vous comprenez? I have been up and down all ze time."

"It's rotten to make you anxious like that," said Tom Merry. "But it couldn't be helped. We couldn't come on in the train to Prolly. But I dare say you know the line was broken?"

Tom Merry pointed it out to the driver.

"Is that the chateau?"

"M'sieur?"

"La Chateau Cernay?"

"Oui, m'sieur."

"Good! We haven't far to go."

The wagon rumbled into a lane which ran past the gates of the chateau. The driver turned in at the gates, which were wide open, and the heavy vehicle rolled on towards the handsome, stone-wall house, half covered with ivy.

More than one face looked out of a

window at the strange sight, and, in spite of their nerve, Tom Merry & Co. felt their cheeks begin to burn.

It certainly was a strange manner in which to present themselves at their French chum's house; but, as Tom Merry said, it could not be helped.

The wagon halted before the wide, stone steps of the portal.

There was a sudden shout, and an active figure came bounding out of the house. It was Auguste Cernay.

He jumped into the wagon



Whiz! Crash! The juniors all aimed for Gussy's glessey w'ik topper, but it was Tom Merry's snowball that lifted the hat from Arthur Augustus' head. "Bai Jove!" gasped the swell of St. Jim's. "You—you feahful wuffians!"

"Oui, oui!"

"We've slept in a barn."

"Ah, it is good—fortunate—zat you are all safe viz yourselves!"

Cernay jumped out of the wagon, and the juniors followed.

Tom Merry handed a fifty-franc note to the farmer's man, who touched his cap and drove off, grinning.

Cernay conducted his friends into the house, ordered breakfast, and then led them upstairs to the apartments they were to occupy.

"It is zat you vill vant ze vash," he

zat you do not—vat you call—turn down!"

"Turn up!" grinned Blake.

"Ah, oui, zat is it—turn up!"

Cernay left his friends in their quarters while he hurried down to look after breakfast. He knew that they would be in want of a solid feed, especially Fatty Wynn.

The juniors revelled in hot water and soap, and Arthur Augustus' face began to beam.

"Bai Jove, this is bettah, deah boys! I'm beginnin' to feel clean again!"

"Good!"

"Pway unswap my twunks, Blake."

"Pray go and eat coke, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Buck up, you chaps!" said Fatty Wynn, looking in at the door, half-dressed. "I don't want to go down first. But don't keep me waiting, will you?"

"What's the huwwy, deah boy?"

"Hurry? Why, breakfast, of course!"

"Oh, wats!"

"I'm hungry—awfully hungry! I don't know what the grub is like here, but I think we can depend upon Cernay to do us all right."

"Yaas, wathah! If you want me to huwwy, I'll—"

"Yes; do get a move on!"

"Then pway come and unswap my twunks. I shall want somethin' out of each of them, you know."

"Rats!"

"My idea is to save time."

"More rats!"

And the fat Fourth Former retired.

"Pway open my twunks, Tom Mewwy, to save time."

"Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry.

And he picked up a pair of heavily ornamented brass tongs from the grate, and raised them in both hands over the locks of D'Arcy's best trunks.

The swell of St. Jim's gave a yell:

"Hold on!"

"Eh?"

"What are you goin' to do?"

"Open the trunk."

"You uttah ass! Leave it alone!"

"Oh, very well! I only wanted to save time," said Tom Merry, putting down the tongs.

"I wegard you as an uttah ass, Tom Mewwy! Pway unlock the trunk and take the stwaps off, and—"

"Rats!"

And Arthur Augustus was reduced to the necessity of doing his unpacking himself. He warned his friends that he would keep them waiting, but they were unmoved. When the others were ready to go down to breakfast, Arthur Augustus had got as far as getting his trousers on, but no farther.

"Ready?" asked Tom Merry.

"I ain not weady, deah boys—not

quite weady. I cannot go down to bwekkah in this state, you know."

"Come on!"

"I am hardly likely to descend in my shirt-sleeves, Tom Mewwy."

"Will you come?"

"Certainly not!"

"Collar him!"

"I wefuse to be collahed! I—oh, pway welease me! Unless you immediately welease me I shall no longah wegard you as my fwriends."

"Yank him along."

"Ow! Oh! Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus was propelled to the door. He struggled desperately but unavailingly.

"Pway don't be silly asses!" he gasped.

"Look here, we'll give you a chance," said Tom Merry. "Two minutes."

"I could not possibly put on my collah and tie and waistcoat and jacket in two minutes. I can do a lot of things, but it is no use attempting impossibilities."

"You'll jolly well come down without them if you don't."

"Besides, I haven't decided which tie to weah."

"Any old thing will do."

"I have fifteen to select fwom, and, allowin' only one minute to each—"

"Two minutes!" said Tom Merry, taking out his watch. "Stand ready, you chaps, and in two minutes take him by the neck—"

"I decline to be taken by the neck, and—"

"And yank him out—"

"I uttably wefuse to be yanked out, and—"

"And carry him downstairs."

"I wefuse—"

"Right-ho!"

"Upon weflection, Tom Mewwy, I will weah this necktie, and—and I think I can be weady in two minutes."

And he was.

CHAPTER 11.

Fatty Wynn Thinks It Good!

TOM MERRY & CO. breakfasted in high spirits.

Rough as their night had been, they had had a good rest, after all, and they felt little the worse for it. While they breakfasted they related to Auguste Cernay the adventures of the night.

Cernay listened with astonishment to the story of the ruined chateau.

"Ciel!" he said. "I am amaze—I am astound! Zat chateau is on ze estate of mon pere, and I have visit it many ze time, because ze villagers and ze farmers say zat it is haunt. I never see nozzing."

"We saw something, though," said Tom Merry, "and even now I don't know what to make of it."

"Yaas, wathah! It puzzles me, you know."

"Zay say zat ze music is heard, and zat ghostly figures show zemselves at night," said Cernay. "Ze seigneur was murder by ze Jacobin in ze Revolution. He was bad man, and ze country people hate him. He wall up ze village fountain, and he drive zem out of zeir homes in one place, to turn ze farm land into hunting land, vous savez. Zem come ze Revolution, and ze mob sack ze chateau and cut his head off. Zey say zat ze ghost still linger in ze place, but moi—I laugh!"

"So do I—in the day-time," said Blake. "But then—and there—it was different. It didn't seem a laughing matter."

"Ready?" asked Tom Merry.

"I ain not weady, deah boys—not

remarked. "Your baggages, zey have been sent on, and you vill find zem all here."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a gasp of relief.

"Bai Jove, this is a stwoke of luck! I shall be able to get a change."

"Oui, oui; zough it is zat my wardrobe would have been at your disposal," said Cernay. "Ziz vay, s'il vous plait. Zere are ze rooms."

There were four rooms in a row, opening on the same corridor, with three beds in each.

"It is zat I stay viz my chums!" exclaimed Cernay. "Ah, my heart vas heavy last night, nies amis, when it is

wanted to save time," said Tom Merry, putting down the tongs.

"I wegard you as an uttah ass, Tom Mewwy! Pway unlock the trunk and take the stwaps off, and—"

"Rats!"

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"I ain not weady, deah boys—not

"Well, what's the verdict?" demanded Figgins.

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"Yes, a farm wagon."

"Well, that's better than nothing."

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"Nothing new to you, old chap."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"I don't see that there's much choice in the matter," said Tom Merry. "Cernay will be anxious about us. He will know that if we stayed anywhere for the night we should have wired him. He'll think we've been lost in the snow—perhaps buried in a snow-drift. We ought to get up to the chateau as quickly as we can."

"Yaas, but—"

"Here, I'll dust you down!" said Blake.

"Thank you, deah boy! That will be bettah than nothin'. But you haven't a bwush."

"That's all right."

Blake began to dust down D'Arcy's clothes with his open hand. He dealt the swell of St. Jim's several hearty smacks, which certainly made the dry mud fly in clouds.

"Ow! Not so hard, deah boy!"

"I hope you're not afraid of a little pain in the cause of cleanliness, Gussy?" said Blake severely.

"N-no, but—"

Smack, smack, smack!

"Ow! Ow!"

Arthur Augustus retreated precipitately.

"Stand still, you ass!" said Blake.

"I haven't finished yet."

"If you stwike me again, Blake, I shall give you a feahful thwashin'! I uttably disappwove of this spiwit of pwactical joking."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wegard you—"

"Hallo, here's the wagon!"

There was a trampling of horses outside, and a rumbling and creaking of clumsy wheels. The juniors crowded out of the barn.

CHAPTER 10.

The Arrival!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS had his misgivings, as was only natural, about presenting himself at the Chateau Cernay in such a state, but there was clearly no help for it.

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The juniors clambered into the farm wagon, and the farmer's man, with a broad grin, drove off with his two lumbering horses. The native seemed to be very much amused at the appearance of the chums of St. Jim's, and that was not surprising.

They were certainly not looking their best.

A night out—such a night—did not agree with them. They were muddy from head to foot, dirty and dishevelled, their hair tousled, their clothes rumped, their linen decidedly soiled.

D'Arcy was as bad as the rest. The sleep in the hay had left them covered with clinging particles, which gave them a curiously speckled appearance.

Arthur Augustus looked round the wagon-load of dishevelled juniors with a glance of great disapproval.

"Bai Jove!" he remarked. "You fellows do look a lot of w'ecks!"

"Have you any idea what you look like yourself?" asked Lowther politely.

"I am afwaid I look a feahful sight."

"Yes, rather. Much worse than usual," said Lowther.

"Weally, you know—"

"Well, Cernay will forgive us when he hears the circumstances," said Tom Merry. "We could have got a clean-up at the farm, but it would have taken time, and Cernay must be anxious."

"Of course, we want a clean-up," said Fatty Wynn. "But what I feel most is the need of brekker."

"You would!" said Kangaroo. "Why didn't you have a go at the hay for a start?"

"Or we might have found you some thistles," said Lowther.

"I get awfully hungry at this time of the year," said Fatty Wynn, unheeding. "I suppose it's the weather, you know. I always notice it."

"Yaas, I've noticed it, too."

The wagon rumbled on.

Round the juniors was a typical French country landscape—level fields, rows of trees, cultivation carried into every possible corner. In the distance was a thick wood of a park, and amid the trees they could catch a slate roofs and stone walls.

Tom Merry pointed it out to the driver.

"Is that the chateau?"

"M'sieur?"

"La Chateau Cernay?"

"Oui, m'sieur."

"Good! We haven't far to go."

The wagon rumbled into a lane which ran past the gates of the chateau. The driver turned in at the gates, which were wide open, and the heavy vehicle rolled on towards the handsome, stone-wall house, half covered with ivy.

More than one face looked out of a

window at the strange sight, and, in spite of their nerve, Tom Merry & Co. felt their cheeks begin to burn.

It certainly was a strange manner in which to present themselves at their French chum's house; but, as Tom Merry said, it could not be helped.

The wagon halted before the wide, stone steps of the portal.

There was a sudden shout, and an active figure came bounding out of the house. It was Auguste Cernay.

He jumped into the wagon



Whiz! Crash! The juniors all aimed for Gussy's glossy hat from Arthur Augustus' head. "Bai Jove!" gasped

glimpse of

"Ciel! Mes amis—mes amis! Bon Dieu!"

out to the

"Here we are, old chap," said Tom Merry.

"Ciel! I have been to zink zat you are dead in ze snow!"

"Not quite dead yet, thank goodness!"

"Ah, I have been anxious! It is zat mon pere has gone to ze station to inquire again—encore—vous comprenez? I have been up and down all ze time."

"It's rotten to make you anxious like that," said Tom Merry. "But it couldn't be helped. We couldn't come on in the train to Proly. But I dare say you know the line was broken?"

"Oui, oui!"
 "We've slept in a barn."
 "Ah, it is good—fortunate—zat you are all safe viz yourselves!"
 Cernay jumped out of the wagon, and the juniors followed.
 Tom Merry handed a fifty-franc note to the farmer's man, who touched his cap and drove off, grinning.
 Cernay conducted his friends into the house, ordered breakfast, and then led them upstairs to the apartments they were to occupy.
 "It is zat you vill vant ze vash," he

zat you do not—vat you call—turn down!"
 "Turn up!" grinned Blake.
 "Ah, oui, zat is it—turn up!"
 Cernay left his friends in their quarters while he hurried down to look after breakfast. He knew that they would be in want of a solid feed, especially Fatty Wynn.
 The juniors revelled in hot water and soap, and Arthur Augustus' face began to beam.
 "Bai Jove, this is bettah, deah boys! I'm beginnin' to feel clean again!"



ilk topper, but it was Tom Merry's snowball that lifted the swell of St. Jim's. "You—you feahful wuffians!"

remarked. "Your baggages, zey have been sent on, and you vill find zem all here."
 Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gave a gasp of relief.
 "Bai Jove, this is a stoke of luck! I shall be able to get a change."
 "Oui, oui; zough it is zat my wardrobe would have been at your disposal," said Cernay. "Ziz vay, s'il vous plait. Zere are ze rooms."
 There were four rooms in a row, opening on the same corridor, with three beds in each.
 "It is zat I stay viz my chums!" exclaimed Cernay. "Ah, my heart vas heavy last night, mes amis, when it is

"Good!"
 "Pway unswap my twunks, Blake."
 "Pray go and eat coke, Gussy!"
 "Weally, Blake—"
 "Buck up, you chaps!" said Fatty Wynn, looking in at the door, half-dressed. "I don't want to go down first. But don't keep me waiting, will you?"
 "What's the huwwy, deah boy?"
 "Hurry? Why, breakfast, of course!"
 "Oh, wats!"
 "I'm hungry—awfully hungry! I don't know what the grub is like here, but I think we can depend upon Cernay to do us all right."
 "Yaas, wathah! If you want me to huwwy, I'll—"
 "Yes; do get a move on!"
 "Then pway come and unswap my twunks. I shall want somethin' out of each of them, you know."
 "Rats!"
 "My idea is to save time."
 "More rats!"
 And the fat Fourth Former retired.
 "Pway open my twunks, Tom Mewwy, to save time."
 "Oh, all right!" said Tom Merry.
 And he picked up a pair of heavily ornamented brass tongs from the grate, and raised them in both hands over the locks of D'Arcy's best trunks.
 The swell of St. Jim's gave a yell:
 "Hold on!"
 "Eh?"
 "What are you goin' to do?"
 "Open the trunk."
 "You uttah ass! Leave it alone!"
 "Oh, very well! I only wanted to save time," said Tom Merry, putting down the tongs.
 "I wegard you as an uttah ass, Tom Mewwy! Pway unlock the twunk and take the stwaps off, and—"
 "Rats!"

And Arthur Augustus was reduced to the necessity of doing his unpacking himself. He warned his friends that he would keep them waiting, but they were unmoved. When the others were ready to go down to breakfast, Arthur Augustus had got as far as getting his trousers on, but no farther.
 "Ready?" asked Tom Merry.
 "I am not weady, deah boys—not

quite weady. I cannot go down to bwekkah in this state, you know."
 "Come on!"
 "I am hardly likely to descend in my shirt-sleeves, Tom Mewwy."
 "Will you come?"
 "Certainly not!"
 "Collar him!"
 "I wefuse to be collahed! I—oh, pway welease me! Unless you immediately welease me I shall no longah wegard you as my fwiends."
 "Yank him along."
 "Ow! Oh! Bai Jove!"
 Arthur Augustus was propelled to the door. He struggled desperately but unavailingly.
 "Pway don't be silly asses!" he gasped.
 "Look here, we'll give you a chance," said Tom Merry. "Two minutes."
 "I could not possibly put on my collah and tie and waistcoat and jacket in two minutes. I can do a lot of things, but it is no use attempting impossibilities."
 "You'll jolly well come down without them if you don't."
 "Besides, I haven't decided which tie to weah."
 "Any old thing will do."
 "I have fifteen to select fwom, and allowin' only one minute to each—"
 "Two minutes!" said Tom Merry, taking out his watch. "Stand ready, you chaps, and in two minutes take him by the neck—"
 "I decline to be taken by the neck, and—"
 "And yank him out—"
 "I uttably wefuse to be yanked out, and—"
 "And carry him downstairs."
 "I wefuse—"
 "Right-ho!"
 "Upon wefflection, Tom Mewwy, I will weah this necktie, and—and I think I can be weady in two minutes." And he was.

CHAPTER 11.

Fatty Wynn Thinks It Good!

TOM MERRY & CO. breakfasted in high spirits.
 Rough as their night had been, they had had a good rest, after all, and they felt little the worse for it. While they breakfasted they related to Augusto Cernay the adventures of the night.
 Cernay listened with astonishment to the story of the ruined chateau.
 "Ciel!" he said. "I am amaze—I am astound! Zat chateau is on ze estate of mon pere, and I have visit it many ze time, because ze villagers and ze farmers say zat it is haunt. I never see nozzing."
 "We saw something, though," said Tom Merry, "and even now I don't know what to make of it."
 "Yaas, wathah! It puzzles me, you know."
 "Zay say zat ze music is heard, and zat ghostly figures show zemselves at night," said Cernay. "Ze seigneur was murder by ze Jacobin in ze Revolution. He was bad man, and ze country people hate him. He wall up ze village fountain, and he drive zem out of zeir homes in one place, to turn ze farm land into hunting land, vous savez. Zen come ze Revolution, and ze mob sack ze chateau and cut his head off. Zey say zat ze ghost still linger in ze place, but moi—I laugh!"
 "So do I—in the day-time," said Blake. "But then—and there—it was different. It didn't seem a laughing matter."

"Non, non!"
"We bunked," said Tom Merry frankly. "But we're going to have another try, Cernay. I suppose there's no objection to exploring the old chateau?"

"Ciel! Non!"
"Then I think we will have a ghost-hunt to-night."

"Bai Jove, what a wippin' ideah!"
"I'm pretty certain it was trickery; but if we go provided with torches and things, we can track the rotters down and make them own up."

Cernay's eyes danced.
"Zat is good—zat is good!" he exclaimed. "I like ze ideea ver' mooch!"

"Yaas, wathah!"
"What do you fellows say?"
"Jolly good wheeze!" came a reply from everyone but Fatty Wynn.

Fatty Wynn was busy upon his sixth egg and bacon.

"Well, Fatty, can't you speak?"
"Um!"

Figgins slapped him on the shoulder.
"Don't you think it's good, Fatty?"

"Yes, rather!"
"You'll come?"

"Wait till I've finished breakfast."
"Eh? We shall go to-night, of course."

"What?"
"We shall go to-night on the ghost-hunt."

"Who's talking about ghosts?"
"Why, you ass, what were you talking about, then?"

"Seems to me you're off your rocker!" said Fatty Wynn. "Figgie asked me if I thought this bacon was good, and I said I did."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"What's the cackle about now?"

"I wasn't speaking of bacon, ass!" said Figgins, with a chuckle. "We were planning a ghost-hunt in the ruined chateau for to-night."

"Oh!"
"Don't you think it's a good idea?"
"Good! Better take plenty of grub, in case of accidents!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Trust Fatty to think of that!"
"Well, I suppose it's an important point!" said Fatty Wynn warmly. "They say an army marches on its stomach, and I'm jolly certain it couldn't march if the grub wasn't well looked after!"

"Quite right!" said Tom Merry. "We'll take a pantechuicon van with a light lunch for Fatty—"

"Oh, rats!" said Fatty.
And he busied himself with his breakfast, and said no more. The juniors made a good breakfast, and they had just finished when a stout, handsome Frenchman, with a slightly puzzled expression upon his face, entered the room. It was Cernay's father.

M. Cernay greeted the boys very kindly. He had been anxious about them, and was greatly relieved to find them at the chateau, safe and sound.

But Tom Merry thought he observed that the old gentleman was thinking about something else, too, as well as their non-arrival the previous night. He had a paper in his hands, and Tom guessed that he had received disturbing news of some sort.

Monsieur Cernay laid the paper on the table. Across the front, in large type, was the announcement of a bank robbery.

Auguste Cernay glanced at it, and uttered an exclamation.

"Mon pere!"
"Yes; we've been robbed!" said Monsieur Cernay, speaking in English. "The Lyons-Dijon Bank, in Paris, was robbed, avant—the night before last!" he went on, explaining to Tom Merry & Co. "I have shares in the bank. I shall lose much—much more than four hundred thousand francs—if the thief is not found and forced to return the money! The bank suffers a great loss. This is the latest paper; it says that there is no news. The police know the criminal, but cannot find a trace of him."

"They know him?"
"Oui, oui. It is Maximilian Ponsac, a man who is well known as a crackman in Paris. He has an accomplice, named Vinol, who is a native of this district, and was in my employ as an agent, and robbed me and fled to Paris. Both of them are known to have been concerned in the bank robbery, but they have disappeared. The Paris police can find no trace of them. But perhaps they will be found."

"I hope so, sir."
"If they are found the money is safe. It is in banknotes which they will not be able to pass for weeks, months," said M. Cernay. "They cannot be in Paris, or the police would find some trace of them. They are hiding in the provinces somewhere, so the police think. You will excuse me if I leave you to my son to-day. I must go to Paris."

And M. Cernay, who evidently felt more uneasiness and anxiety than he cared to show, left the room.

"Bai Jove, that is wotten!" said D'Arcy. "How much is four hundred thousand francs, Kerr?"

"Over two thousand five hundred pounds."

"A jolly heavy loss," said Tom Merry. "I hope they'll lay the rascals by the heels."

Arthur Augustus looked thoughtful. He drew Tom Merry aside rather mysteriously while the others went out into the grounds.

"Tom Mewwy—"
"Come on! They're going out for a stroll!"

"Yaas; but I want to speak to you. It's wathah wotten, this heavy loss fallin' on our respected host, isn't it?"

Tom Merry stared.
"Yes, but how on earth can we help?"

"You know, at St. Jim's, I have done same twainin' as a private detective," said Arthur Augustus modestly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"I see no cause for laughtah, Tom Mewwy. I have solved several mystewies to my own satisfaction—"

"Ha, ha, ha! To anybody else's?"
"That is a minah point. The question is, do you think it would be the pwopah thing to place my skill and experience at the disposal of Monsieur Cernay in this mattah?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Oh, Gussy, you'll be the death of me some day, I know you will!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"I fail to see the cause of your mewwiment," said D'Arcy, putting up his eyeglass and giving the hero of the Shell a freezing look.

"My dear ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass! If I could captuah the cwiminals and restore the stolen banknotes, it would be a sort of Chwistmas pwesent for Monsieur Cernay, and a sort of wepayment for his hospitality."

"Ha, ha, ha! Now, look here, Gussy—"

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"I wefuse to do anythin' of the sort, unless you treat the mattah with pwopah and becomin' sewiousness, Tom Mewwy!"

"I'll be as sober as a judge. Don't you think your lack of French might stand in the way of your handling the case successfully?" asked Tom gravely. "Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that!"

"If you had to disguise yourself as a waiter, or a general in the army, or anything of that sort—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Your accent would give you away." Arthur Augustus D'Arcy nodded thoughtfully.

"Pewwaps you are wight, Tom Mewwy. But I should weally like vewy much to be able to help our esteemed host in the pwesent painful circs."

"Never mind. Come out for a stroll instead."

And they followed the others out of the house.

D'Arcy was still looking thoughtful, as though he could not quite make up his mind whether he ought to offer his valuable services as a detective to M. Cernay. But the old gentleman soon settled the matter by departing in his motor-car.

CHAPTER 12.

A Question of Marksmanship!

"RATS!"

"Bosh!"

"Look here—"

"Br-r-r!"

"You School House ass!"

"You New House dummy!"

The argument between Figgins and Blake was growing warm and excited. It was late afternoon. The St. Jim's juniors had spent a very enjoyable morning tramping round M. Cernay's estate, but a heavy fall of snow had eventually driven them indoors.

The aspect of the countryside was very like Christmas now. It was homelike to see the snow edging the roofs and walls, and the leafless trees looking like skeletons.

After lunch the juniors had been compelled to stay in for a time, till the snow left off. It had ceased falling, and Tom Merry & Co. had strolled out into the garden, now under a blanket of white. Then the difference of opinion between Figgins and Blake had begun.

"Peace, my sons!" said Tom Merry.

"The silly ass says—"

"The howling duffer has the cheek to say—"

"Look here—"

"Rats!"

Tom Merry pushed in between the excited juniors.

"Now, look here, you pair of asses," he said. "You're not going to have a House row under another fellow's roof—"

"We're not under a roof," said Blake. "We're in the blessed garden!"

"It amounts to the same thing. What's the row about? Why can't you kids be quiet?"

"Who are you calling kids?"

"You Fourth Form duffers!" said Tom Merry severely. "Why, here's young Wally of the Third Form, and he's behaving himself quite decently!"

"Thank you!" said Wally cheerfully.

"I want to show Cernay that we're not all howling outsiders at St. Jim's, you know."

"Look here, you young imp—" began Blake.

"Never mind, Wally," interrupted Figgins. "You were saying—"

LAUGH THESE OFF!

—with Monty Lowther.



Merry Christmas, Everybody! Even to the reader who says the only thing that is funny to him is why the Editor let's me write this stuff every week!

"What do you know about Turkey, D'Arcy minor?" asked Mr. Selby. "I like it!" replied Wally promptly.

Young Gibson says that when he grows up he is going to be a literary man. He'll write the "cracks" that go in Christmas crackers. A "resounding" success!

A reader asks if I would like the recipe for a Christmas cake two hundred years old. Do you want to bust my molars, old chap?

"Spare Wheel Thieves," runs a headline. I can't see why we should, even if it is nearly Christmas.

Try this, then: "Why did you butt your opponent, Gore?" asked Tom Merry, after Gore had been disqualified in the school boxing championship. "Well, the instructor told me to use my head!" explained Gore.

"How is it best to feel at Christmas?" inquires Blake. Rich!

News: I hear that at Christmas-time the guards on trains in Siam use bugles. In case of danger they simply blow the communication chord!

Kangaroo says they will be playing a special cricket match at Christmas in Sydney, wearing 1890 costumes. They used to wear "toppers" then, says Kangaroo. Of course, we still can't get on without bowlers.

Story: "Is this swimming pool deep?" asked the all-the-year swimmer of the park attendant. "Deep?" exclaimed the attendant. "I'll say it is! A fellow dived into it a few weeks ago and we saw no more of him. We got a wire later from Australia, asking us to send on his clothes!"

BY SPECIAL REQUEST: George Gore will not sing "Good King Wenceslas" at the school breaking-up concert.

Travelling this vac? I hear cannibals never eat anybody over thirty years of age. So take your birth certificate with you!

For Christmas parties: A snob is a chap who only wants to know the people who don't want to know him.

Here's to you, chaps—in foaming ginger-pop!

"Yes, so I was, and you—"

"I said you couldn't do anything of the sort. I—"

"But what's the row?" almost shouted Tom Merry.

"Why, the ass had the cheek to say that he could chuck a snowball at a moving object straighter than I could!" said Figgins excitedly. "Of course, I don't want to blow my own trumpet. It's a question of facts."

"Lot you know about facts!" snorted Blake. "I don't mind you New House chaps being conceited. I know you can't help it. But when it comes to a matter of denying a thing that's perfectly plain—"

"You ass!"

"You duffer!"

"Hold on!" said Tom Merry. "If you want to settle it, why not put it to the test, instead of slanging each other and wasting your breath?"

"Well, that's not a bad idea," said Figgins, calming down a little. "I suppose if Blake sees me do it he won't have the cheek to say—"

"Yes, I can see you hitting anything smaller than the size of a house!" said Blake. "I don't think! Still, I'm willing to try; though, of course, it won't alter the fact. It will only make you own up that you are a chump!"

"We want moving objects at a certain distance," said Figgins, gathering up a handful of snow, and beginning to knead a snowball. "Suppose Tom Merry walks slowly past at a distance of twelve yards, and we take three shots each in turn. The chap who knocks his cap off first is the winner."

"Good!"

"Oh, jolly good!" said Tom Merry. "But you'll have to find some other target. Young Wally might not mind."

"But he might," said young Wally. "I'll tell you what—Blake can take three shots at Figgins—"

"Good!" said Blake.

"And then Figgins can take three shots at Blake."

"Oh, don't be an ass, young Wally!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lowther.

"Gussy to the rescue as usual!"

"Eh?"

"There's Gussy—in his topper, too! Just in time!"

There was a general grin of approval. The juniors were in the garden at some distance from the house, and Arthur Augustus was taking a stroll down a garden path, at a distance of twelve yards from them. He seemed to be deep in thought; probably thinking out how to get on the track of the bank-robber, and he did not glance towards the group of juniors.

Arthur Augustus was in his most elegant attire, and he was sporting a silk topper as usual. The sight of that silk topper simply made the juniors yearn to put their snowballing to the test.

"Well, that's not a bad idea," grinned Tom Merry. "You take the shots in turn, and the chap who brings down the topper is the best shot."

"Agreed!"

"Here, I'm going to be in this," said Lowther, gathering up a double handful of snow. "Make it a general test—one shot each all round. If the topper isn't brought down, start again from the beginning."

"Good! Blake and Figgy can begin."

"Oh, all right!" said Figgy. "Say when!"

"Get the snowballs ready," said

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Tom Merry. "Better not say anything to Gussy; he might raise some silly objection."

"Ha, ha, ha! Very likely!"

"Fire in order—Blake, Figgins, myself, Lowther, Wally!"

"Good!"

"Go it, Blake!"

Jack Blake took careful aim. Arthur Augustus, strolling by, deep in thought, was just abreast of the group of juniors. His eyes were fixed on the ground, and there was a shade of reflection on his aristocratic brow.

Whiz!

The snowball flew, with careful aim, and missed Arthur Augustus' nose by a quarter of an inch. The swell of St. Jim's gave a violent start.

"Bai Jove!"

"Figg—quick!"

Whiz!

Right on D'Arcy's chin crashed the snowball, as he turned towards the group of juniors in amazement and indignation.

"Your turn, Merry!"

Whiz! Crash!

Tom Merry's snowball went true to its aim.

It crashed full on the glossy silk topper, and lifted it from its wearer's head, and carried it sailing through the air for several yards.

"Bravo!"

"Tom Merry wins!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Hurrah!"

Arthur Augustus stared blankly at the juniors for a moment, and then he rushed towards them.

Lowther and Wally, not to be deprived of their turn, though the target was now demolished, hurled their snowballs, and one caught D'Arcy on the nose, and one on his waistcoat.

The swell of St. Jim's gasped, and came on furiously.

"You—you feahful wuffians—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you wuff beasts! You have wuined my toppah."

"Sorry," Gussy! It was strictly necessary.

"Pway put up your hands, Tom Mewwy! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

And Arthur Augustus danced up to the hero of the Shell, waving his fists in the air, his usually calm countenance aflame with wrath.

CHAPTER 13.

The Scarred Man Again!

TOM MERRY retreated.

"Hold on, Gussy—"

"I wufuse to hold on! You have thwown me into a fluttah, and wuined my toppah! I am goin' to give you a feahful thwashin'!"

"Gussy—Gussy!" said Lowther solemnly. "Suppose M. Cernay should come along and see you fighting? Gussy, are you going to bring down our ginger whiskers in sorrow to the crematorium?"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Keep the peace, Gussy," grinned Tom Merry. "We weren't snowballing your topper as a topper, but as a target. Therefore—"

"It is wuined, all the same."

"That is a detail. You see—"

"In the circe, Tom Mewwy, as it would be wotten bad form to wov in anothah fellow's quartahs, I will not thwash you."

"Oh, thanks, Gussy! You make me breathe again."

"But in the circe, also, I cannot

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wogard such a set of wuffians as my fwiends," said Arthur Augustus, jamming his eyeglass into his eye, and surveying the grinning juniors with indignant scorn. "I wufuse to speak to you again!"

And Arthur Augustus walked off, picked up his topper, and brushed it with his handkerchief, and then walked away with his head very high in the air. He crossed to one of the park gates, walked out, and disappeared from sight.

Tom Merry chuckled. He had little doubt that the swell of St. Jim's would soon get over his wrath, and return to the chateau.

About half an hour later there was a fresh fall of snow, which drove the juniors indoors again, and they adjourned to the billiards-room of the chateau, where they were soon too busy to think of what D'Arcy might be doing.

Meanwhile, D'Arcy walked on.

He was simmering with wrath; but D'Arcy's wrath never lasted long. He calmed down, and, though his wrath was dissipated, his "dig" was as invincible as ever. His brow was clouded as he strode on through the dusk.

The fall of snow was sudden, and it found him a considerable distance from the chateau. He had not brought out either a coat or an umbrella, and he was dismayed. He was thinking not of himself, but of his clothes.

"Bai Jove! I shall have to get some sheltah!" he murmured.

He looked round at the dusky landscape.

Through the gloom of the gathering night loomed up the massive remains of the ruined chateau.

Arthur Augustus' eyes gleamed.

"Bai Jove! Just the place!"

He strode swiftly towards the ruins. There was shelter there, and Arthur Augustus, too, was curious to look over the place. He had an idea that he could penetrate the mystery and discover what trickery was being played there. It would be a score over Tom Merry & Co. to inform them that the mystery was solved, and that their intended night expedition was not needed.

"Yaas, wathah!" murmured Arthur Augustus.

He walked on quickly towards the ruin, and broke into a run as the snow fell more thickly. His footsteps made no sound upon the soft carpet of snow.

As he neared the ruin he gave a start.

Through the thickening dusk he caught sight of a red point of light.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured.

It was a small point of red, and the swell of St. Jim's was puzzled to account for it. It certainly did not proceed from a lamp or lantern, nor from a match.

D'Arcy came through the ruined hall, and reached the doorway of the sheltered apartment in which the juniors had camped the previous night, and from which they had been scared by the unearthly manifestations.

He had lost sight of the red glow for a moment; but now, as he entered the sheltered room, he caught sight of it again.

Then he grinned.

The red glow proceeded from the lighted end of a cigar.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "So the ghosts smoke cigars, do they?"

He stopped and looked into the room. The dusk was thickening, and the interior of the room was, of course, darker than outside, and for some moments he could see nothing. Then

he slowly made out the form of a man with a cigar in his mouth.

As his eyes became more used to the gloom, he discovered the rather startling fact that the man's eyes were fixed upon him, with a glitter of surprise and alarm in them that rather alarmed D'Arcy in his turn.

A low, savage voice came through the dusk.

"You! You once more!"

D'Arcy gave a jump.

He knew the voice, and now he looked again he knew the face, with that scar across it. But the black beard was gone, and its absence changed the face strangely.

A thrill ran through the swell of St. Jim's.

It was the disagreeable passenger of the train—the scarred Frenchman the juniors had run against in the lane last night. What was he doing here?

D'Arcy gazed at him guardedly.

At the slightest hostile movement from the scarred man he was ready to stand on the defensive, or to retreat, as might be needed.

"Bai Jove!" he exclaimed. "Fancy meetin' you!"

"Cochon! Spy!"

"I wufuse to be called a cochon! I—"

"Fool!" growled the scarred man.

"So you come again! You—"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It is once too often, done!" said the scarred man, with a savage grin. "It is your own fault, you English brat! Gaston!"

Arthur Augustus gave a start. The man's look showed him for the first time that there was another enemy to think of, but it was too late. As he whirled round a strong grasp was laid upon him from behind.

He struggled fiercely, but he was in the grip of a powerful man.

"Wefuse me!" gasped D'Arcy. "You cowardly wottah!"

The scarred man sprang forward and lent his aid. In the grasp of the two Arthur Augustus was quite helpless.

The scarred man gave him a bitter look.

"Your own deed," he said, between his teeth. "Upon your head be it."

"You wascals—"

The scarred man spoke to his comrade in French, and the junior was dragged to the flight of stone steps which Figgins had explored. The cold air of the vaults struck a chill to his very bones.

He was dragged along in the darkness, and he heard a sound as of a stone moving, and then he was thrust into a dank smelling chamber of stone, in black darkness.

There was a sound of a click, and the junior realised that he was alone.

"Bai Jove!"

He regained his balance, and felt along the walls for the door. Cold and damp stone met his touch on all sides.

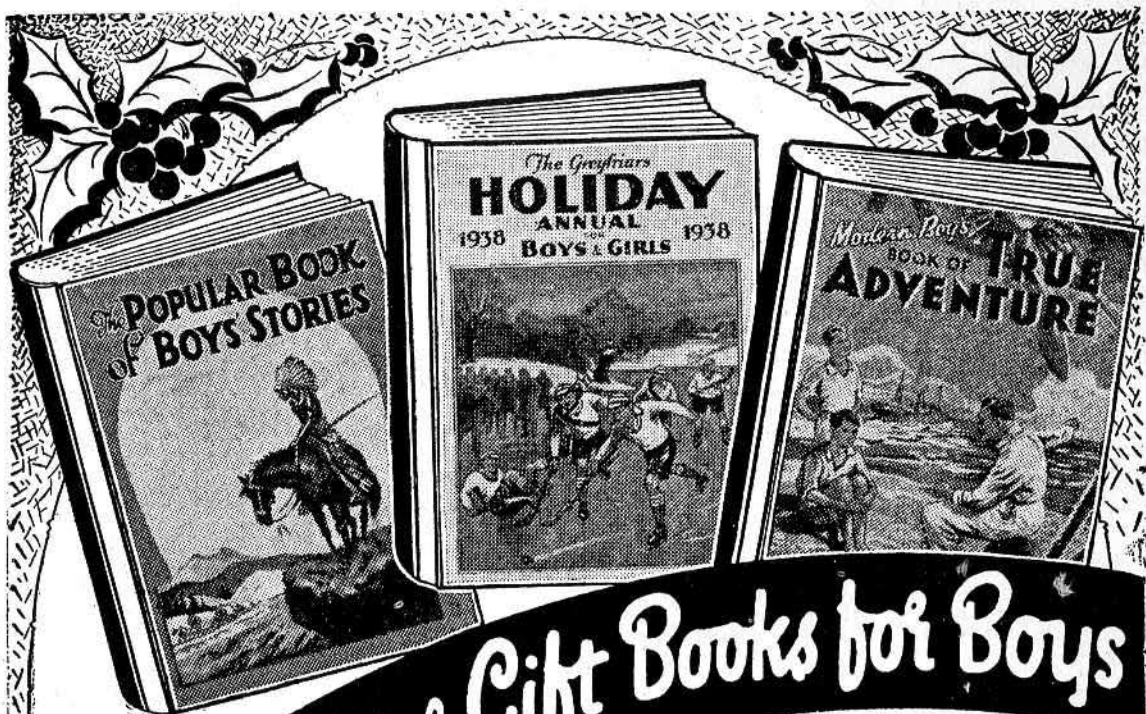
He shouted, but only the echo of his own voice answered him. He felt his way round the room. How many angles were there in the walls? How large was the room?

He had no matches, and he could get no light. He laid his hat on the floor against the wall, and carefully felt his way round till he came to it again.

The room was square in shape, about ten feet each way. It was bare, stone floor, and the walls were of the same cold, chilly stone. But where the door was he could not tell. It presented no difference to his touch.

(Continued on page 20.)

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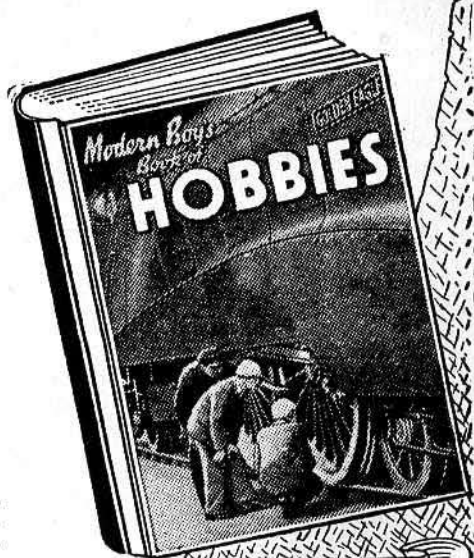
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"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. What was the intention of his captors? Why was he there? D'Arcy hardly dared face the terrible truth, but he felt that he was in about the most serious fix of his life.

CHAPTER 14.

The Expedition!

"**C**HEL!" "Hallo! Anything the matter, Cernay?" "It is zat I do not see Monsieur D'Arcy."

"Gussy!" "It is zat he is not to be seen?" Tom Merry looked concerned. They had gone up to their room to change for dinner, and D'Arcy was not with them. The French youth had been looking for Arthur Augustus, and now he came in to tell the juniors that he was not to be found.

Monsieur Cernay had not yet returned from Paris. But the absence of Cernay pere made the intended ghost hunt that night easier. The juniors had arranged to leave the chateau on the ghost hunt after dinner.

"I cannot see D'Arcy, and I find no one who has seen him," said Cernay. "Is it zat he has gone out for a walk?" "By George!" said Tom Merry. "He did go out about an hour ago!"

"Zen it is zat he was caught in the snow." "Oh, that's it!" said Tom Merry, relieved. "I was afraid he was—ahem! It's all right. He has stopped somewhere out of the snow, and he'll be back later. Serve him right if he misses his dinner. It will be a lesson to him to be more careful."

Cernay laughed. "Ze dinnair vill always be retty for mes amis," he said. "I zink zat some accident happen, perhaps; but if you zink all right—"

"Oh, yes, he's all right!" "Zen it is good!" And Auguste Cernay retired. "He's all right," said Tom Merry. "No need to worry, Blake. He went off on his dig, and I thought at first that he was keeping away because of that. But it stands to reason that he would put up somewhere out of the snow. He had no coat on."

Jack Blake nodded. "Yes; he's all right, I expect." And they went down to dinner. Dinner was a merry meal, and it was not over till late. The snow was falling thickly all the time, and it seemed that D'Arcy would not venture home in it. The juniors had no suspicion, of course, that he had gone to the ruined chateau. Towards eight o'clock the snow slackened, but it did not cease to fall for another half-hour. Then the juniors prepared for their expedition to the ruined chateau.

The night was dark but fine, and a host of stars glittered in the steely sky, and cast a dim light on the carpet of spotless snow.

"It's curious that Gussy doesn't come back," Blake remarked as they went up to put their coats on.

Tom Merry knitted his brows. "I'm afraid it's a case of dig," he remarked. "Gussy was very wrathly about snowballing his topper."

"Yes, but—" "I don't see how anything could have happened to him," said Manners.

"No, but—" "What have you got on your mind, Blake?"

Blake hesitated.

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"Well, it occurred to me that the ass might have gone to the haunted chateau, you know. If he went there alone, he might get into trouble."

Tom Merry looked serious.

"By Jove!" "We know there's some trickery going on there," said Blake. "If Gussy has gone and put his head right into it, one never knows what might happen."

"I shouldn't wonder. It would be like Gus," said Wally. "The best thing we can do is to go and see."

"Yes, rather!" "It did not take the juniors long to prepare for the expedition.

During the day, Cernay had prepared everything that was needed, including a torch cach, and a set of stout cudgels, in case enemies more material than ghosts should be encountered.

The juniors descended and found Cernay in his coat and cap, torch and cudgel in hand, awaiting them at the door.

"Is it zat you are all ready?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!" "I zink zat D'Arcy excuse if ve go vizout him," said Cernay anxiously. "I not zink I like him to zink zat ve neglectful."

"Oh, that's all right, Cernay! As a matter of fact, I think it's quite possible that Gussy has gone to the ruin, and got into trouble there."

"Mon Dieu!" "He might have taken shelter there from the snow," said Kerr.

"Possibly," said Cernay. "If he is zere ve vill find him. Come on!"

"Wait a bit. Where's Fatty?" Fatty Wynn had disappeared. "Fatty!" called out Figgins. "Where are you?"

"I'm coming!" Fatty Wynn returned with a pink face and a parcel under his arm.

"It's all right," he said, blushing guiltily as he met Figgins' accusing glance. "I—I thought I'd better bring

some grub along, in—in case of accidents, you know. Accidents will happen, and it would be an awful thing to go hungry in this weather."

Figgins grunted. "Oh, come on, porpoise!"

And they left the Chateau Cernay. Outside the night was cold and clear. On all sides sheets of spotless white stretched away into the gloom.

Their feet left deep tracks in the soft snow, and a long trail followed them as they tramped on.

They walked mostly in silence. Determined as they were to discover and solve the mystery of the haunted chateau, the juniors realised that they were not engaged in mere fun now; there might be an element of danger in their enterprise.

That the place was really haunted by visitants from the other world, they refused to believe, in spite of the inexplicable manifestations they had witnessed. But if trickery was at work, there must be some motive for it.

The tricksters were not wasting their time playing such a game for fun. There was something they had to hide, some reason why they wished to keep visitors away from the ruin. And the explorers might very easily find themselves on hostile terms with a gang of ruffians.

It was barely possible that the whole affair was due to practical jokers; and in that case, too, there would probably be a fight, as the juniors had their fright of last night to avenge.

Cernay led the way, and they followed him steadily, till at last, through the starlight, the ruins of the haunted chateau loomed up. Gloomy and dark looked the ruins of the old stone chateau as the juniors advanced cautiously towards them.

There was enough light from the stars to enable them to pick their way over the rugged heaps of masonry towards the room in which they had camped two nights ago.

Within, under the roof, the darkness was intense, and Tom Merry gave the word for the torches to be switched on. A dozen beams of light shone out. The room was empty.

On the stone floor was a heap of blackened embers, showing where the fire had burned out. That was all.

Tom Merry looked at the remains of the camp-fire.

"Somebody has been at work here," he said quietly. "The rest of the fuel—where is it? It's been taken."

"The ghosts must have been cold," murmured Monty Lowther.

"Ze peasants—zey need firewood," said Cernay. "It might have been zem."

"Yes, possibly."

"Hark!"

A sound—exactly what they could not say—had become audible in the silence.

"Shut off the lights!" whispered Tom Merry.

In an instant all was dark. The juniors waited—silent, tense, with fast-beating hearts.

CHAPTER 15.

The Ghost of the Chateau!

GRIM silence—still as the grave. It had lasted several minutes, which seemed to be hours to the juniors. What was the sound they had heard?

Tom Merry was about to give the word for the torches to be switched on again, when Blake gripped his arm tightly.

"Look!" he muttered.

There was a pale glimmer of ghostly light. It glimmered through a doorless portal, from the ruined room beyond—a large room, from the massive stone walls alone remained standing. It was the room in which the unearthly form had been seen by the juniors.

They drew a quick, deep breath. "The—ghost!" murmured Fatty Wynn.

"Quiet!"
But Tom Merry, in spite of his nerve, felt a strange eerie thrill as the dim figure of the white monk, with the skull-like face, loomed out of the gloom in the distance. He remembered how he had hurled a stone at the ghostly form without hurting it. What did it mean?

In the dark he stooped for a missile. "Quiet, you chaps!"

He rose again, a jagged stone in his hand. With deadly aim, he hurled it through the opening of the wall at the ghostly figure beyond.

Crash!
The impact of the stone upon the stone wall seemed like thunder to the straining nerves of the St. Jim's juniors. A thousand booming echoes rolled through the recesses of the ruins. The ghostly monk did not stir.

Tom Merry felt the perspiration start out on his brow. There was no mistake. Twice it had happened. What in wonder's name did it mean?

"I—I think we'd better be off," murmured Fatty Wynn.

Figgins' grip closed on his arm. "Stand where you are, Fatty!"

"B—but—"

"Shut up!"

"Turn on the lights!" said Tom Merry resolutely. "I'm going to see this through."

The torchlights blazed out. At the same instant the figure vanished.

"Come on!"

They followed Tom Merry with fast-beating hearts, but with undaunted courage. They scrambled over the rough stones and bricks into the great roofless chamber, flashing their lights on all sides.

They were ready for any foe; but there was no foe to be discovered. The place was empty—silent!

Tom Merry plunged on through stones and snow towards the wall where his missile had struck. On the stone wall was a mark where the impact had been. The stone lay broken in the snow at his feet.

"I—I say, Tom," said Manners, in a low voice, "look at the snow!"

"What about it?"

"There's no footmarks in it—none but our own."

The startled juniors looked at the white carpet of snow. The floor was covered with it to a depth of eight or nine inches. And there was no trace of a footprint there, save the traces left by the boots of the juniors themselves.

They exchanged startled looks, and hurriedly retreated to the adjoining room. Their faces were pale now.

"Hang it all!" muttered Tom Merry desperately. "What does it mean? What can it mean?"

"Is—is it possible——" began Manners.

"Is what possible?"

"That it's a g-g-ghost?"

"Rats!"

"B—but——"

"I—I think we may as well clear," murmured Fatty Wynn. "Of course, I don't believe in ghosts, but it's jolly cold here, and——"

"I'm going to stay!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yes, but——"

"Put the lights out and see if it appears again," said Tom.

There was a general hesitation. After that experience the juniors were naturally loth to stand there in the darkness, but the hesitation was brief. One by one the torches were switched off, and darkness reigned once more in the ruined chateau.

The juniors watched nervously.

Some minutes elapsed, then came the glimmer of ghostly light again, and then, outlined in the gloom, appeared the white monk.

It was moving now—slowly moving in the gloom.

"Great Scott!" muttered Lowther. "Let's get out! What can it be that leaves no footprints in the snow?"

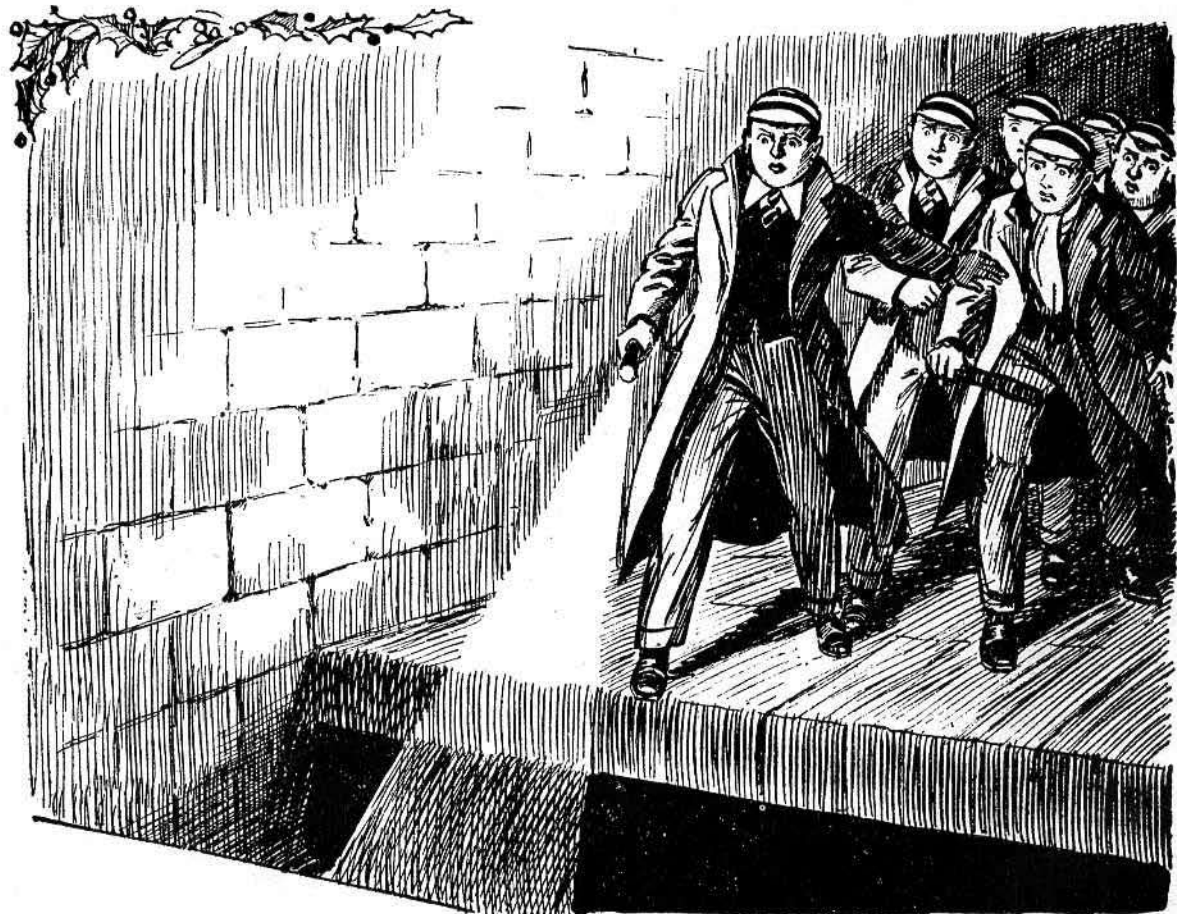
"Come on, Tom!"

"Out, out!" Cernay was feeling nervous. "It is not of ze earth. Let us go, mon ami. Allons!"

Tom Merry did not stir.

"You fellows stand here," he said. "I'm going to see what it is."

"But—but——"



Tom Merry flashed the torchlight on the floor—and it was as well that he did so! For a gap yawned before him in the stone floor. The junior's face went white. "Stop, you chaps!"

"It's no good turning on the lights. I'm going in the dark!" said Tom, whose face was pale but determined. "You fellows stand here."

"You shan't go alone!" said Lowther. "Yes, yes! Two make more row than one. I want to take the rotter by surprise, whoever and whatever it is."

"But—but—"

"Let me have my way, Monty. Keep where you are."

And Tom Merry grasped his cudgel firmly in his hand, and stole silently towards the doorway.

The figure was still now.

Strange and unearthly it looked, and it did not move as Tom Merry entered the roofless chamber, where it glimmered through the darkness.

On the thick snow his feet made no sound.

With a thumping heart but a cool head the junior advanced steadily towards the ghostly monk.

Closer—closer—closer! The form did not move.

Closer—till by stretching out his hand he could have touched it.

And then Tom Merry could have burst into a laugh, for he could see now what the juniors could not see from a distance—that the white monk was simply a lighted reflection on the wall.

No wonder it had disappeared when the torches were turned on.

It was no doubt effected by a film projector, the darkened wall answering the purpose of a screen.

Tom Merry remained silent. He turned round and looked back, and caught the dim bar of light from the point where the tricksters were.

In the stone wall of the roofless chamber was a small opening, where a block of stone had been moved, and there Tom Merry caught a glimmer of light. It was in the wall opposite the apparition, and just over the doorway, and Tom guessed at once that it was a secret passage in the thickness of the wall.

He raised his hand slowly, holding the heavy cudgel in it, the darkness of the place concealing him and his movements. The rascals evidently had no suspicion that any of the explorers would be bold enough to venture into the room in the dark. Tom Merry took careful aim, and the stick went whirling through the air.

There was a sudden yell.

The light disappeared instantly, and the ghostly figure vanished. There was a trampling of feet as the juniors rushed madly through the doorway, and a flashing of lights.

"Tom Merry!"

"It's all right!" called out Tom. They gathered round him.

"I—I thought it was you that called!" gasped Lowther. "What's happened?"

Tom Merry picked up his stick from the snow where it had fallen.

He flashed his light upon the stone wall above the doorway. The opening had disappeared. The stone had been closed.

"It was a trick," said Tom Merry. "We're hardly to blame for being taken in by it, and if any of the country folk here have seen it at work, no wonder they have taken the chateau for haunted."

"But what happened?"

Tom Merry explained. "My hat!" said Lowther. "It was a deep game! Well, I think it's pretty clearly established now that we have ghosts of flesh and blood to deal with."

"Yes, rather!" said Figgins. "Let's descend the stairs and run them down. They can be hunted out if we look long enough."

"Hold on!" said Fatty Wynn. "Suppose we have a snack of grub first. You see—"

"Rats!"

And Tom Merry & Co. made their way to the stone steps that led down to the vaults below the ruined chateau.

CHAPTER 16.

The Secret Passage!

THE discovery of the true nature of the trickery at the haunted chateau had relieved the St. Jim's juniors of any supernatural fears, but it placed them more than ever upon their guard. They knew now for certain that they had earthly foes to deal with, and foes, too, who would not be taking so much trouble for nothing. What was the secret of the ruined chateau?

"Ciel!" said Auguste Cernay. "Zis is my father's property, and ze rascals are trespassers here. Zey are rascals, and I zink zat mon pere he very please if ve show zem up, and prove zat ze chateau not really haunted."

"Yes, rather!"

"I zink, too, zat ze trick's very dangerous, and zat a weak-minded person might be scared into ze fits."

"Very likely."

"Zen you fellows might have had to pass ze whole night in ze snowstorm last night if you had not found ze barn."

"What-ho!"

"Zerefore, if zey are practical jokers here, ve gifts zem licking, and if zey are some rascals ve shows zem up."

"Exactly!" said Tom Merry.

"Only look out where you're going," said Wally.

"If they're foot-pads, or anything of that sort, they may show fight."

"They're very likely to do so,"

said Tom Merry. "But there are eleven of us, and there can hardly be as many of them."

"Zat is not likely."

"Anyway, we're going for them," said Blake, "and if it's a practical joke we'll give them some jokes of a still more practical nature."

"Zat is so."

"Careful here!" said Tom Merry. "The steps are slippery."

"Right-ho!"

They trod carefully down the steps. They entered the dark, damp vaults, flashing the torches round them to right and left.

"Hark!" said Kangaroo suddenly.

A deep groan sounded from the stillness of the vaults. Tom Merry smiled contemptuously.

"They can't frighten us with that now," he remarked.

"No. It's a bit out of date after we've found out the film-projector business," said Monty Lowther. "Give 'em a groan back."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Zat is funny!" said Cernay. "It is a good idea. Ven zey groan again give zem zo groan back again for zemselves."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hark!" exclaimed the Cornstalk. "There it is again!"

Groan!

It was a deep, awe-inspiring sound, and even though they knew it was trickery, it gave some of the juniors a feeling of uneasiness; but they did not hesitate to reply to it in kind.

They gave a groan in chorus back again, and that groan rang and echoed through the dim vaults of the old chateau. Then they listened for a repetition of the sound.

But the groan was not heard again. The explorers' reply had convinced the tricksters evidently that their tactics were of no further use.

Jack Blake gave a chuckle.

"I fancy we've got to the end of the ghost business," he remarked. "But we may have something a bit more serious to tackle next."

"They'll find us ready for them."

"Zat is so, mon ami!"

"Come on!" said Tom Merry. "We're going right through these vaults from end to end. Keep the light well about you, and clubs ready."

"What-ho!"

"Oui, oui!"

The juniors, keeping close together, pressed on through the gloomy vaults.

A dozen torches made the place almost as light as day wherever they moved, and made it impossible for any lurking foe to escape their sight if they should come near him, but no one appeared.

They followed the series of vaults to the extremity, and then returned the way they had come, without seeing anyone.

They gathered again at the foot of the stairs.

"Zere is no vun," said Cernay; "but I have heard mon pere say zat zere are secret passages in zese old ruins."

"It's pretty certain," said Tom Merry. "They were working that ghost business from— Hark! What's that?"

Tap, tap!

"Someone tapping!"

"Listen again!"

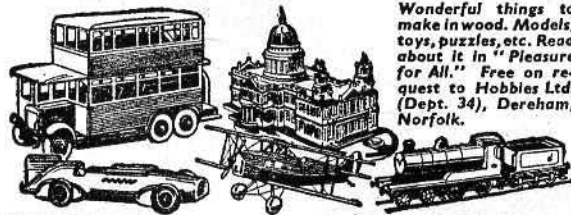
Tap, tap, tap!

They strained their eyes into the darkness on all sides. As far as the radius of light from the torches reached there was nothing to see but damp floor and damp walls.

"It's another game of the rascals!"

said Tom Merry.

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"Yes, rather!"
 "Tap back again!" grinned Kerr.
 "Good wheeze!"
 And Tom Merry tapped on the nearest wall with his cudgel.

Tap—tap—tap!
 They listened for a reply. It was not long in coming.

Tap—tap!
 From what direction the sound proceeded they could not tell.

"There's a blessed secret passage somewhere!" said Blake.

Tom Merry uttered an exclamation:
 "Follow me!"

He ran quickly up the stairs.
 The juniors followed him, wondering what he had in his mind. Tom Merry stopped by the ashes of the old campfire. He flashed his torch down upon the blackened flagstones.

"What's the game?" demanded Digby.

"You remember they groaned quite close to us last night, and we couldn't tell how it could be so close?" said Tom Merry excitedly.

"I remember."

"Well, I should say the secret passage runs under this floor."

"My hat!"
 "And these big, flat stones look as if they could be prised up," said Tom Merry. "Let's try—and see."

The idea caught on at once. The juniors set keenly to work. The cement between the stones had long rotted away, and, by using their sticks as levers, they prised up one of the big flags.

Stony earth was underneath.
 "Not much there," said Kerr.

"One swallow doesn't make a summer."

"We'll try the next," said Kangaroo.

The next stone was easier still to raise, as one edge was uncovered. It revealed nothing but earth. But the third flagstone turned over by the juniors disclosed a dark, wide cavity, rimmed round with stone.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.
 "What do you say to this, my sons?"

"Jolly good!"

The juniors were very excited now. They were evidently on the track of the "ghost" of the ruined chateau at last.
 "We've got to get down there," said Blake.

"Better see what it's like, first. Anybody got any string?"

Digby had a long piece of twine. It was tied to one of the torches, which was lowered into the opening. The torch descended to about eight feet, and clinked upon a stone floor. The light revealed the floor and walls of a passage built in the stone.

"Come on!" said Tom Merry.

He swung himself over the edge of the aperture, and dropped lightly into the passage below.

He picked up the torch there, and led the way onward. One by one the juniors dropped down after him and followed. Behind them the passage extended into blackness; before them the same.

The passage was about three feet wide, and the juniors walked in single file. Tom Merry held his torch out before him, the rays gleaming ahead.

Suddenly the light was crossed by another light, and a dark form loomed up behind a lantern, and two fierce eyes gleamed for a moment.

Tom Merry caught sight of a face.
 He uttered a cry:

"The man with the scar!"
 There was a muttered oath in French. The next instant the second light had

My Ideal Christmas Dinner.

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FATTY WYNN

Personally I am quite satisfied with the usual Christmas dinner, consisting of turkey and plum pudding, with mince pies and nuts and fruit to follow. The Christmas dinner is one of the grandest institutions. It has glorious traditions. I believe it would break my heart if turkey and plum pudding went out of fashion and we had to make our Christmas dinner out of mutton and leeks. Being of Welsh extraction, I ought to be loyal to the leek, but I don't want it on Christmas Day, thanks! I sincerely hope that our reformers and people who are always trying to turn things upside-down will not succeed in changing the Christmas menu.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY

My ideal Christmas dinnah, deah boys, consists of chicken. I have found that a chicken, as a wule, is more tendah than a turkay. The turkay we had last Christmas was as tough as leathah, bai Jove! My patah spwained both his w'ists when he carved it. I considah that bird had been takin' fah too much exercise. It had worked off all its superfluous flesh long since! I shall therefore beg my patah this comin' Chwistmas to slay one of his plump, tendah chickens for the Chwistmas dinnah. Then ewevythin' in the garden will be lovely!

PAT REILLY

Shure, an' the good old turkey an' plum pudding fills the bill intirely! At the same time, I always like to start my Christmas dinner with a plate of Irish stew. It's jolly good stuff, bejabers, especially when there are nice fat dumplings floatin' about in it! If I had my own way I'd preface every meal with a plate of Irish stew.

But I'm afraid, begorrah, that the St. Jim's cook would jolly soon go on strike if she had to prepare Irish stew at every meal!

EPHRAIM TAGGLES

Which I prefers to take my Christmas dinner in liquid form—not solid. What could be better than a foamin' flagon of ginger wine with a dash of summat in it jest to give it a bite? I shall 'ave great pleasure in drinkin' the 'ealths of all the young gents of St. Jim's on Christmas Day—all wot 'ave given me tips, that is!

flushed away—the scarred Frenchman was gone.

Tom Merry halted, breathing hard in his amazement.

"Who was it?" cried Blake.

No one but Tom Merry had seen more than a flashing light and a fitting shadow.

"The scarred Frenchman—the man in the train!"

"Ciel!" exclaimed Cernay, who had been told about him. "And vat is he doing here?"

"Some shady game, I'll bet!" said Tom Merry. "Anyway, we're going to see the end of this now. Come on!"

And he pressed forward along the secret passage.

CHAPTER 17.

The Bank Robber!

STRANGE thoughts were in Tom Merry's mind as he pressed on. He was thinking of the Frenchman in the railway train—of the strange meeting in the dark lane. Then it was the scarred Frenchman for whom those flashing signals had been made last night—the scarred Frenchman who was at the bottom of this trickery at the haunted chateau!

Who was he? What was he?

He looked to the juniors like a man from the city—not by any means like a country footpad, at all events; yet he was the man who was hiding there.

Some criminal—a fugitive from justice, hiding from the police? Some robber who had found the ruined chateau a safe hiding-place for his plunder?

It was very probable.

"Halt!" exclaimed Tom Merry abruptly.

His meditations were interrupted as he came face to face with a stone wall, which blocked further progress.

The juniors came to a stop.

They flashed the lights up and down round them, but they shone only on bare walls built of greystone blocks.

Where had the scarred Frenchman gone?

He had certainly not passed the juniors in the narrow passage, and here they were, at the end of a blind alley, empty save for themselves.

"There must be a door of some sort," said Blake.

"There must be."

"Look for it—the stone's damp and mouldy—there may be a trace where the fello' touched it," said Jack Blake sagely.

"Good for you!"

Tom Merry examined the stones inch by inch. As Blake suggested, a touch would probably have left a mark in the damp fungus that covered the old stones.

"Eureka!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Have you found it?"

"Yes."

They pressed forward to see. There was the plain mark where a heavy push had been given upon the stone, and the damp surface had been rubbed, Tom Merry put his hand in the same place and pushed.

The stone slid away.

Beyond, all was dark; but the torches showed the passage extended into a chamber built in the stone.

"Careful how you go," said Blake.

"Right-ho!"

Tom Merry led the way. He flashed the torchlight on the floor as he went—and it was as well that he did. For a few feet from the opening a gap yawned

in the stone—a gap three feet wide and bottomless, as far as Tom could see by looking.

The junior's face went white.

"Stop, you chaps!"

"What is it?"

"A gap in the floor."

Even Tom Merry was unnerved for a moment. A single incautious step would have hurled him down to certain death.

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"Take care, you fellows!" he said. "This isn't too wide to jump over, but be careful."

"Lead on, Macduff!"

Tom Merry jumped the gap. On the other side lay three or four huge flagstones, and they had evidently recently been moved. The deliberate death-trap had been laid for the pursuers; there could be no doubt about that.

The juniors advanced into the stone chamber. There was no apparent exit from it. As they moved round it, tapping here and there on the walls to feel if they were solid, there came suddenly an answering sound that made them start.

Tap!

"My hat!" said Blake. "The cheek! He's tapping back to us!"

Tap, tap!

Tom Merry looked puzzled.

"It's the same tapping we heard when we were in the vaults," he said. "I wonder—" He did not finish, but searched out the spot where the tapping sounded most clearly, and there tapped in return.

Tap, tap, tap!

Back at once came the reply.

Tap, tap!

"That can't be the scarred man or his friends," said Tom Merry. "It's somebody else—somebody who's got shut up here somehow."

"My hat! Can it be—"

"Gussy?"

"I shouldn't wonder!"

"Ciel! Zat would be strange."

Tom Merry tapped on the stone wall again, and then put his lips close to the stone blocks and called out:

"Who is it?"

His voice rang and echoed through the cell, but he heard no reply. He shouted again, and then he thought he caught a voice through the stone.

"Somebody's there," he said, "but a tap sounds through the stone, and a voice doesn't. I can't make out a word, or be sure if it is a voice."

"There may be a door there."

"It doesn't look like it."

They searched the wall for a trace of a door, but in vain. The stone blocks were immovable. Then they searched the other walls. It was equally in vain, and at last they ceased, baffled.

"Ciel!" said Auguste Cernay. "Zat does it mean, mes amis? Ze man came zis way, zat is certain."

"And he got out somehow," said Figgins.

"Oui, oui."

"Try the floor," suggested Blake.

"There may be another blessed stair!"

"Good!"

They scanned the floor. And there they found a flagstone from which the damp had been rubbed, and which showed plain traces of recent moving. But it refused to move. They pressed and twisted at it without avail.

"It comes up, I expect," said Tom Merry. "But it's fastened underneath."

"Then we can't raise it."

"Only by prising it up. Let's get to work."

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The stone was immovable. But another flag near it was prised up—then another, till the flags round it were all up, and the obstinate stone was left alone. Then they were able to get the thick cudgels under the edge of it, and the leverage gave them an advantage. With a dozen strong arms levering, the stone yielded.

There was a crack below, as if some fastening had broken, and the stone shot up so suddenly that two or three of the juniors rolled on the floor.

The stone fell over with a crash.

"Ow!" gasped Lowther as he sat down. The back of Digby's head gave him a crack on the chin as Dig sat down. "Ow! Ass!"

Dig rubbed the back of his head.

"Oh! What did I knock the back of my head against?"

"My chin, you dummy!"

"Ow! Why couldn't you put your silly chin somewhere else?" grunted Dig. "You've made my head ache!"

"D'you think you haven't made my jaw ache?" howled Lowther.

"Oh, hold your jaw!" said Blake humorously.

"Look here, Blake—"

"Scat! Come on!"

"Yes; shut up, you chaps, and come on!" said Tom Merry. "There's a stone stair here, and I rather think this will be the finish."

"Mon Dieu! I zink so!"

"That's all very well. My jaw's nearly broken."

"But not quite, worse luck!" sighed Manners. "How nice and peaceful the study would be at St. Jim's if it had been really broken!"

"Well, you chaps can stay here and jaw if you like," said Tom Merry. "I'm going on!"

And he stepped into the opening, his torch flashing ahead.

"Stay where you are!"

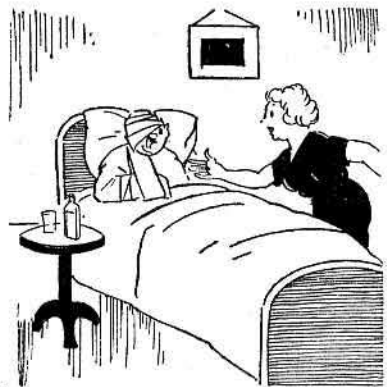
It was a sudden shout from below. A dark figure stood in the torchlight—a savage face looked up from below. It was the scarred Frenchman again—without his board. The scar ran in a livid line across his white cheek.

"Stop!"

His right hand flashed—there was a glimmer of steel in the light. A strange thrill ran through Tom Merry as he realised that a revolver was pointed at him.

"Go back, or I'll shoot!"

Before Tom Merry could reply there was a wild cry from Auguste Cernay



"Cheer up! Perhaps the children will be old enough next year to light their own fireworks!"

Half-a-crown has been awarded to Miss M. Seear, 18, Hampton Place, Brighton.

over his shoulder. The French lad was staring blankly at the scarred man.

"Ciel! It is he— C'est le coquin! It is Maximilian Ponsac!"

"What!"

"It is ze bank robber!"

CHAPTER 18.

Captured!

"THE bank robber!"

The juniors echoed the words in blank amazement.

Across the scarred face of the Frenchman flashed a look of almost demonic rage.

The hand that held the revolver trembled.

"Ah! You know me! Then you'll pay dear for your knowledge—"

Crash!

Jack Blake acted promptly. In his blind rage—and terror, too, for there was as much fear as fury in his face—the scoundrel had been pressing the trigger; but Jack Blake hurled his torch with lightning swiftness.

The missile struck the scarred man full in the face, and the crashing blow blinded him for the moment. His arm dropped; the revolver exploded, and the bullet flattened on the stone floor.

The next moment Tom Merry had leaped down the steps, and a crashing blow of his cudgel fell upon the villain's right arm, numbing it, and the revolver dropped to the ground.

The scarred man gave a yell of pain. "Collar him!" shouted Figgins.

But he was running.

The juniors were tearing after him, but Tom Merry shouted to them to be careful.

"Hold on! Take care! There may be pitfalls!"

"Right-ho, my son!"

"Zat ve follow him!"

"Wait a bit! Blake, old man—"

"Hallo!"

"They may have another way of getting out," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "You and two or three more go back the way we've come, and guard the opening at the top of the vault steps. See? Knock down anybody who tries to get out."

Blake chuckled.

"Good!"

"Take Kerr, Wally, and Kangaroo."

"Come on, you chaps!"

And the four juniors hurried back the way they had come, and in a few moments were in the open air again and on guard at the top of the vault steps.

Tom Merry & Co. pressed on. They were in a wide passage now, evidently on a level with the vaults below the old chateau.

They were all intensely excited by the strange news that Cernay had given them. Auguste Cernay himself was bubbling over with eagerness.

"You're sure it's the bank robber?" asked Tom Merry. "The one who robbed your father's bank, you mean, of course?"

"Oui, oui!"

"Have you seen him?"

"No. But ze police have his photograph; he is a well-known criminal, and ze photo was published in all ze newspapers. I know every line of his features. And, besides, ze scar—zere is zat he cannot disguise."

"Good!"

"But how on earth did a Paris criminal come to hide in a ruin in this part of the country?" asked Lowther.

"Ah! I know zat, too—his confederate, Vinol—"



As Tom Merry stepped into the opening, there was a sudden shout from below. "Stop where you are!" It was the scarred Frenchman again—and a revolver was pointed at the juniors!

"Yes, I remember your governor saying—"

"Oui, oui! Vinol is a native of zis district, and vas in my father's employ once," Cernay explained. "Gaston Vinol—"

"Gaston! That settles it. The scarred man's friend here is named Gaston, as we know."

"Oui, oui! Gaston Vinol was on zis estate for years, and he had undoubtedly discovered zen ze secrets of zis old chateau," said Cernay. "Then, when ze bank robbery had made Paris too hot for zem, it must have been Gaston Vinol who zought of zis place as a safe refuge."

"Bai Jove! Yes, and I suppose he came here first to see if it was safe, as he was a less conspicuous person than the chap with the scar," Tom Merry remarked. "It was he who was making the light signals for his confederate last night when we chanced here."

"Zat is so."

"And he knew that the chateau is supposed to be haunted, and he had the fixings all ready to keep up the game, in case the chateau should be visited," said Figgins. "It was a jolly deep game!"

"Bai Jove! Yes."

"And Vinol vas a violinist, as I remember," said Cernay. "He vas doubtless playing for his own amusement ven you heard him last night."

As they talked the juniors were slowly and cautiously following the stone passage; it led them, as they half-expected, to a blank wall of stone.

But this was not likely to baffle them now.

Tom Merry groped over the wall till he found a stone that yielded to his touch, and as it rolled back a gleam of light came through.

The juniors pushed on through the opening and found themselves in a small stone chamber furnished with a wooden bench, a couple of stools, and beds made up on the floor.

An oil-lamp was burning on the table, and close beside it a pack of cards was scattered, and there were several silver coins among the cards.

Two or three bottles of wine and a couple of glasses and a half-burnt cigar gave additional evidence of the haste with which the occupants had left the place.

The room was closed in on all sides, yet the air was pure enough, showing that there was some hidden means of ventilation in the stone walls.

On the opposite side of the room a stone was partly closed, showing where the bank robbers had made their exit.

Tom Merry glanced quickly round the room.

"This is where they lived," he remarked. "We seem to have interrupted a little game by coming here to-night."

"Ha, ha!"

"And this is the way they've gone," said Figgins, pulling the stone door wide open. "I wonder— Why, here we are in the vaults again!"

"By Jove!"

It was true; they were in the vaults,

close by the stone stair that led to the open air. Tom Merry felt glad that he had thought of detaining Blake to guard the top of that stair from outside.

For even as the juniors emerged into the vaults there came a sound of strife from the stairway.

There was a yell, a curse, and the sound of a body falling down the stairs. Then a shout from above.

"Come on, you bounders! Have another try!"

It was Jack Blake's voice.

Tom Merry chuckled gleefully. Blake and his comrades were on guard, and the bank robbers were not likely to escape that way.

"We'll take the rotters from behind," said Manners.

"Yes, come on."

The juniors ran towards the stair. At the foot of it lay a man, evidently half-stunned. He had been knocked down by a cudgel blow as he tried to emerge from the stairs into the open air, and the roll down the steps had knocked out of him what little sense the blow on the head had left.

The juniors seized him instantly.

He began to struggle savagely, but it did not avail him. It was not the Paris cracksman, but a man the juniors had not seen before. Auguste Cernay knew him at a glance.

"It's Gaston Vinol!" he said

"Good!"

A couple of handkerchiefs were twisted up, and tied fast round the man's wrists and ankles. He lay

muttering curses as the juniors left him.

There was a sound of more curses on the stairs. Then the voice of Maximilian Ponsac was heard in parley.

"Let me pass—let me pass!"

Blake's voice was heard in reply. "You can pass if you like; but you'll take a cracked napper with you! Come on—no extra charge for postman's knocks!"

"I—I—"

"Hear, hear! Come on!"

The bank robber ground his teeth savagely.

The four juniors above had it all in their hands. Gathered round the small square opening at the top of the stairs, they could knock down anybody who tried to get out, without exposing themselves to anything in return. If the bank robber had still had his revolver, it would have been useless to him.

"Let me pass! Mon Dieu! Let me pass and I will make you rich!" he cried hoarsely.

"Go hon!"

"Ten thousand francs—"

"Ten thousand rats!" said Blake.

"Twenty thousand francs—"

"Twenty thousand rats!"

The man gritted his teeth.

With gleaming eyes, he rushed up the steps once more, and emerged head and shoulders into the open, and then dodged back hastily as four cudgels crashed downwards.

As he dodged down, mad with rage, but not daring to face the blows, there was a rush up the stairs behind him, and several strong hands fastened upon him, and he was dragged headlong down.

With a yell of rage, he turned upon his news foes, struggling and fighting like a wildcat, and the bank robber and the juniors rolled to the bottom of the stairs in a struggling heap.

CHAPTER 19.

A Million Francs!

PONSAC fought fiercely, but the odds were too great. The juniors simply piled on him, and he was overwhelmed. A yell from Tom Merry brought Blake and his comrades upon the scene, and they added themselves to the scrimmage.

The furious struggles of the Frenchman were quieted at last. He lay gasping and exhausted under their weight, and his hands and feet were tied as those of his accomplice had been.

Then the juniors released him.

He lay gasping, his eyes mad with rage, his teeth grating. A torrent of curses in French streamed from his lips, till Kanagroo slapped him on the mouth and told him to be silent.

"By Jove!" gasped Tom Merry. "We've got them—the ghosts of the chateau."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Auguste Cernay's eyes were beaming.

"Ve have got ze bank robbers!" he exclaimed. "Vat news for mon pere. My father, he will be delighted. Zey will have ze stolen banknotes viz zem."

"By George! Of course!"

A spasm of rage crossed Ponsac's face. His look alone was enough to tell the juniors that the thieves had the loot about them.

The invasion of their retreat, and the discovery of the secret passages by Tom Merry & Co., had made it impossible for them to hope to lie hidden longer at the haunted chateau. They

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had attempted to escape, and had not Blake been on the watch at the top of the stairs, they would have escaped into the night—and might have cleared away for good, plunder and all.

But now—

Tom Merry stooped over the bound bank robber, and calmly and methodically went through his pockets.

There was a bulky package in a secret pocket in the man's waistcoat, and Tom Merry was not long in finding it and dragging it out into the light.

He opened the package, the bank robber watching him with burning eyes. A huge roll of Bank of France notes was revealed.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Zey are ze notes."

"Look!"

Cernay eagerly took them and began to count them.

million," said Tom Merry. "This will be a ripping Christmas present for your father, Cernay."

"Oui, oui!"

"Et moi?" said Ponsac. "I am of no further use to you—let me go!"

Tom Merry's brow darkened.

"We are not likely to let such a scoundrel as you loose again!" he exclaimed.

Ponsac shrugged his shoulders.

"You have robbed me of a fortune, little monsieur—is that not enough? And there is your friend—what of him?"

Tom Merry started.

"Whom do you mean?"

The bank robber smiled grimly.

"Your friend with the eyeglass."

"It was Gussy we heard tapping," said Blake in a low voice.

Tom Merry nodded.

"You may have heard him tapping," said Ponsac, who had caught the words, "but you will never find his cell without my assistance. Let us both go to find your friend. Peste! You have recovered a million francs. What more would you have?"

"A scoundrel punished!" said Tom Merry.

"Then give up the hope of ever seeing your friend again."

"At all events, we shall search before we come to terms with you," said Tom Merry.

Ponsac gave another shrug of the shoulders.

"Search, then!"

"Stay here with them, one of you, and see that they don't get loose," said Tom Merry. "The rest of you help me to hunt for Gussy."

"Good!"

Digby stayed to watch over the bank robbers, though they were too securely tied for there to be much risk of their getting loose; then Tom Merry & Co. hunted for Gussy. They tapped on the stone walls and were soon rewarded by hearing answering taps.

They gathered in the place where the tapping was loudest, but never a sign of a door could they find. The tapping continued from within. If there was a door—and undoubtedly there was—it was of a kind different from the others they had seen.

They felt over the wall. It was of massive blocks they could not hope to prise open.

Tap—tap—tap!

"This is rotten!" said Tom Merry in a low voice. "There's Gussy on that side of the wall, and us on this side, yet—"

"There must be a door!"

"We can't find it."

"We could get workmen here to wrench the whole wall away to-morrow morning," Blake remarked thoughtfully.

"Yes, but Gussy! Think of him shut up there! He may have been there hours already, without light, without food—"

Fatty Wynn shuddered and left off nibbling a sandwich.

"We'd better make terms with the rotter!"

"I suppose so! You stay here, Wally, and go on tapping, to show Gussy we haven't deserted him."

"Right you are! Poor old Gus! What a state his clothes will be in," said Wally, with great feeling.

Tom Merry returned to the bank robbers. Ponsac looked up at him with a mocking smile.

"Have you found your friend, monsieur?"

"No!"

"You want my help?"

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"How many were taken from the bank?" asked Tom Merry.

"A million francs in notes—mon pere's loss alone would have been four hundred thousand francs," said Cernay. "I zink zey are not all here."

"Some on the other chap, no doubt." Gaston Vinol was searched, and a smaller bundle of notes came to light.

"Ah! Zat is zem."

"C'est bien!" It was Ponsac's voice. The Paris crackman was cool again now; he seemed to have quite recovered his sang-froid. "They are all there, garçons—all excepting five thousand francs already sent to a friend of mine to pass—which you or anybody else will never see again."

"Five thousand isn't much out of a

"Yes!"

"You know the terms."

"I accept them," said Tom Merry shortly. "You release our chum, and we set you free, but no more than that. The police will soon be on your track."

Ponsac looked at him keenly and nodded.

"C'est bien! Untie my legs and let me walk."

They untied his legs. Figgins and Kangaroo taking one each of his arms as a precaution. They led him to the spot where Wally was tapping. Ponsac grinned. He scanned the floor and pressed his foot on a spot that was not, to the eyes of the juniors, marked out from the rest of the damp grimy floor.

But as he pressed a stone sank away, taking a portion of the wall with it, and the torches gleamed into a dark stone cell.

There was an exclamation from the darkness within.

"Gwoat Scott!"

"Gussy!"

The two rascals looked at one another, and then at the juniors. It was quite plain that it was in their minds to attack the lads, and try conclusions once more for the possession of the million francs.

Tom Merry laughed. "Come on!" he said. "I'd be glad to take you to prison, after all!"

But it was too hopeless. The two rascals were unarmed, and the juniors were six to one. With a shrug of the shoulders Ponsac turned away, and Vinol followed him.

The juniors followed them into the open air.

"Adieu, messieurs!" said Maximilian Ponsac. "We may meet again."

"When you are arrested!" said Tom Merry.

Another shrug of the shoulders, and the bank robber disappeared into the gloom. The snow had begun to fall again. In the falling flakes the forms of the two thieves of Paris faded away.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, as he heard the story of the recovery of the banknotes. "Bai Jove, that's

"You surely jest?" said M. Cernay in amazement.

"Non, non, for we have recovered ze banknotes!"

"My son!"

"Look then!"

And Cernay spread out wads of Bank of France notes on the table before the astounded eyes of his father. M. Cernay gave a cry.

"Ah! I am amazed! Tell me all!"

And they told the story of the night's adventure, M. Cernay listening to every word with ejaculations of amazement.

"Ah!" he exclaimed at last. "You are plucky lads, but you should not have gone into such danger. You must not do so again. But I am glad. This will save me from a heavy loss. Mon cher Merry, it was a lucky thought when my son invited you and your friends to spend a Christmas holiday at the Chateau Cernay."

It was a happy party in the Chateau Cernay after that, and the juniors had an additional reason for satisfaction. Monsieur Cernay telephoned news of the

St. Jim's on Christmas Eve! By Clifton Dane.

I SAW St. Jim's on Christmas Eve and it made me feel quite creepy!

I had to go through the House and up to Study No. 11 in the Shell passage, to fetch a bag I'd left behind by mistake. It's a journey I've done so many times that I could easily do it blindfolded; yet, on this occasion, I felt as if I was in a strange place entirely.

It was the weird silence that made it seem so unfamiliar. When you're used to a place that's always swarming with fellows, it's jolly disconcerting to find it still and deserted, as it was on Christmas Eve!

I left Taggles, who had opened the door for me, sitting on a bench in the hall, puffing away at his old pipe. From that time till I rejoined him five

minutes later, I saw no man and heard no sound except the thunderous echo of my own footsteps.

I had a peep at several familiar haunts. They were all equally eerie. The junior Common-room was like a mausoleum. Railton's study reminded me of a miniature museum. The Shell dorm, with all the beds taken to pieces and piled up at one end, looked like a blessed barn!

A deep and awful silence brooded over the Shell passage. Somehow, it made me feel quite prickly down the spine. It would have been a real relief to see one of the doors open and one of the fellows step out. But every one was miles away.

Taking it all round, I was jolly glad to get down to the hall again. Taggles'

crusty countenance had never been such a welcome sight to me!

I crossed the quad in the early wintry dusk, feeling that St. Jim's on Christmas Eve was surely the most desolate place any fellow could visit.

Just for a moment, as I got near the gates, I had a shock, and wondered whether I was mistaken after all. For, over in the direction of the New House, I saw several figures that looked exactly like New House chaps from the distance!

But when I went nearer I saw that they weren't New House chaps.

It was quite a natural mistake, though. The resemblance was remarkable.

As a matter of fact, they were moulting owls!

CHAPTER 20.

Gussy is Satisfied!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY came out of the cell. The elegant junior of St. Jim's was in a shocking state.

His clothes were covered with dirt and slime, his hat was missing, his collar was torn out, and his face and hands were about as grubby as they could well be.

"Bai Jove!" he gasped. "It is weally you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blake. "I think we have more right to ask that question. Is this the one and only ornament of the School House at St. Jim's?"

"You have captured the wascal?"

"Yes, and he's ransomed himself by showing where you were shut up," said Tom Merry. "Otherwise you'd have stayed there till to-morrow."

"Bai Jove!"

"So he's going free; but I expect the police will soon have him."

"I twust so," said D'Arcy. "He has tweated me with the gweatest possible diswpect. Before he goes I think I had better give him a feahful thwashin'."

"Oh, never mind that now!" said Tom Merry, releasing the bank robber. "There you are, you rascal! Scoot!"

Blake released Gaston Vinol at the same moment.

wippin'. You see now, Tom Mewwy, that I was wight."

"Eh?"

"You will wemembah my suggestin' offewin' my services to M'sieur Cernay as an amateur detective, to wun down the bank wobbahs!"

"Ha, ha! Yes!"

"Well, we have run them down," said Arthur Augustus. "I was the first to do so—"

"And to get shut up in a cell," said Blake.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the St. Jim's juniors were still chuckling when they reached the Chateau Cernay. They found that Monsieur Cernay had returned, and was very much perturbed by their absence. He greeted them with great relief when they came in, tired and muddy and snowy, but in great spirits.

"My boys—"

"Ve have news for you, mon pere!" exclaimed Auguste, his eyes dancing.

"Ve have been to find ze ghosts of ze ruined chateau."

"Mon fils—"

"And we've found them," said Blake with a grin.

"What?"

"And zey have turned out to be ze bank robbers of Paris!" exclaimed Cernay.

"Quoi?"

"It is true, mon pere."

bank robbers to the police, and the two rascals were eventually run to earth. The loot was returned to the bank whence it had been taken.

Tom Merry & Co. spent many more days at the Chateau Cernay, and they parted at last with their French friend with equal regret on both sides.

And as Auguste Cernay stood on the platform, watching their train depart, he waved his hat and shouted:

"A merry Christmas!"

And with stentorian tones Tom Merry & Co. shouted back that time-honoured wish:

"A merry Christmas!"

The juniors returned to Paris, where Uncle Frank was glad to see them again. After spending another day or two in the French capital, they set off back to England, with very pleasant memories of their happy and exciting holiday in France.

At Charing Cross the juniors separated to go to their various homes for the remainder of the Christmas holiday, before returning once again to St. Jim's for the new term.

(Next Wednesday: "GRUNDY THE LITTLE I!" Like a good laugh? Of course you do! Then don't miss this sparkling St. Jim's story in the special new pocket edition of the GEM. Order early!)

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