

Complete Stories for Everyone, and Every Story a Gem!

The Terrible Three's Test.

Miss Priscilla's Cottage
at HUCKLEBERRY
HEATH

A Splendid, Long, Complete School Tale of the Boys of St. Jim's.

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1. First Aid.

"H!"
"Bai Jove!"
"Oh, dear!"
"Somethin's the mattah, deah boys!"
"Goodness gracious!"
"Gweat Scott! There's somethin' w'ong!"
"Oh, dear! What shall I do?"
"This way, deah boys!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's led the way, and Tom Merry and Jack Blake followed him.

The juniors had been chatting in the garden of Laurel Villa, at Huckleberry Heath, the residence of Miss Priscilla Fawcett. Miss Fawcett was Tom Merry's old governess, and Tom and some of his chums were there on leave of absence from the school.

They had come to Laurel Villa, as D'Arcy put it, to the "wescue of a lady in distwess." Miss Fawcett had received a threatening letter from some rascal, who wished to blackmail the timid old lady, and she did not feel safe at home without her darling Tommy.

Her darling Tommy felt that he couldn't come without his chums too, and Dr. Holmes of St. Jim's had given permission for the party to go to Huckleberry Heath—for Miss Fawcett had visited St. Jim's, and she had caused so much trouble there that the Head was glad to say good-bye at any price.

While the other fellows at St. Jim's were grinding away in the class-rooms, or slogging at early football practice, Tom Merry & Co. were having a quiet and pretty enjoyable time in the old country village.

Of the blackmailer they had seen and heard nothing—and in fact, in the interest of getting up a football-match with certain youths in the village, they had almost forgotten about the matter. And Miss Priscilla, in the pleasure of having her dear boy with her, seemed to have allowed the threatening letter to pass from her mind also.

But as Tom Merry heard the exclamations through the

French windows that led upon the garden, and recognised his old governess's voice, it struck him all at once that there had been some further development of the strange affair.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the first to hear Miss Fawcett's voice and to approach nearer the window—and it was Arthur Augustus who pushed open the glass doors and entered first. Tom Merry and Blake were close behind him. The other juniors were down the long garden, and as yet unaware of what was transpiring.

"Bai Jove!"
"Phew!"
"She's fainting!"

Tom Merry sprang towards his old governess.

Miss Priscilla was leaning back in a deep-seated old arm-chair. There was a letter in her slim, white hand—but they did not glance at the letter just then. Miss Priscilla's eyes were closed, and her face was white. She seemed to be unconscious, and for a moment the juniors were stricken with dismay.

Tom Merry & Co. were handy fellows in many ways, but how to deal with an old lady in a faint was a mystery they could hardly be expected to grapple with.

"Bettah wing!" exclaimed D'Arcy hastily. "Bettah wing for Hannah!"

"Wing! What do you mean?"

"Ring the bell, ass!"

"Ring it, then! But—but something must be done!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "Water, quick—water!"

Blake dashed to a jug of flowers on the table.

"Here's some—here you are!"

He hurled the flowers out of the open window, and handed the jug of water to Tom Merry.

Tom Merry acted swiftly. He slopped the water over Miss Fawcett's face, and the good old lady gave a sort of jump, and murmured.

"Thank goodness!" exclaimed Tom Merry, in great relief.

"She's coming to."

"She's going off again!"

"Oh, dear!"

"Try burnt feathers!" exclaimed Blake. "The smell of burnt feathers revives people in faints—I've heard my sister say so!"

"Good—got any?"
"Here's a stuffed bird—"
"Splendid! Yank it over."

Blake dragged down the stuffed bird, and Tom Merry jerked off a handful of feathers and jammed the ends into the fire. There was a terrific smell of burning feathers immediately, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gasped and put his head out of the window.

Tom Merry brought the scorched feathers close to Miss Fawcett's face. He felt them with his fingers to feel when they were cool enough, and then he allowed them to touch her face. Whether Miss Fawcett sniffed the scent, and whether it revived her, is uncertain, but it was certain that Tom Merry made black marks all over her kind old face, and transformed her into a remarkable imitation of a nigger minstrel.

Blake rang the bell, and kept on ringing it, while Tom Merry was reviving his old governess.

Hannah burst into the room.

"Goodness gracious! What is the matter? Oh, oh!"

Hannah gave one terrified stare at Miss Fawcett's blackened face, and went off into a faint herself into the nearest chair.

Tom Merry looked at her in dismay.

"My only hat! She's gone off too!"

"Phew!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Slop that other jug of water over her face, Blake!"

"Right-ho!"

Hannah jumped up, coming to with surprising suddenness before Jack Blake could get at her with the jug of water.

"Oh, oh!" gasped Hannah. "What has happened?"

"Miss Fawcett has fainted."

"But her face—"

"H'm! I've afraid I've blacked it."

"My darling Tommy!"

It was Miss Fawcett's voice. She was coming to!

Tom Merry took her hand.

"Yes, dear; it's all right!"

"Tommy!"

"I'm here, dear."

Miss Fawcett opened her eyes and looked at him. She held tightly to his hand and shivered.

"Tommy, that dreadful man!"

"What man, dearest?"

"That dreadful man! He has written to me again!"

"The hound!"

"This is his letter. He is going to set fire to the house."

"The silly ass!"

"And burn us all in our beds, my dearest Tommy!"

"It's only gas, dear!"

"I am convinced that he is a fearful criminal, and will carry out his threat," said Miss Fawcett, with a shudder. "We must fly."

"Bai Jove, it's impos!" said D'Arcy. "We haven't any aeroplane in Huckleberry Heath, Miss Pwiscillah!"

"I mean we must go instantly."

"Oh, no!" said Tom Merry.

"Yes, yes, my darling boy! That dreadful man will carry out his threat! I am sure we are in terrible danger!"

"But—"

"It was wrong of me to bring you from the school into this fearful danger, Tommy. I feel that now."

"That's all right—"

"We must fly—"

"Well, let me see the letter."

Miss Fawcett began to cry softly. Tom Merry's eyes were gleaming with anger. He did not believe there was any danger, but he was burning with indignation against the unscrupulous scoundrel who could scare a timid old lady like this for the purpose of extorting money.

"Bai Jove!" said D'Arcy. "I should like to be within reach of the wotiah! I should vewy much like to show him somethin' in the uppah-cut line! P'way don't be fwightedened, Miss Fawcett—I am heah!"

This assurance did not seem to relieve Miss Fawcett as much as might have been expected.

"Hannah, help me to my room! I feel very faint."

"Yes, dear ma'am."

"We must fly, Tommy, darling!"

"But the detective from Scotland Yard is coming down to-day!" urged Tom Merry. "We can't go till we've seen him!"

"Then we will go immediately we have seen him."

And Miss Fawcett went unsteadily out of the room, leaning on Hannah's arm. Harry Noble, the Cornstalk junior at St. Jim's, looked in the window.

"Hallo! What a 'niff of burning! Setting the house on fire?"

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"No; Miss Fawcett has been fainting."

"Phew! What's the matter?"

"Another letter from that scoundrel."

The Australian came into the room.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now we may have a chance of getting on his track, and that's what we came for."

"Call in the other chaps, then," said Blake.

"Right you are!"

The Cornstalk put his head out of the window.

"Coo-oo-ey! Coo-ey!"

The signal-call rang through the old garden of Laurel Villa, as it had often rung through the wild bush in Harry Noble's native land, and the juniors of St. Jim's answered it at once.

CHAPTER 2.

The Mysterious Letter.

TOM MERRY sat reading the letter, while the chums of St. Jim's gathered in the room. There were nine of them in all—Lowther, Manners, and Tom Merry (the Terrible Three), and Noble and Skimpole of the Shell, and Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

They were all in the room, very curious to know what was on the cards, by the time Tom Merry had looked through the letter.

Tom looked up, and found every eye in the room turned curiously upon him and upon the letter in his hand.

"Well, what's the row?" asked Monty Lowther. "Is this a meeting of the School House Musical Society?"

"Or the cricket committee?" asked Manners.

"P'way be sewious, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus, turning his eyeglass reprovingly upon the juniors. "This is a weally sewious mattah."

"Something to do with a new waistcoat, Gussy?"

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"It is serious, chaps," said Tom Merry quietly. "Miss Fawcett has had another letter from the chap who was trying to blackmail her."

"Oh!"

"This is the letter. You remember she had a letter before, and was frightened and came to St. Jim's—and from what she has told me, it seems that most people thought she was fancying it all, because the writing on the letter faded away afterwards, and it looked like a blank sheet of paper."

"Bai Jove!"

"Dr. Holmes sent it to Scotland Yard, and they reported that there had been writing on the paper, written in a kind of ink that faded after a certain number of hours, and they partly made out what had been on the letter."

"That looks like business," said Lowther seriously. "And this is another letter from the same chap?"

"Yes. Miss Fawcett thinks we have come here simply to protect her, but, as a matter of fact, we're going to track down the scoundrel who is trying to frighten her."

"Yaas, wotah!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "As you fellows know, I have had considewable twainin' as an amateur detective, and I am quite willin' to place my services at the disposal of Miss Pwiscillah."

"Rats!"

"Weally, Digby—"

"Yes, rats!" said Skimpole of the Shell. "I feel that I must repeat Digby's remark, D'Arcy. There is only one fellow at St. Jim's who has ever shown any marked ability as an amateur detective, and it would be false modesty for me to affect to believe that it was any other than myself."

"You uttah ass—"

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"Shut up, both of you!" exclaimed Jack Blake. "We're waiting for Tom Merry to read out the letter."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Order!"

"I wufese to ordah! I mean—"

Tom Merry began to read out the letter, and Arthur Augustus relapsed into silence, with an indignant glare through his eyeglass at Skimpole, the genius of the Shell.

The letter was written upon common notepaper, in a round hand, and a curious kind of pale greenish ink.

It was evidently the invisible ink which faded from view in the course of a few hours, as in the case of the first letter received by Miss Fawcett.

The letter ran as follows, and the juniors of St. Jim's listened with keen attention as Tom Merry read it out:

"Madam,—You have not met my demand, and you have not replied. I write again to give you a final chance. If the £100 is not paid by to-morrow, prepare to meet your doom.

"I must receive £20 to-night, the rest to-morrow. Place the money on the sundial at the end of the garden. I will take it, and know that you are in earnest. Fail me, and



The Australian junior put his head out of the window. Coo-oo-ey! Coo-ey!" The bush-call rang through the old garden of Laurel Villa, and the juniors of St. Jim's answered it at once.

your house shall be burnt down, and every soul in it's all perish.

"Beware!

"(Signed) NEMO."

"Bai Jove!"

"What do you think of that, you fellows?"

"Piffle!" said Jack Blake.

"Rot!"

"Gas!"

"That's it," said Noble. "It's gas—sheer gas. It sounds like a letter written by a character in a New York gore-book. I shouldn't wonder if it's some rascal who got the idea from some American fiction."

Tom Merry nodded.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Of course, the rotter has no intention of carrying out his threats. He couldn't set the house on fire, and he wouldn't if he could."

"Bai Jove, wathah not!"

"It's simply an attempt to extort money by threats—threats which wouldn't have any effect on any but a timid old lady."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"But he's got fellows of a different kidney to deal with

now," said Noble, knitting his brows. "We're going to find him out."

"And make an example of him," said Manners.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Pray hand me the letter, Tom Merry," said Skimpole, holding out a bony hand. "I may be able to find some clue in it which has missed your untrained eye."

Tom Merry grinned and passed over the letter. Skimpole blinked at it seriously through his big spectacles.

"Ah! This is the ink Miss Fawcett told us about," he said. "It will fade from the paper in a few hours."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We have to look for somebody, then, who uses invisible ink," said Skimpole, brilliantly.

Blake patted him on the back gravely.

"Splendid, old chap!" he said. "Go on like that, and see if you can make any more startling and hair-raising deductions."

"Really, Blake—"

"Go ahead! we're waiting!"

Skimpole blinked at the letter again.

"The writing will furnish another clue," he said. "If we can find a person whose writing closely resembles this, and

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who has also a knowledge of the manufacture and use of fading ink, we can guess that he is the man."

"Bravo!"

"Hurray!"

"But how are we to find him?"

"I have not thought out that part yet."

"Bai Jove! I wegard you as an ass, Skimpole. Pway give me the lettah, and I daresay I can discovah a weally usefule clue."

D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and scanned the letter very carefully. The juniors watched him in silence.

"Bai Jove!"

"Hullo! What's the discovery?"

"We shall have to look for a fellow whose w'itin' does not weseemble this," said Arthur Augustus, with a lofty look of scorn at Skimpole.

"Why?"

"Because this w'itin' is disguised."

"Oh!"

"Look here! Some of the t's are cwossed with a heavy stwoke, and some are cwossed with a light stwoke."

"So they are!"

"A chap as a wule cwosses all his t's the same way. This chap, I wathah think, generally uses a heavy stwoke, and was adopting a light one for disguise. Ewvery now and then he dwops into his natural style. See?"

"By Jove, there's something in that," said Blake. "I've always maintained that Gussy had his lucid intervals."

"Weally, Blake—"

"Go on, Gussy."

"The hand looks extwemely youthful," said D'Arcy. "I take that as pwoof that it was w'ritten by a gwown-up person. It is easy to imitate wound hand, and thwows you off the scent if you're twyin' to twack the handw'itin'."

"Good!"

"I daresay I shall discovah a lot more clues shortly," said Arthur Augustus. "We've got to look for a chap who cwosses his t's with a heavy stwoke."

"Good!"

"By the way, how did that letter come?" said Noble. "I remember hearing that the first threatening letter that Miss Fawcett received was put by hand into the letter-box."

"This wasn't," said Tom Merry. "I expect the rotter dared not come up to the house personally this time. No doubt he knows that we are here."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"This has come by post. Here's the envelope."

The juniors looked eagerly at the envelope.

It bore the postmark of Huckleberry Heath, the village on the outskirts of which Laurel Villa stood.

"Collected twelve o'clock to-day," said Tom Merry. "It was posted in the village this morning, then."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That shows pretty clearly that it's a local rascal who's playing this little game," said Lowther.

"Looks like it."

"I'm pretty certain of it," said Tom Merry. "It's no London criminal, anyway. The mention of the sundial in the letter shows that he knows the place well, and the letter being posted here shows that he was in Huckleberry Heath this morning. From the letter it is plain, too, that he's going to be down here to-day and to-morrow. Besides, only a local person would know enough about Miss Fawcett to know that she was timid and easily frightened by a thing like this."

"Vewy twue."

"It's a giddy amateur trying his hand at blackmail," remarked Digby. "It will be a kindness to him to run him down and make an example of him. It may save him from ending his days in penal servitude."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"I'm pretty satisfied about it being somebody belonging to the neighbourhood. A stranger in Huckleberry always attracts attention—it's such a quiet place. If there were one staying about here we should have heard of him already."

"No doubt."

"So we've got to confine our search to the neighbourhood. I'll keep this letter for the detective when he arrives. I expect he will come to the same conclusion that we've come to," said Tom Merry, rising.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Really, Merry, I hardly agree with you," said Skimpole.

"The attempt at blackmail is hardly in keeping with the simplicity of the rustic character."

"Rats!"

"There may be a stranger lurking in the neighbourhood—"

"Of course, it's possible."

"Hiding in the woods, perhaps, whence he will steal in the dark hour of midnight to snatch the gold from the sundial," said Skimpole, impressively.

"Ha, ha!"

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"I can see nothing to cackle at in that remark. I favour the theory of a stranger, and with my splendid abilities as an amateur detective, I think I am likely to be correct."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Probably some desperate criminal from London is hiding from the police, and is filling up the time of enforced seclusion by this attempt to make money."

"By Jove! There might be somethin' in that, you know."

"I am glad to see you agree with me, D'Arcy."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus, who rather liked the idea of running to earth a desperate criminal from London. "I shouldn't wondah, weally! It's quite poss., you know, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's poss., but not prob.," he replied.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I suppose we shan't see Miss Fawcett again for some time?" said Tom. "She's too upset. Suppose we have a walk round the village, and I'll show you the place. You can see nearly all the inhabitants in one short walk, too."

"Good egg!"

Skimpole dug D'Arcy in the ribs with a bony finger.

"Will you come with me, D'Arcy?"

"What for, deah boy?"

"You are the only one who has sufficient intelligence to recognise the truth of my theory. I think I can get on the track, and I should like your assistance."

"Oh, vewy well!" said D'Arcy, pleased at Skimmey's way of putting it. "I will come with you with pleasuah, deah boy!"

"Hullo!" exclaimed Blake, as the two amateur detectives went towards the French windows. "Aren't you coming to the village?"

Skimpole blinked at him.

"Haven't time now, Blake. I'm on the track."

"Ass!"

"I'm goin' on the twack with Skimmey, Blake."

"Duffer!"

"I wufuse to be called a duffah. I—"

"Bosh!"

And Blake took his cap and led the way out by the front of the house, while D'Arcy and Skimpole disappeared into the garden.

CHAPTER 3.

The Sportsman.

TOM MERRY & Co. were very well known in the village of Huckleberry Heath.

In that quiet spot Tom had spent his earliest years, after being brought home from India at a very tender age by Miss Fawcett, who had taken care of him ever since.

Since he had been at St. Jim's, Tom had spent a good many of his holidays at Laurel Villa, and he usually brought some of his school chums with him.

Consequently, the St. Jim's fellows were well known in the village.

They were generally liked, too. They might be a little reckless, and sometimes a little mischievous. But there was always compensation for any little damage they might do; and, as a rule, the villagers nodded cheerily enough to the merry juniors when they came along.

But there were exceptions.

The restless spirit of modern times had crept into even the quiet village of Huckleberry Heath. The building of the railway-station had, in the opinion of the oldest inhabitants, marked the beginning of the fall from grace.

Be that how it might, certain it was that there were a number of young fellows in Huckleberry Heath who disdained the quiet ways of their forefathers, and prided themselves upon knowing the world.

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At some distance from the heath there was a small race-course, and the railway had placed this within touch of the enterprising youth of the village.

The sportsmen of the village spent a great deal of time there, and picked up reckless ways of talking about horse-flesh, using strange oaths, and wearing their hats rakishly on the sides of their heads; things that gravely scandalised the older inhabitants of the village.

The juniors of St. Jim's had no particular respect for fellows who frequented race meetings, and they did not like the sportsmen of Huckleberry Heath; but they were willing to have nothing to do with them.

When disagreement arose, it arose on the other side; but the juniors, of course, were not slow to take up the gauntlet. If a little liveliness could be found in the village, why not find it?

The leader of the "sports," as they called themselves, was a young man named Snope. Mr. Snope was eighteen years old, and he condescended to keep accounts for a tradesman in Huckleberry Heath. This, however, was only because "il faut vivre"; Mr. Snope found it necessary to live. He had a soul far above ledgers. When he was not hanging round a racecourse, in his leisure hours, or when he wasn't "keeping it up with the boys," he spent his time reading cheap novels and lurid American detective stories. Mr. Snope prided himself upon knowing the world and its ways; especially its wicked ways. Its good ways hadn't so much interest for him.

He had spent three days in London, once, while attending to some business for his employer. That was some time ago; and since then, the incident had assumed remarkable proportions in the imagination of Mr. Snope.

The three days expanded into weeks—months, and he forgot that he had spent the days in warehouses, and the nights in a cheap boarding-house in Bloomsbury. To judge by his talk on the subject, he had seen all that there was to be seen in the great city, had hobnobbed with all kinds of swells in all kinds of places in the West End, and had had what he described as a "giddy time."

He usually alluded to that time as "when I was up in town, you know." And the adventures of Mr. Snope up in town were famous among the youth of Huckleberry Heath, and great was the envy they excited.

Mr. Snope naturally took the lead among the local sportsmen.

No one could talk so cock-surely about the form of a horse; no one could make such breaks on the extremely rocky billiard table at the Bird in Hand. No one could get so near London fashions in clothes, or wear his hat at quite such a rakish angle.

For the rest, Mr. Snope was weedy in form, and pasty in face; but he did not regard it as necessary for a sport to be athletic.

Between an individual like Mr. Snope, and a hearty, healthy lad like Tom Merry, there was not likely to be much in common.

In a small place like Huckleberry Heath, people were bound to come into contact, and Tom Merry had come across Mr. Snope several times.

As a matter of fact, their first meeting was brought about by a mistake on Mr. Snope's part in the accounts, his employer being a tradesman who had the honour of supplying Laurel Villa.

Miss Fawcett was very careful with her accounts, and finding herself overcharged on one occasion to the tune of one pound four shillings and ninepence, she had requested Tom to call in at the shop with the bills and explain to Mr. Sands, the grocer.

This led to Snope being carpeted, and somehow he seemed to attribute the trouble to Tom Merry, who certainly was quite blameless in the matter.

From that moment he disliked Tom Merry; and the sportsmen of Huckleberry Heath followed his lead in that matter, as in all others.

That had happened some time ago; and on the occasion of his present visit to the village, Tom had almost forgotten the existence of Mr. Snope.

That existence was brought back to his memory now. The juniors left Laurel Villa, and strolled down the lane towards the village.

As a beginning to their enterprise, it was best to see the lay of the land, as Harry Noble put it, and as the evening was coming on—a very pleasant autumn evening—it was a good opportunity for a stroll round.

The juniors strolled down the lane in the sunset, and as they neared the village, Monty Lowther gave Tom Merry a tap.

Tom looked at him.

"Hallo!"

"Who's that chap?" asked Lowther, with a nod of his head towards a youth sitting on a stile by the side of the

lane, who was looking towards Tom Merry with a decidedly unamiable expression of countenance.

Tom Merry laughed.

"That's Snope!"

"Snope!"

"Yes; Algernon Snope. I hear that he was christened William, and adopted Algernon as a more classy name."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The sports call him Algy, for short."

Lowther stared.

"The sports!"

Tom laughed again.

"Yes; the smart set of Huckleberry Heath, you know. I suppose you find a smart set everywhere—silly asses who think it awfully clever to play the giddy ox."

"Well, we've got 'em at St. Jim's."

"What-ho!" said Blake. "You've got 'em here, too, have you?"

"He's all right, you know," said Tom Merry, "only rather an ass. He doesn't like me; that shows rather bad taste, otherwise I dare say he'll pass."

"I'm rather glad to see Snope," went on Tom, with a grin. "Mr. Dodds—you know Dodds, the curate here—"

"Yes, rather! I remember his playing cricket at St. Jim's," grinned Blake.

"Well, Dodds is rather concerned about these chaps—the sports, you know. They play billiards and drink on Sunday instead of going to church, and so forth. Of course, Doddy doesn't want to make people come and listen to him if they don't want to. But even if a chap cuts church, he might treat Sunday decently; and, anyway, billiards and beer aren't much good to a kid like that."

"Right you are!"

"Then they go in for racing, betting, and so on. Blessed if I know where Snopey can find the tin; Sands doesn't heap money on him in the way of salary, I know that. But it's no business of mine, of course. I feel rather sorry for the ass; it's not pleasant to see any chap going to the dogs. Dodds suggested that we should challenge Snope & Co. to a footer match."

"Oh, that's the match you were talking about, is it?"

"That's it."

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"He doesn't look as if he played footer."

"Well, they play a kind of footer," said Tom, laughing. "Mr. Dodds has persuaded them all to join the football club, and he drives away at it, you know, and keeps them up to the game somehow. He stuck them at cricket during the summer, and I imagine it was all the better for them."

"Yes, rather!"

"A football match will liven us up a bit while we're here, and Dodds likes the idea, so I'm going to challenge Snope & Co. What?"

"Good egg!"

"Then I'll speak to him now. You chaps trot on."

The chaps trotted on, and Tom Merry stopped as he came abreast of the fellow on the stile, and greeted him cheerfully.

CHAPTER 4.

Rough on Algy.

M R. SNOPE looked at Tom Merry. Then he opened his cigarette-case, selected a smoke, and lighted it. This was done with the swagger air of a youth fully satisfied that he was a full-fledged man of the world. Tom Merry watched him with a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"Good-evening!" he said cheerily.

"Good-evenin'," said Mr. Snope, who was always very, very careful to drop his final "g's."

Tom Merry grinned.

"Nice evening," he said.

"Very nice evenin', dear boy," said Mr. Snope.

Tom chuckled.

"I've been wanting to see you," he remarked.

"Gaze on me, and take your fill," replied Mr. Snope humorously.

"You're playing with the Huckleberry Ramblers, I think?"

"I'm their captain," said Mr. Snope.

"Good!"

Mr. Snope puffed at his cigarette. It was a cheap cigarette; Algy's means did not run to expensive ones. The smell of the cheap tobacco was decidedly disagreeable to Tom Merry, who coughed and retreated a pace.

Mr. Snope chuckled.

"You don't smoke?" he asked.

"No," said Tom Merry drily.

"It's the salt of life!" said Algy. "I don't know what I should do without a fag, I don't really, don't you know."

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"Great comfort, I suppose?" grinned Tom Merry, wondering how many of those fags Mr. Snope bought for a penny.

"You're right, my boy, it is."

"Don't you find it interferes with you at footer?"

"Not a bit."

"You get it in the wind, don't you?"

"Oh, my mind's pretty good."

"Then you're lucky. I hear the Ramblers are in good form just now?"

"Oh, yes; fair."

"All your dates full up?"

"Most of 'em."

"Look here, could you get up a match with us while we're here?" said Tom Merry. "There are nine of us staying at Laurel Villa, and we'd like a footer match. We could play nine a side, or we'd take on a couple of village chaps. We should awfully like to play the Huckleberry Ramblers."

Mr. Snope laughed derisively.

"My dear kid—"

"Well?"

"You wouldn't have an earthly!" said Mr. Snope patronisingly. "What's your age—rising fifteen, I suppose?"

"Yes," said Tom Merry, with a smile.

"Well, our average age is seventeen—eighteen."

"Yes, I know you're an older team."

"And we play footer," said Mr. Snope. "No schoolboy game for us, you know. We play it."

The hero of St. Jim's Shell grinned.

He had some idea how the Ramblers "played" the game, and he thought there would be a surprise in store for them when they met a St. Jim's team, even if the average age was two or three years less.

"You see, it would be a walk-over," said Algy Snope. "You would look fools, and we should look fools, too, for playing a parcel of kids."

"But—"

"So I'm afraid it can't be done."

"Look here, you ass—"

"Hallo!" said Algy.

"We could wipe you off the face of the earth as easily as winking," said Tom Merry warmly.

Algy chuckled.

"Go hon!"

"We may be a schoolboy team, but we'll undertake to knock you sky-high, and put in two goals to your one all the time."

"Ha, ha!"

"You don't think so?"

"Not half!"

"Well, meet us and sec."

Algy shook his head.

"Can't be done. I couldn't lower the dignity of the Ramblers by fixing up a match with a parcel of kids."

"You ass—"

"Oh, draw it mild!" said Algy.

"Well, you talk like an ass, you know."

"If you want a little contest, I shouldn't mind putting up my fins for a few minutes," grinned Algy.

"Your what?"

"Fins."

"Oh! You mean you could box?"

"Well, I rather think I could knock you off the earth with one hand, dear boy."

Tom Merry stepped back from the stile.

"Try it, then."

"Oh, I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not likely to hurt me. I'm fifteen and you're eighteen, but I could make rings round you with my eyes shut."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You ass—with your cheap fags, and your staying up late at night over a billiard-table!" said Tom scornfully. "Why, there are kids in the Third Form at St. Jim's who could give you a walloping."

"I shall really have to take you down a peg or two, don't you know."

"Come on, then. I'm waiting to be taken down."

Algy laughed.

"Look here, my boy, I won't hurt you. I've been picking up tips lately from the Bloomsbury Buster, who's staying over at Lantham. I know him."

Algy made this announcement with great pride.

"Rubbish!" said Tom Merry.

"Eh?"

"Get off that stile."

"Look here—"

"I'll yank you if you don't."

Algy's eyes glittered, and he threw away the stump of his cigarette and shipped off the stile.

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"Well, if you will have it!" he remarked.

Tom Merry pushed back his cuffs.

"Come on, you ass!"

"I'll give you a jolly good licking while I'm about it," said Mr. Snope, with a slightly venomous smile. "You swagger about the village as if the place belonged to you—"

"I don't!"

"You think you're better than other fellows because you go to an expensive school," said Mr. Snope savagely.

Tom Merry flushed.

"I don't! Only a silly ass would think such a thing!"

"You want taking down a peg or two."

"Now you're coming to business. If you can take me down, don't count the pegs. I'm willing for you to do all you can."

"Look out, then!"

And Mr. Snope came on.

Algy's idea of boxing seemed to have been learned by watching the motions of a windmill. He came on, waving his thin arms about his head, and letting out lashing fists blindly at Tom Merry.

Tom had not expected much prowess of the chief of the Huckleberry sports, but he had hardly looked for anything quite as helpless as this.

He knocked aside Algy's waving arms with his left, and gave the youth a gentle tap on the chest with his right.

It was hardly forceful enough to be called a blow, but it made Mr. Snope sit down puffing and gasping in the dust.

"Ow!"

Tom Merry grinned.

"Come on!"

"Ow! That's enough!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I—I'm out of form to-day."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I've been overdoing it a bit, keeping it up with the boys, I suppose," gasped Mr. Snope, staggering to his feet, and leaning on the stile. "I'll give you a licking another time, Tom Merry."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Tom Merry, still laughing, ran along the lane to rejoin his friends.

CHAPTER 5.

The Man in Black.

"H A, HA, HA!"
"Jolly good!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

The chums of St. Jim's had witnessed the brief encounter from the distance, and they were laughing heartily as Tom Merry came up.

The hero of the Shell was laughing, too.

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1-



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"It was funny, wasn't it?" he remarked. "The ass thinks he's a boxer as well as a footballer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are they going to play us at football?" asked Blake.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"What! No?"

"No; it's beneath their dignity, as an older team. So says Snope."

"Why, the frabjous ass!"

"We could lick them with half a side!"

"We could wipe them off the earth!"

"The cheeky ass."

"Oh, we'll make them play, somehow," said Tom Merry. "They're not going to keep us out of the match, you bet. But let's get on."

"Hallo!"

"What's the row?"

"A stranger!" exclaimed Blake, as tragically as if a stranger in the lane was as dangerous as a lion or a tiger.

The juniors all glanced at the stranger.

He was a little man, quietly dressed in black, with a silk hat that showed signs of wear, and a somewhat benevolent expression upon his face.

He was coming down the lane towards them from the village, and a pair of keen grey eyes flashed at the boys as he approached.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Noble.

"See what?"

"The way he looked under his eyebrows. He's watching us, and thinks we can't see it. I'll bet he's not as innocent as he looks."

Tom Merry looked serious.

Strangers were uncommon enough at Huckleberry Heath, and he had argued that the blackmailer must be a local resident because there was no stranger known to be in the neighbourhood just then.

Yet here was a stranger!

A stranger of a particularly quiet and harmless appearance, and yet with a pair of keen eyes, and a quick, alert way of using them.

Was it possible—

"We've got him!" murmured Herries.

"Eh!"

"Skimmy's right! It's a criminal from London."

"But—"

"And this is the man."

"But—"

"It's quite possible, anyway," said Blake, with suppressed excitement. "I think we ought to keep him in sight, anyway."

"Yes, rather!"

Tom Merry hesitated.

"Well, I suppose there would be no harm in that," he remarked.

"Of course not."

"It's the thing to be done, my dear fellow."

"But seven of us can't shadow him, though. You chaps had better get on, and—"

"Stuff!" said Lowther decidedly. "I rather think I'm the fellow to keep on his track without being discovered."

"Oh, come, Monty—"

"Look the other way while he passes us, or he's bound to smell a rat."

"Good wheeze!"

And the group of juniors intently studied the darkening landscape while the little man passed them in the lane.

The gentleman in black walked on without once glancing back. The juniors of St. Jim's turned their heads and looked after him.

"He doesn't seem to be afraid of being watched," Tom Merry remarked.

"Ah, that's his cunning, of course."

"He may be going to look back at the corner."

"Watch him and see."

"Right!"

They watched the receding figure keenly. The gentleman in black turned the corner of the lane, and as he did so, he cast one quick glance back.

If the juniors had not been watching for it, they would never have seen it. The next moment the little figure disappeared.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at one another with bated breath. "What do you think of that?" breathed Noble.

"My hat!"

"Looks like business, Kangaroo."

"I shouldn't wonder if—"

"It's the giddy blackmailer!"

"And he knows we're Miss Fawcett's guests, and that we're on the track," said Digby excitedly.

"Let's shadow him."

"Good!"

"Pity I didn't think of bringing my bulldog from the

school," said Herries regretfully. "Towser would have tracked him down like—like anything."

"Oh, blow Towser!"

"Look here, Blake—"

"Let's shadow this chap, and see whether he goes towards Laurel Villa," whispered Manners. "If he does, it will be pretty clear."

"Good!"

"Cut across the field here, and follow him on the inside of the hedge," said Tom Merry sagely. "He can't possibly spot us then."

"Good egg!"

The evening stroll through the village was abandoned at once. The juniors clambered through a hedge into the field, and cut across it to the lower lane which the gentleman in black was now traversing.

Over the top of the hedge they caught sight of the top of a silk hat, bobbing as the little gentleman strode along the lane.

On the inside of the hedge, it was easy for them to keep it in sight, without revealing their presence to the man in the road.

On the inside was a deep ditch, flowing with about three feet of water, and the chums of St. Jim's were careful to give it a wide berth as they scouted along.

Suddenly the silk hat stopped.

"Look out!" whispered Lowther. "He's heard something!"

The juniors halted.

Perhaps the little man in black had very keen ears, and he had caught some incautious footfall from the inside of the hedge.

The movement of the hat showed that he was looking towards them.

There was the sound of a rustle. It was made by a hand from the road pulling the twigs aside, evidently for the purpose of looking through into the field.

"Bunk!" muttered Noble.

"What-ho!"

The juniors swung off—but the footing on the edge of the ditch was uncertain. Blake bumped into Manners, and Manners slipped!

There was a yell.

"Oh!"

Splash!

And Manners disappeared into the water.

CHAPTER 6.

Tracked Down.

FROM the other side of the hedge came a quiet chuckle, but the juniors did not notice it. They had plenty to think about just then, without paying any attention to the gentleman in black whom they had been shadowing.

The silk hat disappeared beyond the hedge; the man in black was gone. But all the attention of Tom Merry & Co. was centred upon Manners.

The unfortunate junior had plumped headlong into the water, and completely disappeared beneath the surface.

He came up, gasping and spluttering, choked and blinded with mud and water; but the current happened to be strong, owing to a recent fall of rain, and he was whisked off his feet by it.

Over he went, with a gasp and a splash.

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther did not hesitate. They plunged knee-deep into the ditch, and seized the struggling junior, and dragged him to the side.

Kangaroo and the rest lent a hand, and Manners was dragged from the water, and laid gasping in the grass.

"Ow! Oh! Oooch!" gasped Manners.

"My only hat!" said Jack Blake. "Of all the clumsy asses—"

"Oh, you ass! You shoved me."

"You shoved me, you mean."

"If you hadn't bumped against me, I shouldn't have fallen into the water," spluttered Manners.

Blake snorted.

"Well, you bumped against me, and I didn't fall into the water," he retorted. "Blessed if I can understand a chap being so clumsy."

"You bumped—"

"You bumped—"

"Oh, cheese it!" exclaimed Kangaroo. "It can't be helped now, anyway. Nice state you're in, I must say."

"Ow! I'm soaked to the skin."

"What about us?" grunted Lowther. "Look at my trousers!"

"And mine!" growled Tom Merry.

"Oh, blow your old trousers!"

"They're not old trousers," said Lowther rather excitedly.

"If you want to know, these are my Sunday bags I've taken into use specially for this visit."

"I don't want to know—"

"Look here, Manners—"
 "Peace, my children—peace," said Tom Merry. "While you're slanging one another, the chap we're shadowing is getting off."

"Phew! I forgot him," said Digby.

"He must have heard this row!"

"Yes, I should say so, unless he's as deaf as a stone."

"Let's have a look for him, anyway."

Kangaroo took a leap over the ditch, and plunged through the hedge into the lane. The rest of the party followed him.

They looked up and down and round about in the lane. But there was no sign of the gentleman in black. He had had more than five minutes to make himself scarce in, and he had undoubtedly done it.

The man in black was gone.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom Merry.

The amateur shadowers looked at one another in dismay.

"Where has he gone?"

"He must have cut off pretty quick."

"Rubbish!" said Blake. "He had plenty of time to crawl away on his hands and knees, if he wanted to, while you Shell-fish were wasting time."

"Look here, Blake—"

"Scat! Manners has mucked it all up."

"You bumped into me, you ass!"

"Oh, rats!"

"Better get back to Laurel Villa," said Tom Merry. "We shall have to change our things pretty quick, or we shall catch a deuce of a cold."

"Yes, rather," said Manners, whose teeth were beginning to chatter. "I'm going to run."

"Get a move on, then."

Manners started at a trot. The juniors walked quickly to keep level.

Tom Merry wrinkled his brows seriously.

"We've lost sight of that chap," he observed. "But at the time we lost him, he was certainly going in the direction of Laurel Villa."

Kangaroo nodded.

"That's so."

"And the fact that he spotted us shadowing him shows that—"

"That we were mugs!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"No, I didn't mean that! It shows that he was on his guard."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Why was he on his guard?" demanded Tom Merry, with the air of one propounding an extremely difficult problem.

"Is that a conundrum?" asked Blake.

"No, ass! I mean, why was he on his guard? No reason why he should be, unless he had a guilty secret of some kind."

"Good!"

"Under the circumstances, it's pretty clear to me that that chap will bear watching," said Tom Merry decidedly.

"What-ho!"

"If he's still making for Laurel Villa, we shall sight him again, when we get there," went on the hero of the Shell.

"Good!"

"So let's get on quickly. Hallo! There's Algy again."

Algy was coming towards them, with another cigarette in his mouth, at which he was puffing away with an air of great enjoyment.

There was a great deal of dust upon his jacket, but otherwise he showed no signs of the encounter he had had with Tom Merry.

"Hallo, Algy!" said Lowther. "What's the odds on Blue Smoke for the Diddlem Stakes?"

Algy did not deign to reply to that frivolous question.

He blew out a little cloud of cigarette-smoke, and walked on, apparently unconscious of the presence of the St. Jim's juniors.

Monty Lowther chuckled.

"I should like to see more of that chap," he remarked.

"I think I could find a lot of harmless and necessary amusement in pulling his respected leg."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Manners was well ahead, leaving a trail of wet in the dust of the lane behind him. As they passed the last curve in the lane before arriving at Laurel Villa, Manners was seen to stop suddenly, turn round, and wave his hand.

The juniors stared at him blankly.

"What on earth's the matter with him?" exclaimed Digby.

"He means us to hurry up!"

"Put it on, then."

They broke into a run. Manners continued to wave his hand excitedly, until they were within earshot.

"Buck up!" he called out.

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"What's the row?"

"I've seen him."

"Whom?"

"Him, ass! The chap we were shadowing."

"Oh!"

"When I waved to you I had just caught sight of him again!" exclaimed Manners triumphantly.

"Good egg! Where was he?"

"Just going into the gate of Laurel Villa."

"Phew! Come on, you chaps—it's the rotter, without a doubt!"

And the whole party broke into a rapid run.

They felt that so many indications, all pointing to the same conclusion, could not deceive them. This was "Nemo," the writer of the anonymous letters, without a doubt. They dashed at top-speed towards the garden gate of Laurel Villa.

"Hallo!" gasped Tom Merry, as they ran. "What's that?"

From beyond the trellis, over the garden wall, came a sound of disturbance—of struggling and gasping!

"Buck up!" shouted Tom Merry.

And he tore towards the gate.

CHAPTER 7.

Skimpole at His Best.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY and Skimpole had not been idle in the meantime. The two amateur detectives of St. Jim's were convinced that they were destined to solve the mystery and bring the blackmailer to justice. They only differed on one point, and that was that each thought he himself was destined to have the principal hand in the success.

Skimpole led the way through the great, old-fashioned garden, which lay wide all round the old house, with a very mysterious look upon his face.

D'Arcy followed him.

Skimpole followed the garden paths without a word, and did not speak till the shrubberies hid them from view of the windows. Then he turned cautiously to D'Arcy.

D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and regarded the genius of the Shell with considerable doubt.

"What's all this wot about, Skimmay, deah boy?" he asked.

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"What's the twouble, anyway?"

"You remember what the blackmailer said in the letter?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Twenty pounds is to be placed on the sundial in the garden, and he is to fetch it away to-night."

"Yaas."

"I am going to examine the vicinity of the sundial. You know where it is—on a grassy lawn at the end of the garden: The lawn will show any tracks—"

"But—"

"As the blackmailer is a stranger to the vicinity—"

"How do you know he is?"

Skimpole smiled superior.

"He is according to my theory, at all events. Taking it for granted that he is a stranger in the vicinity—"

"But—"

"Taking that for granted, I say, how does he know anything about the sundial? It follows that he must have been spying about the place."

"Yaas, but—"

"If he has been near the sundial, he will have left tracks on the lawn."

"Bai Jove!"

"I have a wonderful gift for following tracks. You can help me. Come on."

"Yaas, but—"

"This is no time for talk. Come on."

D'Arcy followed the genius of the Shell in silence. They reached the little green lawn where the sundial stood, almost out of sight of the house.

Skimpole blinked at the short-cropped grass through his spectacles.

"This is where we shall find the tracks, D'Arcy."

"Bai Jove!"

"Help me to look for them."

"Vewy well."

And the two juniors went down on their hands and knees, carefully examining the soil for traces of a footprint.

They were too deeply occupied to observe a handsome, athletic young man in a clerical collar, who came in at the open gate at the end of the garden, and came up the path that passed near the sundial.

It was the Rev. Mr. Dodds, the curate of Huckleberry Heath—an old friend of Tom Merry and the juniors of St. Jim's.

The curate stopped in amazement as he saw the boys on

their hands and knees peering into the grass. He stepped from the path upon the lawn, and called to them.

"Have you lost anything, my lads?"

Arthur Augustus jumped up, and Skimpole, without rising, blinked round at the curate of Huckleberry Heath.

He waved his hand frantically to Mr. Dodds.

"Keep off—keep off!"

The curate looked astounded.

"My dear lad—"

"Keep off!"

"But Skimpole—"

"Keep off—keep off!" shrieked Skimpole.

"You uttah ass, Skimmay!" said D'Arcy, in amazement.

"Mr. Dodds is not goin' to hurt you! Whatevah do you mean, you duffah?"

"Keep off!" shouted Skimpole. "I mean, keep off the grass!"

"Keep off the grass?"

"Yes. You'll destroy the tracks if you tread on them!"

"The tracks?" said Mr. Dodds dazedly.

"Oh, I compwehend! Vewy twue! If you walk on the gwass, sir, you may twead on the twacks!"

"What tracks?"

"We are lookin' for twacks, sir."

"But—"

"Skimmay thinks he's on the twack of the blackmailah, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "We're lookin' for the wascal's twacks."

Mr. Dodds stared at him, and then burst into a laugh.

"Really! Very good! Ha, ha, ha!"

"I fail to see the cause of your laughtah, sir," said D'Arcy, looking perplexed. "We have come down heah on purpose to discovah the blackmailah, sir."

"And you are on his track?" asked Mr. Dodds, smiling.

"Well, sir—"

"Eureka!"

It was a sudden exclamation from Skimpole. He was blinking excitedly at a deep indentation in the soft soil close by the sundial.

D'Arcy ran to his side at once, and turned his eyeglass upon the spot.

"What is it, Skimmay?"

"Look!"

"Bai Jove!"

"It's a track—just as I expected!"

"Gweat Scott!"

"So you've found the track?" said the curate, smiling.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"I congratulate you!"

"Come and look at it, sir."

"With pleasure."

"I expected to find it here," said Skimpole. "My deductions led me irresistibly to the conclusion that I should find a track here. I have found it."

"Jollay good, deah boy!"

Mr. Dodds came up, and he looked at the track in the lawn with a great deal of interest. It was certainly a foot-track of some sort, there could be no doubt on that point. Yet the curate of Huckleberry Heath seemed to regard the discovery in a humorous light.

"It's a twack, sir."

"Yes, it certainly seems to be a track, D'Arcy."

"We will follow it," said Skimpole, bending his glance upon the earth again. "If you care to study the finished methods of a detective at close quarters, Mr. Dodds, you may accompany me."

Mr. Dodds smiled.

"I shall be greatly honoured," he said.

"Here it is again—it leads towards the gate. You see," explained Skimpole, "this little patch of lawn is never used really, being divided from the large lawn by the shrubberies. It is really a very secluded spot. The last rain has made the soil soft and impressionable. I have no doubt that we shall find the tracks leading directly towards the gate. That will further bear out my theories."

"Very good."

"Yaas, wathah! Go it, deah boy!"

Skimpole followed the tracks across the lawn and through a belt of shrubbery, and out into the narrow, grassy lane that ran behind the gardens of Laurel Villa.

D'Arcy was getting highly excited by this time.

"Keep it up, deah boy!" he exclaimed. "You will be able to twack the wascal wight to his hidin'-place at this wate!"

Skimpole nodded serenely.

"I have not the least doubt of being able to do so," he replied. "I expect that the villain is lurking in the fields or woods close to us. If we come upon him, Mr. Dodds, I suppose I can depend upon you for help in seizing him?"

"Certainly."

"Thank you. Come on."

Skimpole blinked at the ground. In a soft patch by the side of the lane he found the deep indentation once more.

The trackers followed it eagerly. It led them directly to a gap in a hedge, and there, in the mud, they found it again. More tracks led across a field to a small wooden shed.

Skimpole's eyes blazed behind his spectacles.

"What do you think now, D'Arcy?"

"Amazin', deah boy!"

"The blackmailing villain is hiding in that shed."

"It's a dead cert, deah boy."

"You will help us, Mr. Dodds?"

"Certainly, if necessary."

They crossed the field to the open door of the shed. Sounds of movement could be heard within.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus, pushing back his cuffs. "I wish I had known there was to be a swap, and I would have put some oldah clothes on! Howevah, the gweat thing is to capchah the blackmailah!"

"Ready?" whispered Skimpole.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Are you ready, Mr. Dodds?"

"Quite!"

"We must rush in, and take him by surprise, and seize him. He may be armed. Follow me!" exclaimed Skimpole valiantly.

The two trackers rushed gallantly into the shed, Mr. Dodds following at a more leisurely pace. A donkey that was stretched lazily on a heap of straw turned its head and looked at them.

There was no one else in the shed!

The donkey looked at the trackers, and the trackers looked at the donkey. D'Arcy turned crimson, and Skimpole's jaw dropped. There was a dreadful pause.

The donkey was the first to break the silence.

"Hee—haw!"

CHAPTER 8.

Better Luck.

"**H**EE-HAW!"

"Hee-hee-haw!"
Skimpole blinked at the donkey. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned his eyeglass upon Skimpole with a crushing look.

Mr. Dodds stood in the doorway of the shed—smiling.

"Dear me!" gasped Skimpole.

"You uttah ass!"

"I—I am very surprised!"

"You fwabjous duffah!"

"The villain may be concealed among the straw," said Skimpole, feebly. "It—it—it is impossible that—that the tracks were made by the donkey!"

"Bai Jove!"

"What could a donkey be doing in Miss Fawcett's garden?" argued Skimpole.

"He might be sprawlin' down by the sundial, lookin' for twacks," said D'Arcy. "I saw an ass doin' that."

"Really, D'Arcy—"

"You feahful chump!"

"But—"

"I had an idea," said Dodds, with a lurking smile, "I had an idea that the track was made by a hoof more heavy and sharp than the foot of a human being. Of course, I did not feel competent to give advice to such a competent tracker."

"Of course not, sir," agreed Skimpole.

D'Arcy gave him a look.

"You fwabjous duffah!"

"Upon second thoughts, the tracks were probably made by this animal," said Skimpole, after looking through the shed and finding that the donkey was the only occupant. "He must have strayed into Miss Fawcett's garden."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Of course, the most experienced detective could not guess that a donkey would stray into the garden and leave his tracks there."

"You couldn't, anyway."

"I trust, D'Arcy, that you do not intend to disparage my abilities as a detective."

"I wegard you as an uttah ass."

"Really—"

D'Arcy sniffed, and left the shed. Mr. Dodds was already walking back to the garden of Laurel Villa. Skimpole followed slowly.

"I was just going in to call upon Miss Fawcett," the curate remarked. "She is at home, D'Arcy?"

"Yaas, sir; but she is suffewin' fwom a shock."

"Indeed! How is that?"

"Anotah thweatenin' lettah fwom that wascal, s'r."

Mr. Dodds' brows darkened.

"Ah! Indeed!"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

The curate nodded and went on towards the house. Like other advisers of Miss Fawcett, he had at first believed that the old lady's fright was due to a strange fancy on her part; but the report from Scotland Yard had convinced him of the reality of the threatening letter.

Skimpole tapped D'Arcy on the shoulder, and detained him.

"It is no use being discouraged by a slight want of success at the start, D'Arcy," he remarked.

"Wats!"

"We must stick to the trail."

"More wats!"

"The other fellows can do nothing. Their undeveloped intelligence is incapable of grappling with a problem like this."

"Yaas, that is twue enough. What is wequired at a moment like this is a fellow of tact and judgment," agreed Arthur Augustus.

"We will stick to the trail," said Skimpole, firmly. "I adhere to my theory that the blackmailing is done by a stranger—a desperate criminal from London—lurking in the neighbourhood. What we have to do is to scout round the neighbourhood carefully, and spot any stranger who is staying here."

"But Tom Merry says that there is no stwangah stayin' about here."

"His methods of observation are very crude."

"Yaas, pewwaps."

"We will see for ourselves. Let us go and scout."

"Well, I suppose we may as well, as there is nothin' to do till the othah fellows come back."

"That is hardly an enthusiastic way of looking at it, D'Arcy."

"Oh, wats!"

The two juniors proceeded to scout. Although there was no enemy in sight, and very little chance of encountering one, Skimpole observed every caution. He dodged and doubled among the shrubbery as he made his way round the house, while the swell of St. Jim's marched after him with head erect.

"Aha!"

Skimpole halted suddenly as he uttered that exclamation.

"What's the mattah, deah boy?" asked his companion.

"Look!"

"Where?"

"In the road."

Skimpole pointed with a bony forefinger.

Arthur Augustus gave a start. From the point they had reached they could see through the trees in the garden to the road. In the road stood a little man in black, in a worn silk hat, gazing towards Laurel Villa intently.

"Is that a stranger?" murmured Skimpole.

D'Arcy nodded eagerly.

"Yaas, wathah! I've been wound Hucklebowwy Heath a lot of times, but I've nevah seen him before."

"Then he is in all probability a stranger here. I was bound to succeed at the second attempt."

"But—"

"He seems to be greatly interested in this place."

"Vewy twue."

"If he approaches it, that will be proof enough. If he enters the garden, we will seize him and make him a prisoner. Doubtless his pockets will be found full of combustibles for setting the house on fire, and that alone will be sufficient to convict him. We—"

"Look out! He's coming!"

The little man in black was walking straight up to the gate.

In a moment the two amateur detectives had taken cover in the shrubbery, beside the path that led up from the gate to the house.

Was the stranger coming in?

If so, what clearer proof of his guilt could possibly be required—at least, by two enthusiastic amateur detectives of fifteen?

There was a click.

"The gate!" breathed Skimpole. "He is coming in!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Quiet! Don't make a row, or—"

"Who's makin' a row?"

"I say—"

"Shut up, deah boy!"

There was a crunching of feet on the path.

The figure in black loomed up in the growing dusk, and the two amateur detectives sprang upon it valiantly.

There was a gasp of surprise, and the stranger went heavily to the ground, with Skimpole and Arthur Augustus sprawling over him.

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NEXT TUESDAY:

"THE D'ARCY CUP"

CHAPTER 9.

A Surprising Prisoner.

"GOT him!"
 "Bai Jove!"
 "Help!"
 "Hold him tight!"
 "Help! Thieves!"
 "Bai Jove!"
 "Help!"

Such were the cries and exclamations that burst upon Tom Merry & Co. as they dashed through the garden gate of Laurel Villa.

Tom Merry ran up the path, and almost ran into three struggling forms in the dusk.

"What's the matter?"

"Help!"

"Is that you, Tom Mewwy? We've got him!"

"Got whom?"

"The blackmailah!"

"My hat!"

"Lend us a hand, deah boy!"

"Why, it's our man!" shouted Lowther, peering at the gentleman in black in the dusk. "I thought so! Gussy's collared our man!"

"Wats! He's my man!" said D'Arcy, getting a firm seat on the chest of the man in black, and pinning him down by sheer weight. "Bai Jove! How he wiggles! I wish Fatty Wynn were here to sit on him!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pray give assistance," gasped Skimpole, who was groping for his glasses, which had been wiped off in the struggle. "The villain may be armed—"

"Help!"

"He's our prisoner," declared Kangaroo. "We've been shadowing him—"

"Yes, rather."

"He belongs to us."

"Wats! We capchahed him."

"Yes, but—"

"Help! Help!"

"Hold on," exclaimed Tom Merry, struck by a sudden doubt. "It's not usual for a criminal to yell for help when he's arrested, I believe. He can't expect the rest of the criminal classes to be within hail."

"Ha, ha!"

"Perhaps there's been a mistake."

"Impossible," said Skimpole, picking up his glasses and adjusting them on his nose, "with my methods, a mistake is impossible."

"I wegard a mistake as imposs, Tom Merry."

"Help!"

"Well, let's question the chap before we execute him, anyway," grinned Kangaroo, who had his doubts as well.

"What's your name, old fellow?"

"My name! I am Inspector Fix, sir!" roared the little man in black. "I will have you all arrested for this."

"Inspector Fix!"

"Yes, you young rascals."

Tom Merry gave a prolonged whistle.

"My only hat!"

"Do you know the name?" said Blake.

"What-ho! It's the detective from Scotland Yard whom Miss Fawcett is expecting."

"Phew!"

"Great Scott!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Pray do not release him," said Skimpole anxiously. "This is, of course, a pretence for the purpose of escaping us. My methods could hardly lead to such a mistake."

"Oh, blow your methods!"

"Really Lowther—"

"It looks to me as if Gussy has made a fearful bloomer this time," said Tom Merry.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Of course, you can't help it, Gussy."

"But you said he was your pwisonah. You have made the feahful bloomah quite as much as I have, Tom Mewwy."

"It's no good arguing about it, Gussy; any amount of talk won't alter the facts," said Tom severely.

"But weally—"

"Is anything the matter?"

It was the quiet voice of Mr. Dodds.

The noise of the affray had reached the house, and the curate of Huckleberry Heath had come down the path to ascertain what was the cause of it. He looked at Mr. Fix—now standing up and dusting himself—and then at the ring of juniors, in amazement.

"Matter, sir!" snorted Mr. Fix. "I should say so! I have been assaulted by a crew of mischievous young rascals."

"Weally, sir!"

Is the Title of Next Week's Story.



The juniors watched the receding figure keenly. The gentleman in black turned the corner of the lane, and as he did so, he cast one quick glance back.

"Mr. Fix!" exclaimed the curate.

"Ah, it is you, Mr. Dodds!"

The two shook hands. No further proof could be needed of the identity of Inspector Fix of Scotland Yard. Skimpole blinked at them, and disappeared among the laurels. He was having cruel luck as a detective.

But D'Arcy stood his ground. The swell of St. Jim's had taken exception to Mr. Fix's words, and he meant to have it out.

"I twust, sir, that you will believe that this mistake was unintentional," he said.

The inspector snorted.

"And I twust, too, that you will withdraw the expension you have just used."

Another snort.

"I decline to be chawactewised as a young wascal. I wegard the expension as oppobwious in the extwmc."

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"I decline to wing off. It is a question of dig. with me. I wefuse to be chawactewised as a young wascal."

"I'll have you all prosecuted for assault!" growled Mr. Fix, rubbing his aching bones.

"Bai Jove!"

"Pray come in, sir," said Mr. Dodds. "This was all a mistake. The boys are guests of Miss Fawcett's, and they have been trying to capture the blackmailer. They evi-

dently took you for that person, as they did not know you by sight."

"The young donkeys!"

"That is an oppobwious expression, too."

"But if it is a mistake, I will overlook it," said Mr. Fix, with a grunt.

"Vewy good, but—"

"Better apologise, Gussy," whispered Digby.

"Weally, Dig—"

"A handsome apology is about the only thing you can do."

"But the boundah has used oppobwious expressions—"

"Never mind; do your little bit."

"Do you considah that I ought to apologise, Tom Mewwy?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Oh, vewy well! Mr. Fix—"

"Eh?"

"I beg to expwess my pwofound wegret for this unfortunate occurrence, and undah the circs. I am quite pwepared to ovahlook any oppobwious expwensions you may have uttahn in the heat of the moment."

"Huh!" said Mr. Fix.

And he walked up the path to the house with the curate. Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle into his eye, and

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gazed after him. Then he turned the glimmer of the eye-glass upon Tom Merry & Co.

"I see nothin' whatevah to gwin at," he remarked, "and I wegard that apoveah as bein' absolutely thwown away. The boundah seems to have no ideah whatevah of courtesy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I have apologised most handsomely, and he has simply gwunted in return. I wegard it as the worst of bad form."

"Never mind, Gussy; you've done your little bit, and you're not responsible for his actions," said Lowther. "In fact, I hardly consider you responsible for your own!"

"Weally, Lowther—"

"Let this be a lesson to you, Gussy!" said Tom Merry sagely. "Make a little more certain next time before you start arresting people—"

"But you were claimin' him as a pwisonah yourself, Tom Mewwy!"

"I think it's tea-time," said Tom Merry hurriedly. "Let's go in."

And they went in.

CHAPTER 10.

Laying the Snare.

MISS FAWCETT had recovered somewhat from the shock of the threatening letter. For a long time the old lady was shut up with Mr. Dodds and the detective from Scotland Yard, discussing the matter. The letter was taken in by Tom Merry, and the detective examined it, and re-examined it, and pursed his lips over it. Miss Fawcett waited anxiously for his verdict.

The little inspector smiled slightly.

"I was thinking of leaving the house this evening, and taking the dear boys with me," said Miss Fawcett nervously. "I am sure dear Mr. Dodds would gladly accommodate us all for the night."

"That is not at all necessary, Miss Fawcett," said the inspector, with a rather queer glance at dear Mr. Dodds, who sat speechless. "I should advise you to remain."

"But the danger?"

"What danger?"

"The wretch threatens to burn down the house."

Mr. Fix laughed heartily.

"You must not pay any attention to that nonsense, Miss Fawcett."

"But—"

"There is nothing in the threat. The fellow is only attempting to work upon your fears. The whole thing is absurd."

Miss Fawcett naturally had a great respect for the judgment of an experienced detective officer, and she was greatly relieved by the assurance.

"Then you think he is not in earnest, Mr. Fix?"

"I am certain he has no intention whatever of attempting to fulfil his threats," said the inspector. "He may threaten you again, or try to frighten you, that is all."

"What a wicked man!"

"More fool than rogue, I should say," replied the inspector. "He can have no idea that a Scotland Yard officer has been sent down here."

"It has not been mentioned outside the house," said Mr. Dodds.

"Good! He speaks of taking an instalment of the money from the sundial in the garden to-night."

"Yes."

"In that case, if he comes there, it will be only necessary to keep watch, in order to ascertain his identity, if not to capture him," said the inspector. "He thinks he is dealing with a nervous lady; as a matter of fact, he is dealing with a detective who knows his business, and that is where he will get into trouble. I shall conceal myself near the sundial to-night, and watch for him."

Mr. Dodds nodded thoughtfully.

"But he may be watching from a distance—"

"Probably."

"And unless he sees Miss Fawcett approach the sundial to place the money there, he will not approach himself."

The detective smiled.

"Doubtless; and so he must be hoodwinked. I will not, of course, ask Miss Fawcett to take any part in the proceedings. But this lad"—he nodded to Tom Merry—"he could put on a shawl or something of the sort, and go down to the sundial after dark, and place something there. Then if the blackmailer is watching the garden paths, he would be satisfied that his threats have been yielded to."

Tom Merry's eyes glimmered.

"I should be quite willing, sir."

"Oh, no, no, no! My dearest Tommy!" ejaculated Miss Fawcett. "I could not allow him to go into this fearful danger."

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Tom Merry smiled.

"There will be no danger, dear."

"Yes, there will be fearful peril. Suppose the black-mailer is armed—"

"But—"

"He may carry revolvers or knives—"

"But—"

"He might murder my darling."

"My dear madam, there is no danger whatever; but if you are alarmed about the boy, I will make some other arrangement," said the detective a little testily.

"Yes—yes, please!" said Miss Fawcett. "I do not wish to spoil your plans, but Tommy is such a gentle and delicate lad. Could not Mr. Dodds put on a shawl and a bonnet and go down to the sundial?"

Mr. Fix coughed, and Dr. Dodds turned pink. The suggested masquerade was hardly in keeping with his clerical character, but the curate did not like to say so to Miss Priscilla.

"Ahem," said Mr. Fix—"ahem! Mr. Dodds is somewhat too large in stature to be easily mistaken for you, Miss Fawcett."

"Exactly," said Mr. Dodds, much relieved. "With your permission, though, inspector, I will be on the spot with you, in case the rascal gives trouble."

"I shall be glad of your assistance, sir. We will find someone else to act the part of Miss Fawcett."

"Please let me go, dear!" said Tom Merry, pressing his old governess's hand. "There is not the slightest danger. You can trust Mr. Fix."

"My darling Tommy—"

"Yes, but—"

"There are the dreadful dewes on the grass at night, Tommy sweet. You would get your poor little feet wet."

Tom turned crimson.

"But, dear—"

"And the night air would be so bad for your poor little chest. You know how delicate you are."

"Oh, dear!"

"Tommy dearest—"

"Ahem! I will find somebody else," said Mr. Fix. "It will not be difficult. One of the other lads—"

"Yes, they are not so delicate as my darling Tommy! I saw Tommy wrestling with Herries to-day, and I felt so nervous. Herries is so big and rough, and Tommy is such a delicate and gentle child."

"Why, my only hat!" exclaimed Tom Merry, exasperated at last. "Why, I can lay Herries on his back in two shakes of a lamb's tail. I was only playing with him to-day."

"My darling, he is so rough—"

"I can wrestle any chap in the Shell at St. Jim's, let alone the Fourth."

"My sweet boy—"

"Ahem!" said Mr. Fix. "Perhaps Herries will take the part of Miss Fawcett in our little comedy to-night—"

"I wish you would let me do it, dear," said Tom Merry persuasively. "It will be fun, and I am sure I could do it ripingly. And it would save the secret going any further, too."

"There is something in that," said Mr. Dodds.

"Gentlemen, I will go myself!" exclaimed Miss Fawcett heroically. "I—I will arm myself. I have a large pistol upstairs that belonged to my grandfather, who used it at the Battle of Waterloo. I will take it—"

Mr. Fix was taken with a sudden fit of coughing, probably caused by a mental picture of Miss Priscilla facing the black-mailer armed with her grandfather's horse-pistol.

"Ahem!" gasped Mr. Fix. "I—I think, upon second thoughts, Miss Fawcett, that it would be better for you not to go. You might faint—"

"Yes, that is possible."

"And give the alarm—"

"Ah! I did not think of that."

"If the rascal escapes us this time he will learn that there is a detective in the house, and he will be more upon his guard," said Mr. Fix. "He may even proceed to something more than threats for the purpose of making you believe that he is in earnest."

"Oh, dear!"

"We must capture him to-night."

"But—but if he is a desperate criminal it will not be safe for any of the boys to take part in the proceedings," said Miss Fawcett anxiously. "They are really in my charge, sir—confided to me by the head-master of St. Jim's."

Mr. Fix smiled.

"We have no desperate criminal to deal with, Miss Fawcett. From the evidence furnished by this letter itself I am certain that the writer is a resident in this neighbourhood, and I suspect that he is some young scoundrel who is in want of money, and knowing your timidity—excuse me—"

has hit upon this method of extorting some from you. I think it is extremely probable that this is his first attempt as a blackmailer, and we must make it his last."

"Ah, poor fellow!"

"Eh?"

"If he is a young person, and it is possible yet to save him from his folly, I—I should not like him to be arrested," faltered Miss Priscilla. "I—I should like him to be stopped from his wickedness, and—given a warning, and—and then I think he could be left to Mr. Dodds, who would try to reform him."

"Ahem!" said Mr. Fix, looking rather grim. "That depends upon whom the rascal turns out to be. We will see. But I assure you it is quite safe for one of the boys to assist me in the way I suggested."

"You will let me go, dear?" urged Tom.

"I will let Mr. Dodds decide," said Miss Fawcett. "If he thinks you may safely go, I will not say no."

"I think he may safely go, certainly," said Mr. Dodds.

"Then you may go, Tommy; but—but do be careful to keep your feet dry."

"Yes, dear," said Tom, with a wry face.

"And—and wrap your neck up well."

"Ye-es."

"And do not forget your chest protector."

"Ye-e-e-es."

"And now," said Mr. Fix, "that matter is settled. Do not mention what is decided to any of your friends, Master Merry. Among so many there would certainly be some talk, which might reach the ears of the rascal we are trying to trap. He may possibly have some acquaintance among the maids here. You cannot be too careful. Not a word outside this room, mind."

"I will be careful, sir."

"What time do the boys go to bed, Miss Fawcett?"

"At half-past nine."

"Very good. Master Merry may be allowed to stay up, and then he will not have to give the others any explanation. It will be useless to go into the garden before ten, I think."

And that being settled, Tom Merry left the room, and rejoined his chums, who were waiting for him with considerable curiosity.

CHAPTER 11.

Tom Merry Does Not Explain.

"WELL?" That monosyllable, uttered simultaneously by eight voices, was jerked at Tom Merry as he entered the room where the juniors of St. Jim's were waiting for him.

Tom Merry glanced at them innocently.

"Well?" he said.

"Well!" repeated Jack Blake, crescendo.

"Well?" replied Tom Merry affably.

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Look here," said Kangaroo, "what do you mean?"

"Nothing."

"Bai Jove!"

"You said 'well,'" remarked Tom Merry, "so I said 'well.' I thought it was some kind of a game you were starting."

The juniors looked at one another.

"None of your old buck!" said Kangaroo. "What's the upshot?"

"Eh?"

"You've been jawing it over with the detective."

"Yes."

"And you've laid some plans, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"Plans," said Tom Merry.

"Look here, don't begin being funny. That's Lowther's job—and we have enough of it from him, if not too much."

"Hear, hear!" said Digby heartily.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Monty Lowther looked a little unpleasant.

"Of all the asses—" he began.

"Oh, don't start talking about your relations now, Lowther," said Blake. "The question is, what plans have they been laying?"

"Yes, that's the question," agreed Manners, who had changed his clothes before tea, and now looked quite himself again. "What are the plans?"

"Speak, you image!"

"Go ahead!"

"Pwaw acquaint us with the plans, deah boy. I want to know whether they meet with my approval."

"Certainly," remarked Skimpole. "I shall be very pleased to help in carrying out the plans if they come up to my opinion of what is necessary."

"Go ahead, Merry!"

"Are you deaf?"

"Why don't you speak?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"Because I've nothing to say."

"What?"

"Anybody care for a game of chess?"

"Blow chess!" howled Manners. "What we want to know about is the plans."

"Are the plans, you mean," said Digby.

"Bosh!"

"Look here—"

"Tom Merry—"

"The plans—"

"I tell you—"

"What price a game of leap-frog round the table?" asked Tom Merry blandly.

"Are you going to jaw?"

"Certainly, if you like. I'll give you a lecture on the subject—'Little Boys Should Not be Curious—'"

"Collar him!" shrieked Kangaroo.

"Here, hold on! Hands off!"

But the warning was unheeded.

The juniors fairly swarmed upon Tom Merry, and in a moment he was struggling in the grasp of eight pairs of hands.

"Bump him!" roared Herries.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What-ho! Bump him!"

Bump!

Tom Merry went down upon the carpet with a heavy bump. Then seven or eight feet were planted upon him, pinning him down.

"Now, then!" said Lowther. "Expound."

"Rats!"

"Explain."

"More rats!"

"Are you going to talk, and tell us all about it?" roared Kangaroo.

"Not half!"

"Bump him!"

"Look here— Ow—yow! Hold on, I tell you!"

Bump! Bump!

Tom Merry struggled desperately, and several of the juniors rolled over on the floor with him. The struggling combatants rolled against the table, and sent it flying. There was a crash and a roar of voices.

"Goodness gracious!"

Miss Priscilla Fawcett opened the door, and stood looking in upon the startling scene, spellbound.

"Tommy, my darling! What—?"

Mr. Dodds was smiling over her shoulder. Inspector Fix, of Scotland Yard, looked on with a puzzled expression.

"Tommy!" shrieked Miss Priscilla.

In a moment the combat ceased.

The juniors, dusty and dishevelled, and very much confused, sprang to their feet.

"Tommy—Tommy! My darling!"

"It's—it's all right, dear," stammered Tom. "Only fun, you know."

"Your collar is torn out."

"Yes, I—I like it like that."

"Your jacket is split."

"I—I like split jackets."

"Tommy!"

"It's only fun, Miss Fawcett," said Kangaroo. "We were only bumping Tom because he had the cheek to think he could keep a secret from us."

"Yaas, wathah! We wegarded it as feahful cheek, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from Mr. Dodds. "Only a little rough play, Miss Fawcett."

"Are you sure you are not hurt, darling?"

"Oh, I'm all right," said Tom Merry.

"Very well," said Miss Fawcett, still looking a little dubious. "But, pray—pray do not have any more of this fun. I am afraid for Tommy. He is so delicate that any rough play might send him into a decline at any time."

"Poor Tommy!" murmured Lowther. Tom Merry looked daggers at his chum.

"We will be vewy careful with Tommy, Miss Pwiscillah," said Arthur Augustus. "You may wely upon it that there shall be no more wuff play."

"Thank you, my dear little Arthur."

It was Arthur Augustus's turn to blush. Miss Priscilla closed the door, and the dusty juniors gathered round Tom Merry.

"Now, you ass, are you going to explain?"

"I can't," said Tom Merry. "If you had given me time, you duffers, I'd have explained that. Fix has arranged something, but I'm to keep it dark for the present."

"Rot!"

"Rubbish!"

"Bosh!"

"Rats!"

Such were the forcibly-expressed opinions of the St. Jim's juniors upon the subject of Mr. Fix's arrangements. Tom Merry laughed breathlessly.

"Look here, you chaps, be sensible. I don't like keeping you in the dark, but Fix said I was to, and I agreed."

"Oh, in that case, we ovahlook the mattah!" said Arthur Augustus gracefully. "Of course, if Tom Mewwy has given his word, it's a mattah of honah with him."

"He was an ass to agree."

"Yaas, I think it will be genewally admitted that Tom Mewwy is an ass."

"Hear, hear!"

"But undah the circs., he is bound to shut up."

Kangaroo grunted.

"Bet you they'll make a muck of it all between them," he said.

"Yaas, I wegard that as vewy pwob."

Skimpole looked very thoughtful. Two big wrinkles appeared in his bony forehead, showing that his mighty brain was hard at work.

"Probably, Mr. Fix does not know of my abilities," he remarked. "I will go and see him, and explain that it would be better to tell me about the matter, as my advice may be useful."

Tom Merry chuckled.

"Go and tell him so, by all means, Skimmy."

And Skimmy did. But much to his surprise, the Scotland Yard detective did not seem impressed, and declined to admit him to his confidence in the matter.

CHAPTER 12.

Two on the Track.

AT half-past nine, the usual bedtime for the juniors when they were at St. Jim's, they marched up to bed.

Miss Fawcett was very careful to keep them to regular habits while they were in her charge. But for once Tom Merry did not accompany them upstairs. When they bade Miss Fawcett good-night, Tom Merry bade them good-night, too, with a smile that would certainly have led to another "bumping," had not Miss Priscilla been present.

The juniors went up to bed in a wrathful frame of mind.

Kangaroo sat on his bed, and looked round at the others. They showed no sign of undressing and turning in.

The juniors had their beds together in a large room on the second floor, nine beds in a row. At St. Jim's a master or a prefect usually turned out the light, but at Laurel Villa they were entrusted with that themselves.

"Well, going to bed?" said Herries.

"Wathah not!"

"Not much," said Kangaroo. "They're up to some little plan for catching the blackmailer, and Tom Merry is taking a hand."

"Looks like it," agreed Blake.

"Are we going to be left out?"

"Not much!"

"Can they possibly manage the thing without our assistance?"

"I don't suppose so, for a moment."

"Are we going to let them try?"

"Never!"

"That's right," said the Cornstalk, nodding. "My idea is, to keep awake, and on the watch. We can turn the light out, and wait. When there's a movement, we can join in and make the thing a success."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's really what we came here for, and it would be absurd to go to bed like kids and let a set of duffers muck it up."

"Bai Jove! I quite agwee with our fwieend Kangawoo, you know."

"Perhaps it would be better for you all to go to bed, and leave the matter in my hands," Skimpole remarked thoughtfully. "As the only person here of any real ability, I think—"

"Oh, suffocate him, somebody!"

"Really, Digby—"

"Scat!"

Kangaroo turned out the light. Mr. Dodds, who knew boys, had gone into the garden, to look at the window. When the light went out, the curate of Huckleberry Heath was satisfied.

He rejoined Miss Fawcett, nothing doubting that the juniors of St. Jim's had gone to bed.

As a matter of fact, they had never been wider awake.

In the shadowy room, where they could hardly see one another, they conversed in whispers for the first half-hour, chuckling over their intended participation in the scheme, whatever it was, for trapping the blackmailer.

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Skimpole wore a very thoughtful look.

He drew D'Arcy to one of the windows, which was open, and from which it was easy to step upon the roof of an outhouse, and thence to reach the garden.

The swell of St. Jim's looked out into the garden. The trees and the high shrubberies intercepted the view for more than a few yards. There was a glimmer of a moon through banks of clouds.

"Well, deah boy?"

"I do not think we should remain here," said Skimpole, in a whisper. "While those chaps are waiting, we may possibly capture the blackmailer. We are far more competent to deal with the matter."

"Yaas, that is vewy twue."

"You remember that the villain required money to be placed on the sundial to-night?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Well, suppose we get out of the window, and keep a watch upon the sundial."

"Bai Jove, that's a wippin' idea!"

"Will you come?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Don't make the others look this way. We can deal with the scoundrel, and it is only fair for us to have the honour of capturing him."

"Quite wight. Besides, the othahs might make a wov, and muck it all up."

"Come on, then!"

Skimpole stepped out of the window upon the roof of the outhouse. Arthur Augustus followed him quietly. They made hardly a sound, and the juniors in the bed-room, who were at some distance from the window, did not observe their departure. They were, as a matter of fact, too busy talking over their own plans, to have any attention for the amateur detectives of St. Jim's.

Skimpole trod along cautiously to the edge of the roof.

"There is a rain-barrel beneath us," he said, peering over the edge. "I trust that the lid will bear our weight, as there is no other means of descending to the ground."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Will you go first, D'Arcy?"

"Not at all, deah boy; I don't want to take pwecedence of you in this mattah."

"My dear fellow, I am quite willing to let you go first," said Skimpole, who had no desire to test the strength of the barrel-top with his own weight.

But D'Arcy did not exactly yearn to do so, either.

"Oh, no, Skimmy! You're the leader in this biznay, you know."

"Yes, but—"

"Pway don't wait for me."

"I really think—"

"I'll west here on the widge while you get down."

"We ought to waste no time—"

"I am waitin' for you, deah boy."

"The fact is, D'Arcy—"

"Bettah not talk too much, Skimmy, in case they hear our voices."

Skimpole resigned himself to his fate. As leader in the enterprise, he could not expect D'Arcy to take the lead, and the swell of St. Jim's naturally did not choose to be either leader or follower just as it suited the convenience of his comrade.

"Very well, D'Arcy, I will go first."

"If you pwefer me to be leadah, deah boy, I will go first."

"Ah! I am afraid I could not trust to your intelligence. But I do not wish to be greedy; you shall lead until we arrive upon the scene of action."

The swell of St. Jim's chuckled softly.

"Wathah not, deah boy."

"Oh, very well! I trust the lid will bear my weight."

"I twust so. If you get a duckin', I will get down some othah way, and you can go back, and leave the whole mattah to me."

Skimpole made no reply to this generous offer. He lowered himself from the edge of the roof, and felt for the lid of the rain-barrel with his feet.

He found it, and rested his feet there.

"Ah, I think it will bear my weight!"

D'Arcy peered over at him.

"Jollay good! I—"

"Oh!"

"What's the mattah, deah boy?"

"Oh, I'm going—oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

There was a sudden crackling sound, and the lid of the rain-barrel, which wasn't built to stand the weight of an amateur detective, collapsed.

Skimpole disappeared into the barrel.

"Gweat Scott!"

"Ow!"

"Bai Jove! Are you ddowned, Skimmy?"



The footing on the edge of the ditch was uncertain, and Manners slipped as Blake bumped into him. There was a splash and a yell, and Manners disappeared into the water.

"Ow!"

Arthur Augustus peered down through the gloom. The succession of "oh's" and "ow's" from the barrel seemed pretty clear proof that Skimmay wasn't drowned.

"Are you hurt, Skimmay?"

"Yes, you idiot!"

"Weally, Skimmay——"

"There isn't any water in the barrel!" gasped Skimpole. "But—but I have received a shock. Come down and help me out!"

"I am afraid I cannot, Skimmay."

"You can stand on the edges of the barrel to get down."

"I was not thinkin' of that. You have applied an oppwobwious expression to me. I refuse to be chawac-tewised as an idiot."

"Oh!"

"Unless you immediately withdwaw that oppwobwious expression, it will be impos. for me to accompany you any furthah, and I shall return immediately."

"Ow! Come and help me out!"

"I am waitin' for your apology," said D'Arcy, in his most stately manner.

"You—you ass——"

"Good-bye!"

"Hold on, D'Arcy—hold on! I—I apologise."

"Oh, vevy well, then we can wemain fwriends."

"Come and help me out."

"Certainly, deah boy."

Arthur Augustus cautiously lowered himself down, and rested his feet upon the edges of the rain-barrel. Then he gained the ground. Then he grasped Skimpole, and dragged him over the edges of the barrel.

"Come on, Skimmay."

"Ow—ow! I am hurt!"

"Would you wathah stay there?"

"No, you—ahem! No, D'Arcy."

"Then make an effort, deah boy, and get out."

With the School House swell's assistance Skimpole managed to clamber out of the barrel. He gasped for breath as he landed on the ground.

"Dear me! What a fearful experience!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"However, a detective must be prepared to take risks," said Skimpole. "Let us go on. I do not think we have been missed in the bed-room."

Skimpole was right. As a matter of fact, the keenness of the St. Jim's juniors was dying out a little as the hour grew later. Sleepiness was creeping upon some of them. Herries was the first to yield. He said he would lie down for a bit, so as to be fresher when the time came for action.

Three seconds later he was fast asleep, and looked as if nothing short of a cannon would have awakened him.

Digby was the next. He followed Herries's example, with the same intentions and the same result.

Manners gave a chuckle as he heard Digby's deep breathing.

"The ass!" he said. "He won't wake up in a hurry. I feel a bit sleepy myself, but I'll just take a rest in this ripping armchair. I won't lie down."

And Manners took a rest in the armchair, and was sound asleep in less than three minutes.

Noble, Blake, and Lowther remained awake, and they, taking warning by the others, did not "rest." They remained talking, every few minutes going to the door to listen for a sound below.

Blake came back from the door with bated breath a little later.

"Time!" he muttered.

"What is it?"

"I heard a door close."

"Good!"

And in a moment the three were widely alert and ready for action. On tiptoe they stole to the door, and passed out upon the landing.

CHAPTER 13.

An Unexpected Meeting.

"HUSH!"

"Weally——"

"Quiet!"

"My deah Skimmay——"

"Pray shut up, D'Arcy! I heard somebody move."

"Why didn't you say so at first, you ass!"

"Hush!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The two amateur detectives paused, and listened in the dark shade of the trees in the long, wide garden of Laurel Villa.

There was a sound of someone moving in the garden—there was no doubt about that. The two juniors were pushing cautiously through the shrubberies towards the patch of lawn where lay the old sundial, and they were careful to keep in cover. The individual whose movements they detected seemed to be doing the same.

"Bai Jove!" whispered Arthur Augustus. "It's somebody cweepin' through the shwubbewy."

"Yes, that's it."

"It's bound to be the blackmailah."

"Certain."

"Let's cweep forward and then suddenly spwing on him."

"Good!"

"Come on, then!"

"Wait a moment," whispered Skimpole, struck by a sudden thought. "You know that according to Determinism——"

"Blow Determinism!"

"But I am a Determinist."

"Wats!"

"I am bound to stand by my principles. According to Determinism, everybody is the victim of the combined influence of his heredity and environment——"

"More wats!"

"And therefore," pursued Skimpole, unheeding, "therefore he is not morally to blame for any of his actions."

"Pway don't begin talkin' wot now."

"This isn't rot—this is Determinism."

"What's the difference?"

"You see," went on Skimpole, without replying to the question, which was a rather difficult one for anybody to answer, "you see, the thought occurs to me, should I be justified as a Determinist in causing the arrest of a man who is driven to bad deeds by his heredity and his environment?"

D'Arcy chuckled softly.

"Yaas, deah boy! You can put it down to your own heredity and environment, you know. You couldn't be to blame."

"Dear me! That is a very intelligent remark for you, D'Arcy. I hardly expected it of a fellow of your limited mental powers."

"Bai Jove!"

"Under the circumstances, I need have no hesitation in seizing the villain. Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

And Skimpole, reassured in his mind, led the way through the shrubbery again. D'Arcy followed, grinning in the darkness. Privately, he regarded Determinism as sheer nonsense, and that particular moment for starting a discussion on the subject as particularly ill-chosen. As he confided to Blake afterwards, he had replied to Skimmay's "wot" with some more "wot," which quite satisfied Skimmay.

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NEXT TUESDAY: "THE D'ARCY CUP"

Is the Title of Next Week's Story.

The moon peeped over the top branches of a big apple-tree, and fell on the edge of the shrubbery. It fell also upon a slinking figure. Skimpole grasped D'Arcy by the arm as he saw it.

"There he is!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Seize him!"

They sprang forward.

The slinking figure suddenly straightened up, and turned towards them with a startled exclamation.

D'Arcy stopped, with a slight laugh.

"It's all wight, Skimmay. I know this chap."

"Is it not a stranger?" exclaimed Skimpole, greatly disappointed.

"Wathah not!"

"Who is it?"

"Chap named Snope."

Algy Snope it was. He looked at the two juniors in an extremely uncertain way, and in the moonlight his cheeks were very white—perhaps because their sudden appearance had startled him.

"You!" he murmured.

"Yaas, wathah! What are you doin' here?"

"I—I—I came to—to—to see Tom Merry!" stammered Snope.

D'Arcy grinned. He had heard from the juniors about that little encounter in the lane, and he had rather believed that Snope would avoid further meetings with Tom Merry if he could.

"Weally, Snope——"

"I—I wanted to see him——"

"Wathah a cewious time for payin' a visit" remarked D'Arcy. "Tom Mewwy goes to bed as a wule at half-past nine, and it is nearly ten now."

"Yes, but—but——"

"You are lookin' for twouble, I pwesume?"

"N-n-n-n-no."

"You came here to play some twick on Tom Mewwy, I suppose?" said Arthur Augustus. "I wathah think I can see through you, deah boy."

"I—I—I——"

"Or pewayws it was to tell us that you accept the challenge to a football match?" remarked the swell of St. Jim's sarcastically.

Algy Snope seemed to clutch at the straw, as it were.

"Yes, yes, that was just it!" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Sewiously, deah boy?"

"Yes, cer-certainly. You see, I—I had to stay late at Mr. Sands, going over the books, and—and I couldn't get away sooner. I just looked in the back way, in—in case Tom Merry might be still up, as—as I didn't like to ring at the door at this time of night. I—I've spoken to the Ramblers, and they are willing to meet Tom Merry's team."

"Bai Jove, that's good!" said D'Arcy. "You wan a wisk of bein' taken for a burglah, you know, but it's all wight. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir! Are you staying out later?"

"That is weally no business of yours, my fwriend."

"N-no, but—but——"

"I pwesume I can take a moonlight stroll in a garden if I like with my fwriend Skimmay?" remarked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, but—but it's chilly, and—and if you caught cold——"

"Well?"

"You'd have to stand out of the footer match, you know."

"Bai Jove, that's vewy true! We'd bettah go in, Skimmay."

"But——" began Skimpole.

"Don't argue, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus, linking arms with the genius of the Shell. "We shall both be wanted for the footah match, and we can't wisk catchin' cold in the garden. Come in!"

"But——"

"Come in, you ass!"

And Arthur Augustus walked Skimpole off towards the house. As they disappeared into the shrubbery Algy Snope smiled a peculiar smile. He did not leave the garden; he settled himself down in a shadowy spot on the edge of the shrubbery, within sight of the sundial, which glimmered faintly in the moonlight.

ANSWERS

CHAPTER 14.

Tom Merry's Disguise.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY marched Skimpole away through the shrubberies, the genius of the Shell vainly murmuring protests. They were quite out of sight of the spot where they had met Mr. Snope, when D'Arcy halted at last in the shade of a big tree.

"Pway stop that idiotic stwuggin', Skimmay."

"I am not going in, D'Arcy. I refuse to go in. If you wish to go in, you can go in alone."

"Upon second thoughts, Skimmay, I will not go in," said D'Arcy thoughtfully. "You had better do so, and I will cawwy on the mattah alone."

"I refuse—"

"Wats! I know you are a feahful ass at footah, but we shall want you in the team. You can't play if you catch a cold."

"I am not going to catch a cold."

"It's damp in the garden, deah boy, and you know you're in wotten bad condish. You nevah do keep yourself fit."

"I shall not go in!"

"I insist!"

"D'Arcy—"

"I wegard you as bein' undah my care," said D'Arcy, in quite a fatherly tone. "You see, you're not in good form like myself. You are such a skinnay, thin, knock-kneed sort of wastah, you know, that it is necessawy for you to take every care of yourself."

"I will not go in!"

But Arthur Augustus was not to be argued with. When he assumed his fatherly manner, and began to look after people, he was past argument.

"Now, Skimmay, I twust you will not force me to cawwy you."

"You ass—"

"I wefuse to be called an ass. I've got to look aftah you. If you catch a cold, you may die of pneumonia or somethin'."

"I shall do nothing of the sort. I—"

"Pway don't be such an argumentative beast, Skimmay! I nevah knew such a feahfully obstinate boundah as you are!"

"I tell you—"

"Hush! There's somebody comin'."

Skimpole hushed, and so did D'Arcy. The dispute was forgotten for the moment. A footstep sounded very clearly up the garden path.

It could not be Snope, who had been left behind at the bottom of the garden. Who was it? Was it the mysterious blackmailer at last?

The juniors crouched deeper into the shadow of the tree. The path ran past the tree, and the moonlight glimmered upon it.

In a minute or less they would see whom it was.

They waited with bated breath.

A figure loomed up past the laurels—and the juniors recognised a shawl and a bonnet they had seen before.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "Miss Pwiscillah!"

"Dear me!"

"Quiet! Don't startle her."

The form passed by in the moonlight. The shawl concealed the face, as if the old lady were carefully guarding her head from the chance of a chill.

Both the juniors wondered what Miss Fawcett was walking alone in the garden at that hour for. The sight of a little leather bag in her hand enlightened them. They remembered the threatening letter and its conditions.

The figure disappeared down the garden.

"Bai Jove!" murmured D'Arcy. "She's taking the cash to the blackmailah!"

"Undoubtedly."

"It's wotten! I wondah Mr. Fix or Mr. Dodds didn't stop her."

"Perhaps she hasn't consulted them about it."

D'Arcy knitted his brows.

"Look here, Skimmay, the wascal is not goin' to have that money."

"Certainly not."

"If you will be vevy careful not to catch a chill, I will let you come back and watch the sundial with me for the blackmailah."

"I shall certainly watch the sundial, D'Arcy, and I regard your interference with my personal liberty as—"

"Wats! Come on."

They stole back through the shrubs again. They were particularly careful this time to make no noise, for fear of startling the old lady. If Miss Fawcett had suddenly seen moving forms in the shrubbery, she might have fainted.

"Look out!" whispered D'Arcy suddenly.

"What—"

"She's comin' back."

They crouched low in the shadows. The footsteps were returning along the path. The figure in the shawl came through a belt of trees.

But it did not go up to the house. Standing in the shadows, it divested itself of the shawl and the bonnet, throwing them upon the ground. When the skirt followed, D'Arcy began to gasp. But he gasped more than ever the next moment, when he discerned the form of Tom Merry in the place of that of the supposed Miss Fawcett.

It was not the old lady at all. It was the hero of the Shell in her guise!

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus could not resist that slight ejaculation, so great was his amazement at the transformation.

Tom Merry was seen to give a sudden start.

His glance was fixed upon the spot where the two amateur detectives crouched in the shadows of the shrubbery.

"Come out!" he said, in a whisper—low, but very distinct.

They did not stir.

"Come out, you ass! I know you're there!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass!"

"What are you doing here?"

"Twackin' down the blackmailah."

Tom Merry laughed silently.

"Have you seen anybody in the garden?"

"Nobody as yet, exceptin' that chap Snope."

"Snope!"

"Yaas, Algy Snope, you know."

Tom Merry started violently.

"Algy Snope! What was he doing here?"

"He came to see you weally, to tell you that he and his club are acceptin' the challenge for the footah match on Saturday."

"Oh!"

"It's all wight."

"Is it?" said Tom Merry, with a peculiar look. "Good! Now, you chaps had better get in and go to bed."

"Are you sevious, Tom Mewwy?"

"Of course I am."

"You are not jokin'?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I can only wegard the suggestion as an insult," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity. "We are here to—"

"Speak in whispers, you duffer."

"I wefuse to be called a duffah!"

"Look here—"

"We are here to twack down the blackmailah. We are goin' to do so. You can come with me, if you like, and Skimmay can go in to bed."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," said Skimpole.

"But I shall not wequire your help, Skimmay, if Tom Mewwy comes with me."

"I regard you as an ass, D'Arcy."

"Weally, Skimmay—"

"Oh, shut up!" said Tom Merry. "Look here, it's a serious situation now. I went down to the sundial in Miss Fawcett's shawl to lead the blackmailer to suppose that the money was there if he was watching."

"Good!"

"Inspector Fix and Mr. Dodds have gone round by the side-path to watch the dial from the side nearest the gate. I was going to watch on this side."

"We will watch too."

"Well, if you will. I suppose I can't lick you now, as it will make a row—"

"I should uttably wefuse to be licked!"

"Oh, come on, and shut up!"

And the three juniors crept down the garden cautiously.

CHAPTER 15.

The Blackmailer.

INSPECTOR FIX snorted softly as he lay in the shadow of the shrubbery, on the lower edge of the little lawn at the end of the garden.

The inspector was not feeling comfortable.

He had been ensconced in that position for ten minutes before the disguised Tom Merry had appeared to place the bag on the sundial.

The inspector was a townsman born and bred, and he had a great dislike to roughing it in the country. The grass in the garden was damp, and damp trickled from the laurels.

Mr. Fix had taken the precaution to bring a big travelling-rug with him to spread on the ground, and this saved him from catching a chill, but he was not comfortable—and when he was not comfortable, he snorted.

But he snorted very softly now.

It was probable that at any moment the blackmailer might appear to take the bag from the sundial, and the inspector did not wish to give the alarm.

Mr. Dodds, sitting on another rug, with his back against

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a tree, with an unlighted pipe in his mouth, waited patiently.

From where they had taken cover, the two men had a clear and uninterrupted view of the sundial, upon which the moonlight was falling more clearly every moment.

They had clearly seen the disguised junior advance and place the bag there, and then disappear in the shadows towards the house.

Had other eyes seen him?

Was the blackmailer lurking in the shadows there, or was he coming at a later hour to examine the spot and ascertain whether his demand had been complied with?

It was quite possible that the vigil would last all the night, and at the prospect the inspector could almost have groaned aloud: It was possible, too, that the rascal might not be caught by so shallow a trap—that he might "smell a rat" and not come at all.

The inspector, judging by what clues he had, had decided that the blackmailer was some local person, more fool than rascal, and had laid his plans accordingly.

His theory, however, might be erroneous, and in that case he might have his vigil, and the risk of rheumatism, for his pains. In that case, it was likely to go hard with the blackmailer when the gentleman from Scotland Yard finally did catch him.

"Nothing yet," murmured the inspector.

Mr. Dodds touched his arm.

"Look!"

Inspector Fix drew a deep breath.

From the shrubbery on the further side of the little lawn a dark shadow moved out into the moonlight. It was a masculine form, but the face could not be seen, for a soft felt hat was pulled down over it so as to completely conceal the features.

The figure advanced rapidly towards the sundial.

They watched him breathlessly.

It was undoubtedly the blackmailer, and he had been waiting the last ten minutes to give the supposed Miss Fawcett time to get back to the house. Now he was coming to take the money—or, rather, the bag. The bag, as a matter of fact, contained only stones, and would have been a very small prize for any blackmailer, amateur or professional.

"It's our man!" murmured the inspector.

"Undoubtedly."

"Wait till he's taken the bag, and then at him," muttered Mr. Fix. "You get between him and the gate, and I'll tackle him on this side."

"Very good."

The dark figure reached the sundial. A hand was stretched out to take the bag. The next moment the valuable prize was thrust into a pocket, and the figure turned away.

Like arrows shot at the same moment, the inspector and Mr. Dodds leaped out from cover and dashed upon the rascal. He swung round with a gasping exclamation of alarm, his quick, nervous ears detecting the slight sounds they made.

"Oh!"

It was a gasp of almost agonised fear that escaped the rascal as the two men rushed upon him. For a moment he looked wildly round, like a hunted animal seeking a way of escape, but the athletic figure of Mr. Dodds cut him off from the way to the gate, and Inspector Fix, a little slower, was coming straight at him.

There was only one way to go, and he went that way. He swung off and dashed up the garden towards the house at a frantic speed.

There were paths round the house, leading to the front garden and the lane beyond. The rascal had a chance yet if he could gain on his pursuers. His face had not been seen.

The three burst through the shrubbery, and there was a sudden yell.

Tom Merry sprang at the fleeing rascal, and missed, catching his foot and rolling into the shrubs. Mr. Dodds stumbled over him, and rolled headlong. Arthur Augustus and Skimpole, too confused by the sudden alarm to note exactly whom and what they were attacking, hurled themselves upon the inspector, and brought him to the earth.

"Got him!" gasped Skimpole.

"Yaas, wathah!"

Mr. Dodds staggered to his feet.

"Sorry, sir!" gasped Tom Merry.

"All right! After the rascal!"

"This way! We've got him!" shouted D'Arcy.

The curate turned towards him.

"D'Arcy! Skimpole! How—"

"We've got him, sir!"

"Help!" gasped a muffled voice. "Get these young fools off! I'm being squashed."

"Bai Jove! It's Fix!"

"Dear me! This is the second time that troublesome THE GEM LIBRARY.—87.

detective has caused us to make a mistake," murmured Skimpole, slowly getting off the inspector's head.

Inspector Fix staggered to his feet.

"Have you got him?"

"No—"

"After him!"

Mr. Dodds was already racing up the garden. They dashed after him; but there was little chance of capturing the rascal now, and they knew it. With the start he had gained, and the darkness to help him, he was not likely to be overtaken by his pursuers. But suddenly, from the black shadows near the house, rose a wild uproar.

There was a bumping and a scrambling, a yelling and a shouting, and the shrieks of a terrified man.

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "The other chaps are out!"

"Bai Jove!"

"Buck up!"

"We've got him, then!" muttered the inspector.

They dashed on at top speed.

Close by the house, where the side path ran between rows of trees, a heap of sprawling and struggling forms appeared on the ground.

Three or four forms were sprawling there, and the uproar and the struggling were simply terrific.

"Bai Jove! They've got him!"

Kangaroo detached himself from the struggling mass, jumping up breathless.

"We've got him all right."

A weedy figure lay gasping on the ground, with the grasp of Blake and Lowther fast upon him. The inspector knelt down, and there was a click as the handcuffs fastened upon the wrists of the prisoner.

At the touch of the cold metal, the courage of the wretched blackmailer seemed to desert him suddenly—or, rather, the frantic excitement which had taken the place of courage when he felt himself seized by the juniors.

He lay helpless, breathing faintly, and moaning like one wounded, or like an animal, shrinking from the lash.

"Get him into the light," said the inspector grimly. "Let us see his face."

The slouched hat had fallen off in the struggle, and the prisoner was bareheaded. He was dragged into the moonlight, and the rays fell upon his white, terrified face. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy uttered an exclamation.

"Bai Jove! You've made a mistake affah all!"

"What!"

"This isn't the blackmailah, deah boys!"

"Who is it, then?" said the inspector grimly. "Do you know him?"

"Yaas, wathah! It's Algy Snope!"

CHAPTER 16.

Algy Owns Up!

"SNOPE!"

"Algy!"

"Great Scott!"

"My only hat!" murmured Tom Merry. "So this is the giddy sport, and this is how we raise the tin for betting on the races, is it?"

"Bai Jove! What a widiculous mistake!" said Arthur Augustus fatuously. "I am sowwy you have been handled in this wuff way, Snope. You are wathah an ass, I know, but this is weally too wuff."

"Yes, it is too bad," said Skimpole, with a look of annoyance. "But the worst of it is, that while we have been wasting time upon this person, the real criminal has probably made his escape."

Snope gasped and gasped. The words would not come out at first.

"It's—it's all a mistake!" he got out at last. "I—I—" "Of course it's all a mistake," agreed D'Arcy. "I recognised that as soon as I saw your chivvay, deah boy."

"Of course," said Skimpole, with a nod. "We have been wasting time—"

"Ass!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Weally, Mewwy—"

"Master D'Arcy can tell you why I was here," gasped Snope. "I—I came to speak to Tom Merry, to—to tell him that we accept his challenge to a football match on Saturday—"

"That's wight!"

"Yes, I remember you told us so when we saw you in the garden half an hour ago," said Skimpole. "Quite right."

"Bring him into the house," said the inspector.

"My dear sir—"

"Come," said Mr. Dodds.

"My deah Mr. Dodds—"

"I am afraid you are a little too credulous with this



"Gracious goodness! What is the matter!" "Oh, oh!" Hannah gave one terrified stare at Miss Fawcett's blackened face, and went off into a faint herself into the nearest chair.

person, D'Arcy," said the curate. "He is the blackmailer."

"But—" "The inspector and I have been on the watch for him, and we saw him take the bag from the sundial."

"But—but—" "It is in his pocket now."

"Bai Jove!" "I am afraid there is no doubt of his guilt."

"But—but—" gasped the swell of St. Jim's, in astonishment. "He—he told us—"

"I am afraid he was deceiving you."

"Bai Jove! I nevah thought of that, you know. Do you think the uttah wascal was tellin' me an untwuth, Mr. Dodds?"

"I fear there is no doubt about it."

"Bai Jove! Pway take those things off his w'ists, Inspector Fix, while I give him a feahful thwashin'."

The inspector laughed. "He has enough to face, Master D'Arcy, without a thrashing," he said.

D'Arcy's look altered at once. "Yaas, wathah; I forgot that! Upon second thoughts, I will not give him a thwashin'. But it was extremewly wotten of him to tell me an untwuth."

"Pray stop a minute," said Skimpole. "It is quite impossible for this gentleman to be guilty. It does not agree in the least with any of my theories."

"Go hon!" said Blake. "Bring him in," said Mr. Fix.

"Moreover," pursued Skimpole, talking as Algy was walked gently towards the house, the handcuffs clinking on his wrists—"moreover, even if he is guilty, according to all the theories of Determinism he is not culpable, as he was irresistibly driven to commit this crime by the combined force of his heredity and his environment."

"Oh, ring off!" said Kangaroo. "A sincere Determinist never rings off, Noble. According to Determinism, a man cannot justly be punished for any crime."

"What would you do with a blackmailer, then?" asked the Cornstalk chum, who had not heard as much of Skimpole's "isms" as the other fellows, being newer to St. Jim's.

"Ahem—"

"Would you allow him to run loose, and blackmail?" "Certainly not. The rights of the community must be guarded."

"Then you would shut him up somewhere?"

"He would be—be segregated."
 "That is, shut up by himself?"
 "Ye-es."
 "And deprived of his liberty?"
 "Ye-es."
 "So that he couldn't do it any more?"
 "Exactly."

"Well, that's what's going to happen to him now," grinned Kangaroo. "He's going to be shut up by himself, where he can't do it any more; so it's just the same as if he lived under Determinism."

"There is a difference."
 "Where?"
 "Well, you see—"
 "Yes, I see," agreed Kangaroo. "I always suspected that Determinism was a lot of bosh, and Determinists a set of cranks; and now I know it for certain."

"Really, Noble—"
 "Oh, seat!"
 "But—"
 "Give us a rest!"
 The prisoner was marched into the house. He went with hanging head and a dejected face. He had ceased making denials. His guilt was so clear that it was only in the first terror that he had thought of denying it.

He knew that the game was up, and that knowledge utterly crushed him. Algy Snope was not of the stuff of which heroes are made.

He could punt on the racecourse, and make wonderful breaks on the billiard table, and stay up till one o'clock in the morning drinking and smoking, and keeping up a wonderful appearance of enjoying it; but when he found himself in danger, all his nerve went utterly.

The smart sportsman, the leader of the choice spirits of the Bird in Hand, the glass of fashion in Huckleberry Heath—what was he now?

He seemed to have shrunk to half his size as he tottered along in the midst of his captors.

His face, always pasty in colour from late hours and smoking and general bad habits, was now as white as a sheet of notepaper, and his eyes seemed to have sunk into his head. His lips were hanging loose and flabby, and tears trembled on his eyelids.

Algy, the sportsman, was facing the music with less nerve than the smallest fag at St. Jim's would have shown.

Brandy and water and cheap cigarettes could not buck him up to stand a trial like this!

He staggered rather than walked in through the French windows, and sank almost in a heap into an armchair.

His whole look was so ghastly that the juniors felt a thrill of pity for him.

His crime had been mean and cowardly, and yet it was probably as much the outcome of sheer stupidity as of wickedness.

"I—I can't stand this," murmured Blake. "I—I wish they'd let the poor rotter go."

"Yaas, wathah!"
 Algy caught the muttered words, and he looked up eagerly, with wild hope flushing his pasty face.

"Speak a word for me!" he muttered brokenly. "For mercy's sake, don't let them send me to prison."

His glance swept eagerly round the circle of faces. Only Mr. Fix's was hard and grim. The curate of Huckleberry Heath looked pitying, but he had no authority in the matter. The decision rested with Mr. Fix and Miss Fawcett.

There was a rustle as Miss Priscilla entered the room. The old lady had remained up, with a palpitating heart, waiting for the announcement of the capture, if it should be effected.

She glanced in surprise at the crowd of juniors in the room. "My dear boys—"

"We all had a hand in it, Miss Fawcett," said Kangaroo blandly. "The rotter would have got away otherwise. We've got him."

"The rascal is captured, Miss Fawcett," said Inspector Fix gravely.

Miss Priscilla looked at the prisoner. "My goodness! This is Mr. Sands' young man!"

"It is the blackmailer."
 "Surely there is some mistake!"
 "None!"
 "Bless my soul!"

Snope looked eagerly at the astonished old lady. "Miss Fawcett—"

"Is that—that the dreadful man?" said Miss Fawcett, in wonder.

The juniors could not help grinning. Algy Snope did not look much like a dreadful man at that moment. He looked more like a whipped dog.

"Miss Fawcett! Don't let them send me to prison!"

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CHAPTER 17.

A Chance for Algy.

MISS PRISCILLA looked at the white-faced, trembling wretch in the chair and then at the grim countenance of the detective.

The juniors drew back from the scene. The abject terror and misery of Algy Snope had touched their hearts, and they were inwardly determined that something should be done for the poor wretch, and if the inspector did not give way they meant to interfere somehow.

But for the present they drew aside from the scene, and left Miss Fawcett to deal with the grim-faced gentleman from Scotland Yard.

Tom Merry had a suspicion that Mr. Fix's grim looks were assumed for the purpose of striking a wholesome terror into the heart of the amateur blackmailer, but he could not be quite sure.

"Has the bad boy confessed?" asked Miss Fawcett. Even in his abasement Algy could not help giving a sort of wriggle as she said that. For the choice spirit of the village, the chief of the local sports, to be alluded to as a bad boy was too humiliating. But he did not speak.

"You confess?" said Mr. Dodds. Algy bowed his head. "Yes, sir."

"Have you anything to say in extenuation—anything that may justify Miss Fawcett in taking pity on you?" Algy gasped for breath.

"Yes—yes, sir! I—I'll tell you all about it! I—"
 He broke off.

Tom Merry glanced round at his comrades. "Let's go out," he murmured. "The poor rotter doesn't want to tell us all his private affairs. Come on!"

"Yaas, wathah! I wogard that as vewy good form on your part, Tom Mewwy."

"Oh, rats!"

"Well, I can do with some sleep," remarked Blake. "It's fatiguing, capturing blackmailers in the middle of the night, though, of course, a chap likes to lend his aid to fellows from Scotland Yard, who aren't quite up to their business."

"Yaas, wathah!"

And the juniors crowded out of the room. But they did not go to bed. They were too anxious to know the verdict upon Algy.

The door closed behind them. "Shall I go?" asked Mr. Dodds, glancing at Miss Fawcett. The old lady shook her head.

"Pray remain, Mr. Dodds. I depend upon you for advice."
 "Very well."

Mr. Dodds sat down. Algy looked relieved by the departure of the juniors.

Abased as he was, he felt that he could not speak freely before them.

"Well, have you anything to say?" said the inspector grimly.

"Ye-e-es. I—I hope Miss Fawcett will pardon me," stammered Algy. "I—I never meant to do her any harm. I—I only wanted the money."

"We know you never meant to carry out your silly threats," said Mr. Dodds quietly. "But Miss Fawcett did not know it, and she was very much alarmed."

"Very much," said Miss Fawcett. "Not so much for myself, as for the dear children."

"I—I am very sorry, ma'am. I—I was so awfully in want of money."

"Why so?" said the curate. "Mr. Sands pays you the ordinary rate of salary, I believe, and you are a lad without anyone dependant upon you."

"I—I—I'm in debt."
 "Indeed!"

"I—I—I've been losing money," stammered Algy, the old, old miserable story coming out at last. "I—I owe money at the Bird in Hand, and—and I've been unlucky on the—the races. I—I—I—"

"Come, you had better be frank," said Mr. Fix, who saw very clearly that there was something more serious behind. "Make a clean breast of it."

"But—"
 "Come, get on!"
 "But—but—"

"Nothing you say now shall be used against you," said the inspector.

"Thank you!" stammered Algy. "I—I had to pay some of the debts, and—and I took some of old Sands's money to pay them."

Miss Fawcett gave a little shriek. "You have robbed your employer!"

Algy burst into tears.

It would have astonished the "giddy sports" of the neighbourhood to see their great chief with the water running helplessly down his ashen cheeks.

NEXT
 TUESDAY:

"THE D'ARCY CUP"

Is the Title of Next Week's Story.

"I—I took it only for a time," he gasped. "I—I expected to bring off a— a coup at the races the same week, but—but my horse came in fifth, and—and I lost. If I don't get money by the end of the month I—I shall be found out. Oh dear—oh, dear! I shall be sent to prison!"

"Well, I must say you're a pretty fair specimen of an all-round blackguard!" said the inspector. "Debts at a public-house, debts on the races, robbing your employer, and blackmail at the finish!"

"Oh, dear—oh, dear!"

"He is more a fool than a rogue, as you surmised yourself from seeing the letter, Mr. Fix," said the curate. "I have had him under my observation for some time. He is a silly lad, and thinks himself very clever, and he has been led into this from a silly, conceited desire to keep up his reputation among the foolish and worthless lads he associates with."

Algy writhed.

He had sometimes had some plain speaking from Mr. Dodds, but never anything quite as plain as this before. The inspector nodded. He had come across many Alfies in his experience, and he knew exactly what they were like.

"I do not know how to express my detestation of this wretched boy's actions," said Miss Priscilla; "but—but I should like to be merciful."

"I won't ever do it again!" wailed Algy. "Only give me a chance!"

"Inspector, what do you say? You will let me give him a chance?"

Inspector Fix smiled. He had no desire to take a silly, crying boy to the county gaol with him as his prisoner. The case was as ridiculous as it was contemptible. Algy had had a terrible fright, and under careful management that would probably do him more good than a term in prison, which would probably turn him into a confirmed criminal by closing all honest paths to him.

And little Mr. Fix, in spite of his grim looks, had a tender heart enough.

"Well, if you wish to treat him leniently, Miss Fawcett—"

"I do—I do!"

"Yet I don't know," said Mr. Fix, hesitating a little for Algy's benefit. "A rascal who tries to blackmail, and writes letters in invisible ink—"

"It was that put the idea into my head," wailed Algy. "I—I read of a chap doing it in the 'New York Boys' Buster,' and there was a recipe for making the ink."

"You young fool!" exclaimed the inspector, his gravity breaking down. "What you want is a hiding, not arrest!"

"I—I—I'd rather have a hiding, please!"

"Perhaps we can give him a chance," said the inspector thoughtfully. "Suppose we leave him to Mr. Dodds? Of course, I am taking a serious step in doing this."

"It is indeed kind of you, Mr. Fix. I am sure we can trust Mr. Dodds to look after this bad boy."

The bad boy writhed.

"If he is left to me," said the curate, "I will do my best. We must first ascertain whether he is willing."

"Oh, quite willing, sir—quite willing!" panted Algy.

"Mind, I shall not deal easily with you," said Mr. Dodds sternly. "In the first place, you will give up drinking."

"Yes, sir."

"You will give up smoking till you are turned twenty."

"Yes, sir."

"You will cease to visit public-houses on any pretext whatever."

"Yes, sir."

"You will keep regular hours."

"Yes, sir."

"You will give up associating with rowdy companions, except for the purpose of trying to bring them to more decent ways."

"Yes, sir."

"You will keep clear of the races, and never bet either on horses or cars."

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. That is all."

Algy looked at him in wonder.

"But—but you haven't said anything about coming to church, sir. I—I'll come to church every Sunday."

"No, you won't!" said Mr. Dodds. "I make no condition on that point. You can suit yourself exactly. It would do you good; but I want no hypocrisy, Snope."

"Ye-e-es, sir."

"Then I think we can call the matter settled."

"But—but—but—"

"Well?"

"I—I am twelve pounds behind with my accounts, sir," faltered Snope.

"I will see to that," said Miss Fawcett. "It would not be fair to Mr. Sands to leave him in ignorance of the fact—"

"You won't tell him?" shrieked Algy.

"He must be told," said Miss Fawcett gently. "We must be fair; but I will find the money for you to repay, and I will use all my influence with Mr. Sands to induce him to keep you in his employ. If it is unpleasant for you, you must regard that as part of your punishment. I cannot help you to deceive your employer."

"Oh, very well!" murmured Algy.

And so it was settled.

The inspector removed the handcuffs, and Mr. Dodds conducted the amateur blackmailer to the door.

Gladly enough Algy fled.

The juniors of St. Jim's saw him go, and they went to bed in a much more contented mood with the knowledge that the young rascal was being given another chance.

The capture of the "dreadful man" had quickly followed the arrival of the juniors at Laurel Villa, but they stayed till the end of the week all the same. On the Saturday afternoon they played the Ramblers at football. It was a changed and subdued Algy whom they met on the footer ground.

Algy was unable to meet their eyes, but the juniors made no allusion whatever to what had passed, and treated him with perfect courtesy, so he soon regained his courage.

The match was fareical. The juniors, with only nine on their side, simply walked over the Ramblers, who played eleven.

But the match showed Algy something of what football was like when it was well played, and it put new ideas into his head.

After the match he spoke to Tom Merry in a way Tom had never expected from the redoubtable sportsman.

"I've been a silly ass," said Algy in a low voice. "I'm going to run straight now. Mr. Sands has treated me very decently, though he keeps a sharp eye on me now. Miss Fawcett has settled it for me. What a wonderful old lady she is! I shall never forget how she has treated me!"

"Good!"

"I've dropped the sports," said Algy, with a grimace. "Some of them have dropped me, too. I'm going in for footer seriously this season. When you come down again I'll play you, if you like, and I think we'll give you a better game."

"Agreed!" said Tom Merry heartily.

And they parted on the best of terms.

And when the juniors took the train to return to St. Jim's, along with Miss Fawcett and Mr. Dodds on the platform to see them off was a weedy figure—without a cheap cigarette—waving a friendly hand, and Tom Merry waved back again to Algy Snope, the "dreadful man" whom they had come to Huckleberry Heath to discover.

THE END.

NEXT THURSDAY:

"THE D'ARCY CUP."

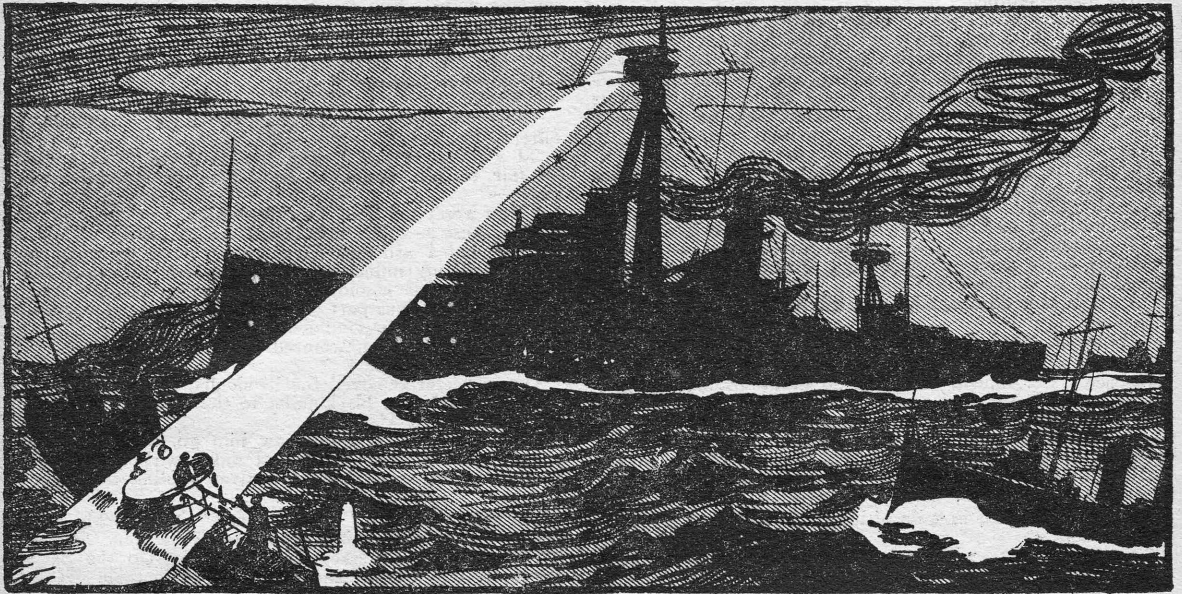
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BRITAIN AT BAY.



A Powerful and Stirring War Story.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sam and Stephen Villiers, two cadets of Greyfriars School, by a combination of luck and pluck render valuable service to the British Army during the great German invasion. They are appointed special scouts to the Army, which is forced back from London by Von Krantz, the German commander. At the time when this instalment opens, Sam and Stephen are interviewing Mulholland, the man at the head of the great League of Britons, Mulholland is explaining what he wishes the scouts to do when the League rises at midnight to sweep the Germans from London.

(Now go on with the story.)

The First Blow.

Mulholland spread a large scale map of London on the table, and the boys watched as he unfolded the scheme.

"You see this point here, where Berners Street narrows down before it joins Oxford Street? That is where I want you to make for," he said. "And you see this square of streets, with Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road forming two of its sides? Very well. The League is going to hold that square against the Germans, and defy them, and the opening of every street in it will be barricaded and defended with machine-guns and by League members. The Germans, being defied from the barricades, will call up their troops, and make a determined attack on the position. You understand?"

"Perfectly," said Sam. "But can it be done, sir? How are we to get machine guns and rifles in the midst of the German troops?"

"That is all prepared," said Mulholland. "Everything is ready. Small machine-guns—Maxims and pom-poms—have been smuggled into London piecemeal by the League agents, and put together in the houses. There are rifles by the hundred, too. Remember the vast size of London, and the millions of people in it, and you will guess how the thing has been done. We have been working like slaves the last fortnight, while you were with the Fleet. But this square of North London is the place where I want the Germans kept busy. Every house in those streets has its concealed League members ready to rise.

"Of course, the Germans may wipe you out, with the

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NEXT
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"THE D'ARCY CUP"

Is the Title of Next Week's Story.

twelve thousand men who will defend the place I am pointing out to you. But, for that matter, many hundreds of thousands of Britons must die within the next few days. The trained legions of the Kaiser are sure to inflict fearful loss upon a mob army of brave but untrained patriots, and only by sheer numbers and bravery shall we be able to overcome them."

Sam nodded. He knew it well enough.

"What I want you to do is to go to Berners Street as best you can, and seek out Sam Flynn in this house that I'm pointing out. He's a Frontiersman, and you and he will command the Berners Street defences. You will handle the guns, and he the riflemen. He is expecting you, for he knows I am sending him help. And now," said Mulholland, "I have much to do, so I'll leave you to learn the rest from him."

"We are to hold out as long as there's a man standing, of course?"

"Yes. And if you can keep the Germans off till midnight the hordes of South London may reach and help you. They will take the bridges by storm, after a heavy bombardment, and then they will swarm into North London, a million strong, and there the whole population will rise. A deadly and bloodstained struggle it will be, but, with Heaven's help, we shall prevail. You, with your little force at Oxford Street, will bear the first brunt of it, and stand the finest chance of being annihilated. It is the post of honour I'm offering you!"

"And we're grateful, I promise you," said Sam. "We'll not be annihilated, either, in a hurry. We'll start at once. There's one thing I'd like to ask you. What do the Germans think about the League? Are they doin' anything?"

"They have treated it with ridicule all along," said Mulholland, with a dry laugh. "They knew of its existence from the first, and Von Krantz, their commander-in-chief, mocked at the idea. But now, at the eleventh hour, they are getting a little scared. They have surprised some of our meetings in North London, taken many prisoners, and shot them out of hand. But they are too late, and in a few hours the signal will be given. One word more, Villiers. How do you propose to get across the river unchallenged?"

"We've still got the German railway service overalls we pinched out of the train," said Stephen. They were the only things the boys brought away with them, and Stephen had saved them out of the wrecked balloon before he left it.

"I thought they'd do us for a disguise over our own duds."
 "It's your best chance," said Mulholland. "There's a bit of a mist on the river, too. Go down opposite the Blackwall Tunnel, and you'll be able to get a boat there. Good-bye, my lads, and good luck to you!"

A warm handgrip was exchanged, and the brothers left at once on their perilous journey. They went quickly eastwards till they were opposite the Blackwall Tunnel, which had long ago been blown up and destroyed—and, by the advice of a League man, changed into the blue German overalls in a house fronting on the river.

"A bold stroke is our only chance," said Sam, as they took a boat and pulled out across the tide. "The new tunnel station on the other side is in German hands, of course, an' that's why Mulholland gave us the tip, because there'll be plenty of their military Railway Service men on and off there, an' we're more likely to be passed through. Hope they don't stop us, an' set us to work, though."

The landing proved much easier than they expected. A sentry challenged the boat, but allowed them to land on Sam's statement that he was on railway service. There was hardly anybody about except the picket; and, making a detour, the brothers avoided the station, and soon found themselves in the streets.

London north of the Thames seemed strangely quiet that day. There were fewer people in the streets than usual, and it was as though a storm-cloud hung over the place, ready to burst. The German troops seemed everywhere, as usual; but the huge, silent population remained indoors.

As the boys moved rapidly westwards, however, more and more people were to be seen. A German railway staff-officer stopped Sam and Stephen, and asked harshly where they were going. Sam saluted—it went much against the grain—and replied that they were under orders for Liverpool Street. The staff-officer bade them hurry, and went on his way.

It was a little after noon when the boys, turning the corner of a narrow street near Aldgate, came upon the first striking sign of the League. It was a large placard, printed in blood-red type, and, as if in sheer defiance, it had been pasted on top of one of the German commander-in-chief's proclamations.

"By gum!" said Stephen, stopping before it. "Look at this! Doesn't beat about the bush, does it?"

They read the placard, and it ran as follows:

LEAGUE OF BRITONS.

The time has come for vengeance. Take your weapons and make ready.

To-night, at midnight, rise and prove your power. Strike down the invaders wherever you meet them, and by any means.

Neither give nor take quarter. Avenge the innocent blood with which the land has been drenched. Free your country from the grip of the German tyrant.

Three million men are ready to rise in and around London. Strike fearlessly, and victory shall be ours!

DEATH TO THE GERMAN INVADER! REMEMBER! MIDNIGHT!

JAMES MULHOLLAND.

"That's the final of Mulholland's placards," said Sam, his eyes sparkling. "Look at the row in the next street! I'll bet they're being shoved on the walls everywhere by hundreds! There's no drawin' back now!"

A man, tall, gaunt, and ragged, came up just then, and read the placard. A fierce light of satisfaction came into his eyes, and he turned and saw the boys in their dungaree overalls.

"Can you read that?" he said, with a grim, menacing laugh. "In a few hours you German rabble will be rueing the day that you set foot in England! The sands of your lives are fast running out!"

Sam and Stephen turned away without answering, for others were fast arriving to read the placard, and they pushed on hastily towards Oxford Street.

"We've got to go carefully," said Sam. "We're in more danger from Britishers than from Germans, I fancy, while we're in these togs. Look—look, there's another placard! An' the whole street strewn with handbills, too!" he added, picking up a red square of paper, one of many that fluttered down from some window overhead, though they could see nobody when they looked up. The paper bore the same contents as the big placard.

"It'll be the same in every street through London," added Sam, with grim delight. "Twelve o'clock noon was evidently the time for givin' out the news. And at twelve midnight the League rises!"

"But isn't it giving the thing away to the enemy, as well as to the League?" exclaimed Stephen. "The Germans'll know, an' be prepared."

"That couldn't be helped, I reckon; and it don't much

matter, either. They'll know it, anyway. An' you couldn't spread the news among millions of scattered men in a few hours, an' make certain of 'em knowing, by any means except this. Now it'll spread like wildfire, in spite of all the Germans can do to stop it. In fact, all the legions of the Kaiser couldn't do it. And the Leaguers will remain quietly in their houses till the time comes. You wouldn't know 'em from any others."

"Suppose Von Krantz has the houses searched?"

"The soldiers who went searchin' a few thousand houses, half of which are full of armed and desperate men, would never come out of 'em alive!" said Sam grimly. "Von Krantz has bitten off more than he can chew. His victorious army looks fine in the open field, but what can it do, broken up in this great labyrinth of a city, if it comes to searching houses, and fighting the whole population?"

"We shall know before the sun rises," said Stephen, "which side has the best of it."

"I'll tell you where the death-traps for our side will be. In the big, open spaces like Trafalgar Square, where the German guns could mow down ten thousand men without losing a gunner. The narrow streets'll be our best friends. Hurry along; it's time we were at Berners Street. All London's buzzin' with the news by now."

Sam was right, and as they went onward they had the proof of it. Everywhere the handbills strewed the streets; piles of them were tossed from upper windows by unseen hands. A cloud of them fluttered down over the very heads of a troop of Prussian Uhlans who were riding along Holborn. Placards appeared everywhere—even under the noses of the Kaiser's troops and officials.

Frantic efforts were being made by the Germans to stop this eruption of placards, and in several places men were caught in the act of posting them up, and executed on the spot. Several times on their journey the boys heard the rifle-shots which told that some brave member of the League had been taken while spreading the news, placed against a wall, and shot without further parley.

At the corner of Southampton Street they saw a burly citizen struggling with a corporal's file of Saxons, two of whom he had floored with a short bludgeon before they seized him; and in another minute he, too, was lying on the pavement, with a dark stream staining the flagstones behind him, and three German bullets in his breast.

The sight made the two young scouts hot with anger; but they could do nothing. Their work lay in front. New Oxford Street was full of silent, sullen Londoners and German troops; but Oxford Street itself was clearer, and when the brothers turned into the narrower thoroughfare of Berners Street, it was like leaving a crowded river for a backwater. There were only a few people about, some distance up the street, across the narrowest part of which was a rough barricade of bricks and flagstones, cleared away in the middle, and looking only half finished.

"Hallo," said Stephen in surprise, "have the Germans been lettin' 'em put up barricades, an' done nothing to stop it?"

"No, no!" said his brother. "That's the remains of the old barrier that was made when Von Krantz first invaded London. There was a lot of on-and-off street fightin', you know, and that's one of the small barriers. They've been cleared away in the main streets, but in these side-streets nobody's bothered about them, as there's no traffic. That's partly why Mulholland chose this square of streets, I expect, for there are several of these barriers in it. They'll want a lot of adding to before they're good enough for what we want; but they'll be a useful foundation."

Stephen wondered how they were going to be built up in such a hurry; but they had now arrived at their destination, and Berners Street seemed unnaturally quiet. There was a sort of threat in the silence that lay over it, and Stephen felt as if the very stones were watching him. The house Mulholland had pointed out, on the left-hand side, was just beyond the old barricade.

The front door was within half an inch of being shut, and Sam thought he saw it move very slightly as they approached. He knocked upon it quickly, but there was no answer from inside, and a second knock was also unheeded. Deciding it would not do to wait outside, in case they were seen, he thrust the door open, and both the boys walked in.

The hall was empty, and Sam, passing along it, called out in a low voice, in English. Still no reply. But as they came abreast the first door there was a sudden rush, and in an instant both the boys found themselves in the grip of immensely powerful hands, and dashed violently against the opposite wall, where they were held fast. A knife flashed before Sam's face.

He managed to gasp out the password of the League, and made the sign with his free hand—and only just in time. The person who had grabbed him—a tall, bronzed man, with a grip like steel bands—released Sam at once.

"Hold up there, boys!" he said quickly to his comrades, five of whom had suddenly appeared as if from nowhere.

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"It's all right. Shut that front door. Say, who are you?" he queried, looking keenly at Sam.

"Leaguers," replied the young scout. "We're from Mulholland. Is Sam Flynn here?"

"Gosh! You spoke just about in time, or you'd ha' had the steel through you," said the big man, who had a strong American accent; "we're taking no chances to-day, an' when we saw you comin' up the street in that rig-out we laid for you, in case you made trouble. Those darned German duds are a disguise to get you through—eh? Well, I'm Sam Flynn!"

"Then here's a note for you from our leader," said Sam, handing him Mulholland's letter. It was in cipher, and while Flynn was making it out, the brothers took a glance at the other men.

They were a miscellaneous crew, but very useful-looking and hard-bitten, and were watching the boys closely and in silence.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Flynn again, when he had read the note. "You're the Greyfriars scouts, then?"

"That's us," Sam replied, slipping out of his overalls. "We can shed these togs now, I think."

"I'm blessed glad to see you!" said Flynn, gripping his hand, and shaking it warmly. "You'll take charge of the guns, of course. An' your young brother, I've heard, is a carbine-sharp—we want men who can shoot. Gosh! I'll bet we've got a soft thing on now you've brought your luck along! We know you're dead-sure mascots!"

He made the young scouts known to his comrades, who all greeted them warmly.

"Service-kit—eh?" said Flynn, glancing at the brothers' worn khaki clothes. "You'd best not show yourselves out o' doors till the time comes to raise Cain. There's plenty to do in here till then. I'm goin' to make you acquainted with our little preparations here, so's you'll know what's what. An' I'm not above takin' hints either, old bird as I am at the game, for I know you've been right up to the neck in experience lately."

"Are these all your men?" said Sam.

"Gosh, no! There's twenty in this house alone, mainly in the upper rooms, lyin' on their rifles, an' ready for the word 'Go!' We've a hundred and fifty more in other houses handy, and as many again a little way back. All the streets on the block are furnished the same—we've been gettin' ready on the quiet for a week. Come round, an' I'll show you where the gear is."

The upper rooms, as Flynn said, were full of riflemen, all of them civilians, starved-looking and ragged, but with grimly-determined faces. They lay on the floor out of sight of the windows, talking quietly, and tending their weapons.

In one of the back lower rooms, entered by folding doors, three men were putting together a one-pounder Maxim, or "pom-pom," and carriage, which was just narrow enough to pass through the big front door when needed. An ordinary rifle-cartridge Maxim was already in order, at the back of the hall, behind some curtains. Sam overhauled the pom-pom skilfully, and helped them put the finishing touches to it.

"You're a real gun-sharp, I can see," said Flynn; "these two are our pets, an' it's been a rare job gettin' 'em here in bits. Yonder's the ammunition-room—come and look at it. I wish we weren't so short of rifles. Some of our men have only got pistols, and a few nothing but knives and such-like. We've a scheme for gettin' more rifles from the Germans when we start, though, an' I've a spare Martini repeater your young brother can have, anyhow."

"What about building up the barricades?" asked Stephen.

Flynn led them to the large covered back-yard. It had been paved with flagstones, but all these were now prised up, and stood on end in orderly rows. There were also twenty large bags packed with earth and broken concrete.

"We shall have a party taking these flagstones an' bags through into the street an' stacking 'em on the barricade," he said. "I've picked out the handiest men for it, an' we'll handle the lot out in five minutes. Flagstones make the finest barriers you can get. The next four houses on each side are ready in just the same way, with their back-yards torn up, and at the signal they'll be running out with the stuff before you can wink, an' finishing the barrier."

"Rippin'!" said Sam enthusiastically. "You've worked the arrangements splendidly, and I'd as soon think of offering hints to my grandfather. Mulholland knows how to pick his men—eh? You're an American, aren't you, Mr. Flynn?"

"Not on your life!" said the big man. "I'm a Canadian. Was in Strathcona's Horse, an' lately a Frontiersman; but we're all in the League now. Come upstairs; there's somethin' I want to point out to you."

He led Sam to the second floor, to a front room with two windows, and occupied by five men with rifles, and was calling Sam's attention to a cupboard stocked with a supply of

small hand-bombs, when a clatter of hoofs below made him stride cautiously to the open window and look down.

"Hallo!" he said. "Those must ha' come right through our district from Tottenham Court Road. We ain't troubled by many."

A troop of a dozen Germans on horseback—Westphalian Mounted Infantry—in charge of a subaltern, were riding at a foot-pace towards Oxford Street, right under the windows.

"I expect they've been through to see if anybody's postin' those placards," said Sam.

"Well, nobody has. There ain't any need of it in our streets here, for all our men know about it, an' we don't want a fuss raised before we're ready."

"Looks as if there'll be one if somebody isn't careful, though," observed Sam. "See that?"

The Westphalians were riding through with the full amount of swagger, which all German soldiers, especially the mounted men, were wont to show in the conquered city, as they supposed it to be. There were several more men in the street now, evidently emerged from the houses; but, of course, unarmed. These had to get out of the way of the troop.

The barricade was just ahead of the Germans, and the space by which the horses could pass through it was narrow. Right in this space stood a young Londoner, a good-looking and powerfully-built fellow, who was taking no notice of the riders behind him, but was looking with interest towards Oxford Street, where some sort of a fracas was in progress.

He did not step out of the way of the troop, and the Westphalian lieutenant, with a sharp command in German to "get out of the road!" struck him a heavy blow with the flat of his sword.

The young man spun round, his eyes blazing with anger, and, springing at the officer, he seized him, and hauled him out of the saddle with one jerk. The German came to the ground heavily, his sword clattering upon the stones of the barricade. Instantly, one of the troopers levelled his rifle, and shot the Englishman dead.

A cry of rage broke from the lips of the riflemen in the room where Sam stood—for they had risen to their feet and saw the occurrence—and two of them shouldered their weapons to take aim at the German trooper.

"Back!" cried Flynn fiercely. "The first man who fires without leave I will shoot with my own hand!"

The defenders drew back sullenly, and breathing hard. But the League men outside were less disciplined than those in Flynn's house, and in a moment the fat was all in the fire. Another man who was standing by the barricade, infuriated at the death of his comrade, whipped out a six-shooter, and brought the trooper who had killed him toppling from his horse.

A sharp spatter of firing followed on the report, the Westphalians pulling up and letting fly at all the civilians around them indiscriminately. Most of these were not armed, and in a few seconds five of them lay dying on the road.

But a swift and terrible vengeance descended on the Germans. While they were still shooting down the men in the street, the windows of the houses opposite were suddenly flung up, and a withering rifle-fire poured down upon the troopers. From a dozen windows the pale flashes of flame spurted out, and in less time than it takes to tell it, six saddles were emptied, and the road began to look like a shambles.

The subaltern tried to jump upon his horse again, but was shot even as he did so. The remaining troopers made a bewildered attempt to return the fire, but the volleys from above were too much for them, and, setting spurs to their horses, four survivors galloped towards Oxford Street, shouting the alarm. But they could not ride away from the bullets, which followed them like hail.

Three more paid the penalty, and the last of all, before he had covered fifty yards, plunged forward, and fell, his riderless horse galloping on into Oxford Street.

"Blazes take it!" cried Flynn savagely, rushing to the landing and down the stairs. "Those fools opposite have forced our hand an' spoiled the show—we weren't to have started for two hours yet, and we aren't ready! Below there!" he shouted. "Barricade-gang, pass out those stones and bags for all you're worth! Lively now, or we're done! Irvine, bid the other houses get to it like lightning! Send runners to let the other streets know, if the firing hasn't warned them! Villiers, get your guns out, man!"

All was furious hard work, almost before the words were out of his mouth. Men were running out, bearing the paving-flags between them, and piling them on the barrier. Sam jumped for the room where the one-pounder Maxim lay, and sent in a couple of men to haul out the other.

"If we fail through this, may the chumps who opened fire on those Germans be the first ones shot!" cried Flynn furiously, with all a leader's just anger for subordinates who imperil his plans by disobeying orders in a great crisis.

"Riflemen, out there—the two front houses! Quick, you slugs, before the Germans get in on top of us!"

Stephen had already seized his Martini rifle and a bandolier of cartridges, and run out into the street. If the League men had been undisciplined in firing on the troopers, at least they were smart at their work. From each of the four houses nearest, a stream of men were passing out the materials for the barrier, which was growing bigger and more formidable every second.

They were none too soon—indeed, not soon enough, for already the Germans were hurrying to avenge the attack on the troopers. A full company of Saxon infantry with fixed bayonets, under two officers, turned out at Oxford Street and came doubling at full speed towards the barrier which was not yet complete.

In a twinkling, however, fifty riflemen from the house took up their places at the two ends of the barricade, leaving the middle for the gangs to build up. A deadly fire at once swept the street, and in the face of it the Saxons went down like ripe corn. Before they had covered half the distance, they found it utterly impossible to reach the barricade in the face of such a fire—their numbers were not great enough. Not one of the Westphalians had escaped to report the strength of the defenders, and the Saxon captain did not know what he had to face. But, having lost half his men, he retreated pell-mell towards Oxford Street, leaving the road strewn with fallen men. A cheer went up from the barricade, which was now nearly ready.

"Hurry, there, you cripples!" shouted Flynn, who was working like a demon with the rest. "We shall have 'em on to us in six times the strength before you can wink!"

The instant the places for them were ready, Sam came swiftly out with his pom-pom, and with the help of two of his men, fixed it on one plank of the barricade, its muzzle pointing over.

He rapidly placed the feeding-belts in order, and took his place, singlehanded, behind the deadly little gun. The Maxim was already at the other end, with an expert to handle it.

"Here they come!" was the cry. "Give it 'em from the first start-off!"

Barely had the guns been placed, when a rattling hail of bullets drummed on the barricade from Oxford Street. Then it ceased, and a far more formidable force than the first came sweeping down Berners Street, as fast as they could rush, with loud cries of "Hoch!"

Whir-r-r-r-r-r! stammered the Maxim, and the coughing pom-pom-pom-pom-pom-bang! Pom-bang-bang! of Sam's weapon, broke out with deadly effect. His hand gripped the lever, and his eye glinted coolly along the jacketed barrel. The Germans were falling faster than leaves in autumn, but still they came on.

"Keep low!" Flynn's voice roared above the whir of the guns. "Pump it into 'em! More rifles at the back here!"

The drab-coated soldiers of the Kaiser came sweeping onward in hordes, bent upon storming the barricade, and wiping out of existence the little force of defenders that had the insolence to defy them.

But the advantage now lay with Flynn and his men. Two machine-guns and fifty picked riflemen behind a stone barrier, can keep a narrow street against a host. The first attack had failed for want of men. The Saxons now relied on their numbers, and the short distance they had to go.

Yet it was too far for them. A very pestilence of bullets spouted from the barricade, and the Saxons fell as fast as they could advance. Sam's eye glinted coolly along the pom-pom's barrel, as he swung it gently to and fro, sweeping the street with a stream of small shells, that cut the attackers into mere human wreckage.

On the other side the Maxim was doing similar work. The asphalt of the roadway was heaped and blocked with bodies.

So determined had been the attack, that a dozen or so Saxons, keeping close to the houses, had managed to rush in, and avoid the fire, hurling themselves upon the barricade.

They were met with rifle-butt and revolver, and paid for the attempt with their lives. A few sprang over the flagstones and sandbags, bayonet in hand, only to be instantly overwhelmed, and laid low by the defenders behind.

The guns and the rifle-fire seemed to present a perfect wall of lead, so that beyond a certain point in the street, not a man could pass, save the few who had dashed through by the sides.

Even these were stopped now. The Saxons, finding success impossible, halted, broke, and fled, pursued by the drumming guns, and a cheer rose from the little garrison of Leaguers.

"They've got their gruel!" cried Stephen, whose rifle-muzzle was hot enough to scorch his hands. "They're beat!"

Berners Street looked like a shambles in places, and especially at the rallying-point, the dead lay in heaps.

Right away down to Oxford Street the paving was littered

with prostrate, drab-coated forms, showing how terrible had been the effect of the guns.

Now that the firing was over, the sound of strife in several other quarters could be heard. East, towards Tottenham Court Road, there was a dull roar of shouting, and the crackling of musketry, followed by the vicious shatter of Maxims.

Behind, northward, and to the left as well, the distant clamour of forces doing battle to the death, came plainly to the ear.

"The other barriers are manned!" said Tom Flynn exultingly; and almost directly afterwards he received a message from the Tottenham Court Road barricade:

"Our chaps are holdin' their own, and the Germans are attacking all round! We're driving 'em back at every point!"

"Hope it'll last!" said Sam, rapidly attaching fresh cartridge-pads to his gun.

"We've got to make it last till midnight if we can. They may not wipe us out after all. I'm durned obliged to you, Villiers, for the way you worked that gun. It was a pictur'. Yes; and the Maxim man, too. Look alive there, men! More ammunition down!"

"Will they attack again?" said Stephen.

"Of course they will! But exactly what they'll do, it's hard to say. They ought to ha' learned their lesson by now!"

"By Jove, it's getting rather dark!" Stephen exclaimed, for twilight was fast settling upon the great city. "I'd no notion it was so late."

"We've spent a good long time over it, first an' last," Flynn replied, "since you arrived. Time flies fast at this sort of thing. I wonder what those galoots, yonder, mean to do?" he added, gazing towards Bedford Street.

All was comparatively quiet in the direction of the German forces, and they took care not even to cross the line of fire from the barricade.

Still, it was absolutely certain that the German commander-in-chief would not let things remain as they were. He had no choice but to wipe out of existence the force that had defied his authority, and that as quickly as possible. The League warnings and placards were giving plenty of anxiety.

The next thing the defenders knew, a barricade of waggons was quickly drawn across the opening of Berners Street, and from it a spattering rifle-fire began to beat upon the stone barrier of the League men.

This continued some time. Flynn bade his men lie flat behind the flagstones, and only return a very slight fire, not exposing themselves an inch more than was necessary.

"We can't afford to lose men—we shall want 'em all at the pinch," he said, "and it won't do to play the guns on that barrier of waggons. We should waste ammunition without doing much execution, an' we've none to spare."

"Are they going to keep this up for good?" said Stephen.

"Not they! It's only the preparation for another go at us! They can't afford too much time."

Yet the fusillade kept up unwearyingly, for what seemed to be an age. Very little damage was done, though the bullets flew thick and fast, for the barrier was a sure protection. Presently the fire redoubled, and in the gloom—for it had long been quite dark—large companies of men could be seen massing behind the waggons.

"Ah," said Flynn pensively, "well an' good! They mean to pepper us until they've made it too hot, an' thinned us out, an' then they'd put in the biggest charge yet, to carry the barricade. Well, we'll let 'em."

"Let 'em!" echoed Stephen.

"You bet!"

He gave orders for all his men, except half a dozen, to return quietly into the houses, keeping low. The breech-blocks of the Maxim and pom-pom were taken, too, leaving the guns untended. In a little while the barricade was deserted, save for the six Leaguers, who kept up a brisk fire, though without showing themselves, or doing any execution. The Germans delivered a terrific and searching rifle-fire on the barricade, and the street hummed with bullets.

"This is where we trap 'em," said Flynn softly, as his six men gradually ceased to fire. "They'll charge in a minute. They'll get over the barricade, but few will ever go back again, except feet first."

Then it was that the boys saw the reason of Flynn's strategy. The firing from the defender's barricade had ceased. The Germans, concluding that their withering rifle-fire had silenced it, came on to the attack. The waggons were swiftly drawn back, and three full companies charged with the bayonet. Not a gun greeted them from the barrier.

Flynn intended that they should not break, and fly this time, but be annihilated.

"Every German life that's taken now, is a riddance for Britain!" said Flynn grimly.

On they came, the soldiers of the Kaiser, hungry for vengeance upon the half-starved, ragged little band. The bulk of the defenders, they believed, lay dead beyond the wall of flagstones.

With hoarse cheers they leaped the barricade, and not till they were well within it did they feel the strength of the defenders. To their amazement the street was deserted.

Then, with a rattling crash, a hundred rifles suddenly opened fire upon them from the windows above. The confusion in the German ranks was fearful. Fifty men went down at the first discharge, and still the devastating volleys continued. Every casement seemed to be spouting tongues of flame straight down upon them. Nor could they reach the men of the League, who were wiping them out of existence.

Many fired blindly at the windows, with little effect, to be shot down likewise the next moment. Others battered on the back doors of the houses furiously, but vainly trying to force a way in. There was no room for the Leaguers to miss. In thirty seconds the bulk of the German companies were decimated. The rest tried to escape, but very few got away. The rifle-fire followed them, and hardly were the last of the Germans in flight when the League men poured out of the houses, and Sam and his partner sprang to the pom-pom and Maxim again.

Flynn sat behind the barricade, smoking silently, and looking up, a grim, expectant expression on his face.

Presently, after another half-hour, a surprise occurred. A dazzling white searchlight sprouted its ray from Oxford Street, lighting up the barrier and its defenders as brightly as mid-day. And behind a couple of low trolleys that had been pushed into position in the street, under cover of the darkness, three grim, black muzzles, like iron rings, could just be made out.

"What now?" exclaimed Stephen.

"It's what I feared," said Flynn grimly. "The guns—they must have been all this time bringing them from Hornsey. They've fairly got us now—nothing can stand against those shells. Loose off with the pom-pom, Villiers, an' see if you can get that searchlight!"

The pom-pom spoke almost before he had given the order. But the next moment one of the field-guns the Germans had brought, opened with a loud boom. The shell burst with fearful force against the barrel, and a splinter of it struck and wrecked the pom-pom hopelessly.

Two tremendous explosions followed, each illumined by a blinding flash as the shells burst.

It was the beginning of the end. The barricade gave way slowly and relentlessly before the frightful power of the high explosives, and the League men fell fast.

How London Rose Against the Invaders.

As the first shell crashed into the barricade and wrecked the machine-gun, Sam was knocked bodily backwards by the shock. He found himself on the pavement below, his arms numbed from wrist to shoulder by the ringing of the barrel when the fragment of shell struck it, for his hands had been on the levers.

Though he himself was not hit, the force of the explosion so close at hand stunned him for the moment; but he recovered to find his brother, greatly alarmed at his collapse, kneeling beside him.

"Here's a go! The gun's done for!" gasped Sam ruefully, picking himself up.

The roar and flash of the shells, that now began to come thick and fast, very soon showed that the barricade was doomed. Nothing could be done against such a battery at close range. The rifle-fire of the defenders had very little effect, and even as Sam rose, six of them were blown into eternity by a single shell that drove straight in amongst them.

It was a chance shot, for few shells as yet reached the inner side, but they were pounding away with fearful force against the outer, and already parts of the solid barrier were giving way, while splinters of stone and shell swept the place in showers; and every man who showed himself in the slightest, paid the penalty.

Flynn's voice roared out like a bull's:

"To the houses! Keep under cover, and get into 'em as quick as you can! Leave the barricade!"

It was a wise order, for nothing but butchery could await those who remained behind, neither could they do any good by staying. In a short time all the defenders, keeping flat to the roadway, made for the shelter of the houses; but many did not reach them, being caught by shrapnel bursting overhead and raining down upon them. A score of men met their end, and in a little while the rest were in the building, safe for the moment.

"It's a sickly thing to give back!" growled Flynn, tying a rough bandage round his thigh, which had been torn by a flying splinter of stone; "but there's no use throwin' men away. We'll save 'em for the finish."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—87.

NEXT
TUESDAY:

"THE D'ARCY CUP"

Is the Title of Next Week's Story.

"When'll that be?" said Stephen, as they moved towards one of the windows.

"When they've cleared the street," said Flynn. "Both the guns are scrap-iron before now—an' look at the barricade. Well, I suppose we should be glad they didn't manage it earlier. We've laid out three times our weight in 'em," he said grimly, "so whatever happens to us now, we'll have had the best of the bargain."

"Yes," said Sam thoughtfully, "it looks as if we're done for. Well, it's what we were told to expect, and I think we've done our duty. They'll pour in a battalion, of course, as soon as the barrier's down?"

"That's it. An' we can't hold 'em back, with no guns. But we'll account for a few more of 'em before they can storm each house in turn, and bayonet the last of us."

"But can't we let 'em have it from the windows, as we did an hour ago?" cried Stephen eagerly. "Why not?"

"You'll soon see why not, youngster. There'll be no windows to shoot from, an' precious little house either, by the time they're ready."

His words soon proved true enough. The German battery, at present, was devoting itself to the barricade, which was gradually melting under the blast of the shells, as a ridge of sand melts before the breakers in a gale.

Flagstones, sandbags, and all the rest, were being blown to pieces and scattered remorselessly. The field-guns were capable of dealing heavy damage, even at two or three miles' range, and at a point-blank distance of only a few hundred yards it can be imagined how terrible was their effect. What little glass there was in the windows of the houses was soon shivered out of them, and a storm of splinters beat on the brick walls and hurtled into the front rooms.

Presently, when the barricade was levelled and ruined, the next stage of the bombardment began. The guns fired slantwise at the houses to either side, and great breaches rapidly appeared in the walls.

The brickwork front wall of the room Flynn and the boys were in, was suddenly carried away for a space of ten feet, and the room, shaking with the explosion, filled with acrid fumes. Flynn rapidly withdrew his men into the back part of the house, and then mounted at once to the roof, whence he was able to overlook the enemy's operations, with five or six of his companions, including Sam and Stephen. The latter wanted to try his carbine against the German gunners, but Flynn stopped him.

"The batteries are masked," he said; "you'll do no good, and only draw their fire higher. I want to save my men for the last of it, an' to die with an enemy's gun in front of you's a better game than bein' blown to bits from a distance. Durn them guns!"

"They've been a good while about it," said Sam. "The night must be growing old."

Flynn heard the remark—though it was not easy to hear anything but the boom of the guns—and seemed to arouse himself out of a sort of brown study into which he had fallen.

"What time is it?" he said. "Has anyone got it on him?"

The ragged, hunger-stricken Leaguers—though more than one had owned a gold watch in his day—shook their heads. As for the boys, they had only Sam's old watch between them. It had held out in a marvellous manner, but within the last day or two had given up under the hardships it underwent, and worked no more.

"I should think about ten," said one, and Stephen guessed it to be nearer eleven.

"I should put it at a lot later than even that," said Sam, half to himself.

"What's the time matter to us, anyway?" put in one of the Leaguers. "We sha'n't see the sun rise, an' all I care for is to send a few more of those drab-coated devils on ahead of me before I go down. Gun or bayonet, 'twon't be much longer for us. Let 'em come!"

But Flynn was looking keenly at the German battery, whose fire now seemed sharper than ever. The house-fronts for some way up the street were now mere hollow shells. The ruin was frightful, and several men in each house had fallen during the bombardment.

But, just at its height, a change came over the battery. Two of the guns ceased firing, and some commotion could be seen about them. A dull, confused noise, and the sound of fierce shouting came from the street beyond. Then the other two guns ceased also.

"They're swinging 'em round!" cried Sam. "By gum, they're bein' attacked from the west—from Regent Street!"

"An' from the other side as well, or I'm a Dutchman!" Stephen exclaimed. "Listen to that!"

The little knot of defenders stared for a few moments in amazement. A sharp, fierce clamour arose all the length of Oxford Street. The guns had indeed been swung round—two each way.

"The League's risen! That's what it is!" cried Flynn, springing towards the roof trapdoor. "We've misjudged the time, and it's midnight! Down quick, and take the guns on the flank—we shall help 'em that way!"

In twenty seconds they were out among the ruins in the street, and from every house Flynn's men poured in a body. Away they went like madmen, straight for the German battery.

What the enemy had to face beyond, Flynn's command neither knew nor cared. The battery was dumb, and they made for it at top speed.

One of the guns was turned again to face them, and opened fire, the shell killing six or seven men in line. But it did not stop the rest. Deadly as the field-guns were in a bombardment, they were not rapid-firing enough to stop a short rush. Maxims could have done it easily, but before four shells were fired, Flynn's men had reached the guns.

Now that there was help beyond, it was by far their best chance, and till Oxford Street was reached, Sam and his brother did not realise how thoroughly the Germans had their hands full. As if from nowhere, a horde of armed civilians suddenly poured into the streets, and those who were nearest the scene of the fighting made for it pell-mell, fully a hundred strong.

They were armed in all sorts of ways—some few scarcely armed at all—but the fury of revenge was in them, and not a man of them all cared whether he lived or died. Such foes are always dangerous to face. They came into conflict at once with a full company of Saxons stationed near the battery, and these opened fire at once. But the League men dashed among them like a pack of wolves, scores dropping, dead or wounded, and the rest stabbing and slaying right and left. From the further side, in the Tottenham Court Road direction, another and larger body of armed men, who seemed to have sprung from the very stones, had absolutely swamped a section of Prussian infantry, overwhelming them, and trampling them underfoot, and were making also for the guns.

Flynn and his men leaped in upon the gunners, hungry to take their revenge for the comrades who had gone down in the bombardment. Eight or ten of the Leaguers fell before the German artillerymen's carbines before the rest reached them; but immediately afterwards the Germans were overwhelmed, and lay dead or dying among the wheels of their guns.

Sam beat down a tall artilleryman who fired a carbine almost in his face, and the gigantic Flynn, who seemed to prefer this style of fighting to any other, went through the guns like a mad bull, wielding a broken-stocked rifle in a way that no man could stand up against. Once through the battery, the boys found themselves in a wild, confused melee of Londoners and Germans, the former fully three to one, and the latter scattered and broken up, striving desperately with their enemies. And everywhere the hoarse cry went up: "England and the League!"

"Keep close by me!" cried Sam to his brother. "If we're separated, it'll be for good!"

Clubbing and stabbing and slaying, the fierce crowd, who had borne the insolence of the German invaders so long, and seen their homes desecrated, and their loved ones killed by bullets and starvation, fairly struck the enemy down, and stamped him underfoot. The German soldiers fought like demons, knowing they had no mercy to hope for. They had never given quarter to any civilian found with arms, and now it was the civilians who dealt out the punishment. Not a German in the whole five companies escaped.

Every moment Sam expected reinforcements of Von Krantz's men, with cavalry and guns, would be hurried to the spot. But none appeared. When the fierce affray in Oxford Street was at an end, and the riotous noise became less, a sound was heard that explained the reason.

A dull, hoarse roar that seemed to fill all earth and sky, grew slowly louder and louder. East and west, far north and south, right away to the Thames, and beyond, it was heard on every side, with the crackle of musketry and the sound of strife.

London had risen! Her millions were up in arms to deal with the invader who had ground her into the dust, and the fight to the death had begun.

The Disaster in Trafalgar Square.

"The Strand!" cried Sam to his brother. "They're up! Make for the Strand, and join with the Leaguers from across the water!"

Many who were near him, and heard the cry, took it up. But the bulk of the League men went wherever they listed—east, west, or south. It did not greatly matter—they had but one object in view. Wherever a German was found, he was to be put to death, nor did it matter how many lives were lost in the process.

There was no discipline or strategy. The first outbreak—the holding of the square of streets, and the rising of the

men who had checked the German guns—was Mulholland's scheme, and was cleverly planned. It had fallen out perfectly. But once the train of powder that raised all London was lit, no further scheme could be followed. Discipline or order among that huge crowd of armed and maddened civilians, was impossible, nor was there much need of it. It was every man for himself.

The two young scouts made their way as quickly as they could to Charing Cross Road, and went down it. They left behind them a fierce melee in New Oxford Street, where a battalion of Prussian grenadiers seemed to be getting the best of it; but what happened could hardly be seen. Fresh masses of Londoners kept adding themselves to the fight, which became a savage, hand-to-hand struggle.

London became the theatre of many an awful scene that night. The great hordes of armed men who had been gathering and waiting south of the Thames, added themselves to the conflict. For half an hour a tremendous bombardment of the German bridge guards and barricades, by strong batteries brought into Southwark and Battersea for the purpose, had taken place. Then, when the guards were beaten down by the artillery fire, thousands upon thousands of the League rushed the bridges and poured into northern London, driving back the far smaller German battalions wherever they met them.

In the open it would have been a very different matter. A large, trained army with plenty of guns, like Von Krantz's, could have inflicted fearful havoc on such a mob, however brave and reckless. But in the narrow streets, the swarming multitude, breaking out in every direction, had the better of it. They fought with the mad ferocity of men who have nothing to lose, and are not afraid to die.

Throughout the whole vast city the same thing was happening, from Hackney to Acton, and from Highgate to the Strand. Not a German squad, big or little, knew when it was safe. A battalion or a company marched quickly down a street, to be suddenly fallen upon from all sides, cut off, and annihilated. A squadron of cavalry would trot hurriedly down a thoroughfare, and without warning to the big troopers, fell dead or dying from their saddles as a blast of rifle-fire suddenly burst upon them from a hundred windows at once, where all had been quiet and still a little while before. Shot-guns, pistols, sporting-rifles, even old muzzle-loaders were used by hundreds, and in that close fighting, one was just as deadly as the other.

In many places, especially the open squares and parks, the Germans beat back their assailants with appalling loss. Over five thousand Londoners fell around St. James's and Whitehall, and as many more met their death in trying to assail Von Krantz's headquarters at the War Office. But all through the narrow streets and thoroughfares the killing of the Germans went on, every man dying with his weapon in his hand, and those who gave back and cried for quarter, shared the same fate. Too many Londoners had asked quarter in the dark days and been refused it, for any German to be shown mercy now. If Von Krantz's men got the upper hand, again, as all knew, there would be merciless executions by the hundred.

As rapidly as possible the Germans were being withdrawn from the streets, and gathered in the strongest positions. The rising of the League had been too thorough for this to be done easily. Scores of German companies and regiments found themselves cut off by streets full of raging Leaguers, and those that managed to fight their way through, only did it at enormous loss. Even when bayoneted and trodden under foot, the dying Londoner would often reach up and drag a German soldier down, while a comrade knifed him. None cared for the rules of war, nor in what manner they fought. It was the old and simple rule of life for life.

Sam and Stephen, hastening towards the Strand, found very few Germans in the way—they had been withdrawn from that route. Here and there a few scenes of bloodshed were to be seen, but the boys did not stay or halt. They struck out to the left through the narrower byways till they came to Bedford Street, where they found themselves in the midst of a hot encounter between a Prussian infantry force and a desperate mob of Leaguers, who were rapidly making short work of the foe.

The two brothers, hardly knowing what they did, fought and strove with the rest, surging back and forth with the crowd, and presently found themselves in the Strand. Fresh hordes of the League men were all the time pouring across Waterloo Bridge and through Wellington Street, most of them pressing westward. The roadway and pavement were strewn with the bodies of Germans, who had fallen in the first assault. The League had come off lightly here.

The young scouts were carried along by the pressing of the crowd westwards along the Strand, most of them men who had yet had no hand in the fight, and eager to strike. They had neither leaders nor plans.

"Hold back!" shouted Sam, as the west end of the Strand was neared. "Hold back, men! Don't tackle Trafalgar

Square—you can never cross it in the face of the German guns! Go where you can do good!"

A few of those nearest had knowledge enough to see that Sam was right, and added their voices to his. But the great blind mass of the crowd pushed onward without heeding, anxious only to get at their enemies. Those who wished to turn—the boys amongst them—were quite unable, and found themselves driven along as relentlessly as if before a tidal wave, by the hundreds pressing behind.

"Back, you idiots!" cried Stephen wildly. "You'll throw away your lives for nothing!"

It was too late. They had passed St. Martin's, there were no turnings on the north side, and Trafalgar Square came full into view, its great open space empty as a drum, except on the farther side. There across the opening of Cockspur Street, a whole line of German Maxims and pom-poms stood ready to sweep the Square.

With a terrific rattle they opened fire. A hail of lead met the ragged front of the armed mob as it debouched from the Strand, and men fell by the score, as though smitten down by an invisible hand.

There was no turning back. Those far behind still pushed on, and the men of the League were mown down in swathes. Dozens of them went down on one knee at once, and replied to the German fire with their rifles; but it was a hopeless butchery for the brave citizens who faced the pitiless hail from the German Maxims, and an awful scene of carnage followed.

Sam seized his brother by the arm, and jerked him behind a broken down waggon at the corner, which sheltered the two of them for the moment, though the bullets pattered on it like hail. Stephen, kneeling, fired his carbine between the wheels at the German front.

"That's useless!" cried Sam. "Our only chance is to get back. Take the first opening!"

It was true, for even trained troops could never have advanced in the face of such a Maxim fire, let alone a mob of badly-armed citizens, however brave. An appalling slaughter was the result, nearly a thousand Londoners falling before the vast crowds behind realised the mistake, and gave way. Then those in front fled back into the Strand, many of them being shot down on the way.

Sam and Stephen, taking a line from the waggon, with several other refugees, managed to regain the street safely. The rage of the Leaguers was great. They had learned their lesson, and, breaking away through the narrow streets, they shouted to each other to work round and attack the Germans from the rear.

A fierce uproar, down by the Charing Cross Underground Station, next the Embankment, was heard almost at once. An entire battalion of Wurtemberg Grenadiers had been sent to try and capture it, but found themselves set upon and hemmed in by over three thousand maddened Leaguers, who shot and stabbed and fought like fiends. A stern revenge was taken for the slaughter in Trafalgar Square, and scarcely one of the big Wurtembergers escaped alive. The swarming hordes of Londoners were everywhere.

The two brothers found it quite impossible to get across the bridges, on account of the packed legions pouring across them. Thousands upon thousands of men from the Kent and Surrey towns, who had moved into South London in readiness; and outside, as the boys knew, the Leaguers who were joining with Lord Ripley's regular forces were to be counted by millions and not thousands. From all over Britain they had gathered together, nor could the German Army prevent them.

The rest of the scenes of carnage and battle which filled London that night must be left unspoken of. About three in the morning the two brothers, utterly weary and dead-beat with their labours of the day before, crept in a half-ruined house in Catherine Street, and, lying on the bare boards in a first-floor room, slept the sleep of exhaustion. And all through

the dark hours, the great city roared with the sounds of strife and bloodshed.

When Sam and his brother awoke, it was ten o'clock, and the distant rattle of rifle-shots told them that fighting was still in progress. Both of them were possessed with a raging hunger, and, after eating the rations they had brought with them, and drinking from a tap—the water-mains were still running—they sallied out into the street. There were far fewer people in the Strand now.

"How have things gone?" cried Sam, stopping a man who wore the badge of the League, which all wore openly now.

"Von Krantz is finding out that he's in for it!" replied the Leaguer. "The Germans have lost thousands of men, an' they're all falling back on the chief positions. They're the defenders now, an' we're the attackers. They're just managing to hold their own, an' that's all. A million and a half of Londoners are more than they can handle."

"Good! And outside the town?" cried Stephen.

"Lord Ripley, helped by a big force of Colonial troops an' artillery, has beaten the Germans back from the river. He's massing over two million Leaguers along by Staines, and I reckon he means to get 'em across and attack. The whole German army is concentrating there, under Prince Johann, who is Von Krantz's field-marshal. It'll come to a head in a few hours, very likely."

"By George!" exclaimed Sam, as the Leaguer hurried off. "Steve, I don't see what good you and I are in London here. We're no great shakes at this street-fighting, for it's dirty, messy work, an' means just butchery on one side or the other. Scoutin' an' machine-guns are my game, marksmanship is yours, an' there's no use for either of 'em here."

"If we could get into the open—" began Stephen eagerly.

"We can't get any further orders from Mulholland, it seems. It's every man for himself now in the League once the outbreak's started."

Discontent fell upon the brothers, but they did not care to leave without orders from somewhere. Learning that a large force of Leaguers were attacking the Germans at Whitehall, they started in that direction, going round by the Embankment; but, as they passed Westminster Bridge, a man in torn khaki saw and came towards them.

"Hallo, ain't you the young Villiers' scouts?" he said. "Mulholland's word to you, if anybody came across you, was to join Ripley's force at Staines, an' report to the Fusiliers. All the scouts they can get are wanted badly."

"Here's our chance!" cried Sam. "Come on, Steve! Let's get into the middle of it!"

Nothing loth to turn their backs on the reeking, blood-stained city, the boys hurried across the bridge and made their way back eastwards to Waterloo. The line had been in full working order for some time, and the last of the regular troops, who had remained behind after opening up the bridges, were being dispatched post-haste to the front.


A railway staff officer, recognising the boys, at once gave them a place on one of the troop-trains, and in a very short time they were journeying rapidly towards Long Ditton.

The news of their defence of the barricades, with Sam Flynn, had reached South London, and they were greeted with congratulations.

"I don't think any of us regulars thought the League could really do what it has," said a colour-sergeant to Stephen; "but it's done grandly, not only here, but in the North. Birmingham, Hull, Newcastle—all are fighting just as London is. We've no news of the result yet, but you can bet they're doing well. The Scotsmen have swarmed in to join the League up that way, and are doin' grand work."

Once at Long Ditton, the boys made their way as quickly as they could to the Fusiliers' bivouac, and on the way they passed Lord Ripley's headquarters' tent.

(Another long instalment of this thrilling serial next week.)



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The Editor