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St. Jim's and the Mysterious X.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**

*Admirers of Tom Merry should buy our new
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out, and read the splendid tale dealing with the
famous junior's early schooldays.—EDITOR.*

CHAPTER 1. D'Arcy's Latest.

"It's up to us, deah boys!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, made that remark quite suddenly. He had been sitting silent for some time, which in itself was an unusual circumstance. There was a buzz of voices, however, in Study No. 6 in the School House, and the silence of Arthur Augustus had passed unnoticed. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, of the Shell, had dropped in for a chat with the Fourth-Formers, and they were all talking at once. They were talking about a recent happening at St. Jim's which had excited the whole school, and each fellow was giving his own views without paying much attention to the views of anybody else.

Hence it happened that D'Arcy's remark, when he came out of his deep reflections at last, passed unheeded. Tom Merry and Blake were both stating their opinions, and Monty Lowther was laying down the law; Herries, too, was talking, and tapping the table with his finger to emphasise his remarks.

Arthur Augustus polished his famous monocle, and jammed it into his eye, and glanced at his companions in a reproving way.

"It's up to us, deah boys!" he repeated.

"This is how I look at it——" said Tom Merry.

"My opinion is——" remarked Manners.

"I thought at the time——" said Blake.

"If Towser had been called in——" said Herries.

"You see——" said Digby.

"I thought all along——" said Monty Lowther.

"Bai Jove!"—Arthur Augustus rose to his feet—"I weally wish you would pay a little attention, deah boys! I made a wemark!"

"That's all right, Gussy," said Lowther. "So did I! So did we all! There's no law against making remarks."

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah! I made a wemark. I wemarked that it is up to us!"

"What is?" asked Tom Merry.

"It is up to us to look into this mattah!" said Arthur Augustus firmly. "If you will have the gweat kindness to leave off chattewin' for a few minutes I will explain my views."

"Go hon!"

"I'll tell you what!" said Blake, with the air of a fellow making a good offer. "You go out into the passage and explain your views, Gussy. Shut the door after you, and then you won't be interrupted."

"Good egg!" exclaimed Tom Merry enthusiastically. "There's the door, Gussy!"

"Hear, hear!" said the rest of the juniors.

Arthur Augustus did not move.

"I wegard you as a set of asses!" he said. "I have been thinkin' this mattah ovah while you chaps have been talkin'. The Head has been wobbed."

"That's ancient history," said Manners.

Next Wednesday:

"HARD TIMES!" AND "BIRDS OF PREY!"

"The Head has been wobbed," pursued Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, unheeding. "A vewy valuable picture has been taken out of his study. The Head has been goin' about lookin' like a moultin' owl evah since he lost his Wembwandt. The police have been lookin' for the thief, and lookin' for the picture. They can't find eithah. Therefore, I wepeat, that it is up to us!"

"Us!"
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "You're thinking of painting the Head a new picture?" asked Monty Lowther innocently.

"No, ass!" said D'Arcy. "You fellows will wemembah that I used to studay Sherlock Holmes' bizney at one time for amusement, and I thought at the time that I should make a wippin' detective if I had the time for it—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "I see nothin' whatevah to cackle at in that remark. The poor old Head has lost his Wembwandt, and he's takin' it as much to heart as if he had lost a new toppah. The Head is a good old sport, and I wegard it as our duty to wally wound him."

"Well, we could rally round him all right," said Blake. "No difficulty about that. But what good would it do?"
 "I am goin' to investigate the case," said D'Arcy. "You fellows can help me if you like. I feel assuahed that if I had time to look into the case I should be able to solve the mystery—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Pway be sewious, deah boys. I wegard this as a sewious mattah. I'm goin' to stand by the Head and do my best to find the missin' picture. I have made a studay of Sherlock Holmes' methods, and I have not the slightest doubt that I shall solve the problem if I bwing my bwain to beah upon it. I want all you fellows to back me up and help me. Of course, I shall do all the thinkin'."

The juniors regarded Arthur Augustus humorously. Arthur Augustus had a conviction that there were few things he could not do if he gave his mind to them. But that he should think of solving a mystery which had baffled the keenest detectives of Scotland Yard seemed rather rich.

"You'll do all the thinking?" asked Monty Lowther thoughtfully.

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "What with?"
 "Eh?"
 "What will you do the thinking with?" asked Lowther blandly. "My impression is that you haven't got the apparatus."

The juniors chuckled, and the swell of St. Jim's frowned.
 "Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah! This is a sewious mattah. I am goin' to take up the case. You fellows can help me if you like. I have thought the mattah ovah, and decided about it. You chaps know what a jolly good detective I should make—"

"Ahem!"
 "For instance," said D'Arcy, with a condescending smile, "I have studied the science of makin' deductions, like Sherlock Holmes. For instance, I can tell that you went out into the quadrangle before you came up here aftah third lesson, Tom Mewwy."

Tom Merry looked surprised.
 "You can tell that?" he asked.
 "Yaas, wathah!"
 "Did you see me?"
 "Wathah not."

"Then how can you tell?"
 "Because you have some mud on your twousahs," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy triumphantly. "It was wainin' this mornin', and you have got your bags mudday. You couldn't get them mudday in the house; therefore you went out into the quad, before you came up here. Now, if you had committed a cwime in the quad—"

"A—a what?"
 "A cwime," said D'Arcy firmly. "Of course, I don't mean to hint that you are capable of committin' a cwime—"

"You'd better not!" said Tom Merry warmly.
 "I am only puttin' a case, deah boy. Pway don't get your wag out. If you had committed a cwime in the quad, and twied to pwove an alibi, it would be no use, because I should be able to pwove that you went out into the quad. See?"

"I suppose you'd be willing to swear to it in the witness-box?" suggested Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"
 "Oh, good! As it happens I didn't go out into the quad," said Tom Merry cheerfully.
 "Weally, deah boy—"

"That mud on my bags was shied at me by your precious minor when I was looking out of the doorway after lessons—"

"Oh!"
 "I came straight up here after third lesson," said Tom Merry, grinning, "so your deductions are quite off-side."

"Ahem!"
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Weally, deah boys—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Of course, even the most expewienced detective cannot be wight ewevy time," said D'Arcy, unabashed. "Even Sherlock Holmes made mistakes at times. Howevah, I wepeat that I am goin' to take up the case. I will explain my vews to you fellows at length—"

"Will you?" said all the fellows together.
 "Yaas, wathah! I have been makin' some notes on the case, and I will wead them out to you, and explain as I go along," said D'Arcy. "Pway wait a minute while I get my pote-book; it's in my desk here."

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy turned to the desk in a corner of the study, and opened the lid, and rummaged among the papers inside. He had his back to the juniors, and they exchanged glances and smiles. They all rose on tiptoe, and tiptoed out of the study, while D'Arcy was searching in the desk. Blake was the last to go, and he drew the door shut quietly after him.

"Bai Jove, I know I put it here!" murmured D'Arcy. "I twust you fellows haven't been playin' twicks with my note-book."

The door closed softly.
 "Ah! Bai Jove, here it is!" said the swell of St. Jim's, taking a bulky pocket-book from the desk. "Now deah boys—"

He turned round.
 "Now, I will wead— Gweat Scott!"

Arthur Augustus gazed round him in astonishment.

He jammed his eyeglass a little tighter into his eye, and gazed round again. The study, excepting for himself, was empty!

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy.

He dashed to the door and threw it open and gazed out into the passage. The juniors had disappeared. Arthur Augustus frowned majestically.

"Bai Jove! The uttah asses! Bai Jove!"

Downstairs a bell was ringing. Tom Merry & Co. chuckled as they went into the dining-room. When Arthur Augustus came in, five minutes later, his aristocratic nose was very high in the air, and there was a lofty frown upon his brow, at which the juniors chuckled still more.

CHAPTER 2.

Arthur Augustus Does Not Go.

KILDARE of the Sixth, the captain of St. Jim's, tapped Tom Merry on the shoulder as the boys came out of the dining-room in the School House. The Terrible Three were walking with linked arms; but Manners and Lowther detached themselves, and strolled to the window to wait.

"Busy this afternoon?" asked Kildare.
 Tom Merry shook his head.

"No; we're not playing the Fourth," he said. "We were going to give Blake and Figgins a licking, but the grounds' too wet."

"Good. Can you go over to Glyn House with a message for me?"

That was a very nice way of putting it. Kildare, as a prefect, could fag the Shell if he liked, but he preferred to ask it as a favour.

"Yes, rather," said Tom Merry cheerfully. "I've got to go down to the village, and I could cut over to Glyn House at the same time if you like. I'll take Manners and Lowther, and Glyn's sister will give us some tea."

Kildare laughed.
 "I could send another kid if you like," he said. "Glyn's asked me to excuse him as he's busy on some work in his study. I could send Mellish of the Fourth, as the message is to his cousin, who is staying with Mr. Glyn."

"No; send me," said Tom Merry at once. "I'd like to see Captain Mellish again before he leaves for London. He's going back to town this week, I think."

Kildare's face clouded a little.
 "Are you sure of that?" he asked.

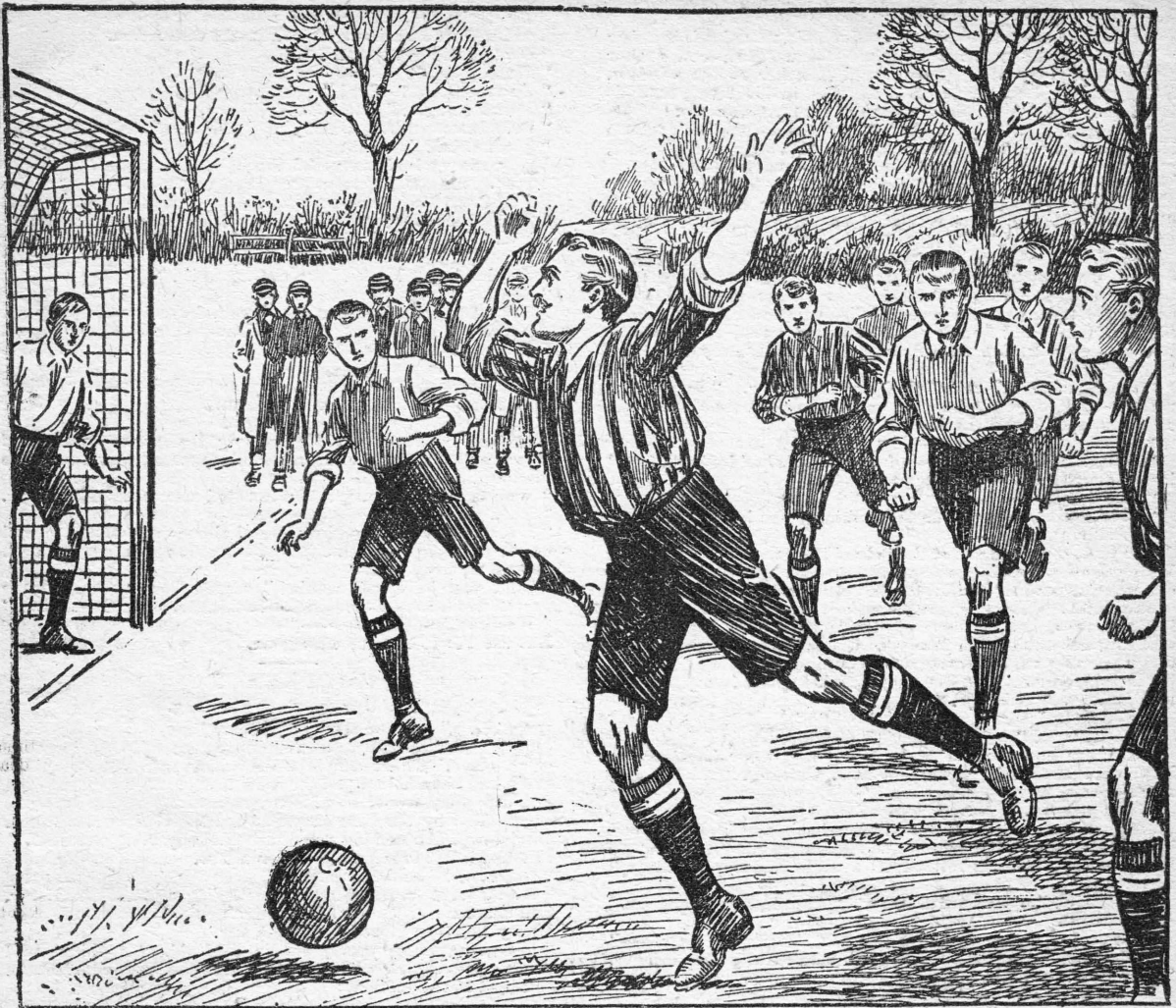
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Kildare's men were racing for the goal. Captain Mellish was about to kick when he was seen to stumble. He spun round on one foot and fell heavily to the ground. There was a shout of alarm at once. (See Chapter 11.)

"I think he goes back on Saturday," said Tom Merry. "You know he played footer for us against the Fifth last Saturday. I asked him if he'd like to come over for another match next Saturday, and he said he wasn't sure he'd be in the country then."

"Oh, that settles it!" said Kildare.

"What's the row?"

"You know we're playing the Wayland Ramblers, on Saturday?" said Kildare.

"Yes."

"Langton's hurt his ankle, and can't play. I was turning over in my mind whom I could play in his place, when I thought of Captain Mellish. He played up like a giddy International when he played for you kids on Saturday. He would play rippingly for us, and it would be rather more his mark playing in a senior team. I should like to have him on Saturday, if he's got nothing to do. But if he's going away, of course, that settles it. Anyway, you might take the letter."

"I should think he'd stay on purpose to play for St. Jim's seniors," said Tom Merry. The St. Jim's captain smiled.

"I hope he will," he said. "Come to my study for the letter before you start. I'll get it written now."

"Right-oh!"

Kildare walked away.

Tom Merry rejoined his chums. Manners and Lowther were looking out into the quadrangle. There had been rain recently, and the football ground was altogether too wet for play. The elms in the quad, stripped of their leaves by the November wind, were weeping with rain-drops. D'Arcy minor, of the Third Form, and several other fags were punting about a footer in the quad, and smothering themselves with mud with great enjoyment.

"What time do we start for the station?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Pretty soon," said Tom Merry. "Mr. Locke arrives by the three train. Kildare wants me to take a note to Captain Mellish at Glyn House. He's going to ask Captain Mellish to play for the First Eleven on Saturday. Langton's crocked."

"Good egg!" said Lowther. "The captain will be a surprise packet for the Ramblers. The Fifth haven't got over it yet, the way he helped us to lick them. Extraordinary thing that outsider Mellish should have such a ripping cousin as Captain Mellish—chap who passes like an angel and kicks goals like a cherub."

"Thank you," said Mellish of the Fourth, passing as Lowther made that remark.

Monty Lowther looked round, not at all abashed.

"Hallo! I didn't know you were there, Mellish," he remarked. "Queer thing that you always happen to hear what a fellow is saying. Listeners never hear any good of themselves, do they?"

"Oh, rats!" said Mellish.

"It is queer!" said Lowther argumentatively. "You're a rotten slacker, and you can't play footer for toffee. You wouldn't take a place in the House Eleven if it were offered to you. You'd rather hang about smoking cigarettes behind the wood-shed. Now your cousin is a ripping footballer, and a splendid chap all round. My advice to you is to take him as a shining example, and play up to him."

Mellish sneered.

"Thanks! when I want your advice I'll ask you for it!" he said. And the cad of the Fourth walked away.

"I'm going to Kildare's study for the note," said Tom Merry. "You chaps wait for me here. We'll go on to Glyn House after meeting Mr. Locke at the station."

"Right you are!"

Tom Merry went to Kildare's study. He came back in a few minutes with the note for Captain Mellish. He found Arthur Augustus D'Arcy with Manners and Lowther at the window. D'Arcy had his coat on, and a silk hat in his hand, and his beautifully shiny boots were protected by elegant spats.

"I'm comin' with you, deah boy," he remarked as Tom Merry came up. "I want to see Mr. Fewwahs Locke again, you know. Now I'm takin' up detective work——"

"Now you're whatting?" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Takin' up detective work," said Arthur Augustus, with dignity. "Undah the cires, I shall be glad to have a consultation with Mr. Locke."

The Terrible Three chuckled. Ferrers Locke, the famous detective, was coming down to St. Jim's to take up the case of the missing Rembrandt. Ferrers Locke was an old acquaintance of Tom Merry and Co., hence their intention of meeting him at the station. What the famous detective would think of the idea of a consultation with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could not be imagined.

"Come on, then," said Tom Merry, laughing. "Bring your note-book. You may be able to tell by the time the train comes in whether Mr. Locke will be able to find the picture."

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

"Or by the colour of his eyelashes what he's had for breakfast," Monty Lowther remarked sagely.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"Sherlock Holmes can do these things, you know."

"Weally, you ass——"

The juniors walked out of the School House. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy frowned a little as he caught sight of his minor in the quadrangle, punting the footer to Jameson and Curly Gibson of the Third. Arthur Augustus was clean and neat, almost to fastidiousness, but Wally was decidedly the reverse. There was so much mud upon Wally at the present moment that it was not really easy to recognise him.

"Pway wait a minute, deah boys, while I speak to my minah," said D'Arcy. "Wallyay!"

Wally looked round.

"Hallo, Gus!"

"You are in a shoekin' state, you young wascal. Pway go in at once and make yourself a little cleanah!" said Arthur Augustus severely.

Wally grinned.

Jameson had sent the footer whirling back, and Wally stopped it with his head. The footer was thick with mud, and Wally's head was not in a much better state when he had stopped the ball with it.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated D'Arcy. "Stop it, you young ass."

"I have stopped it," said Wally innocently.

"You misapprehend me. You are in a disgustin' state——"

"Oh, don't you begin, Gussy," said Wally imploringly.

"Give us a rest, old man."

"Weally, Wally——"

"Pass that ball!" roared Jameson.

"Wally, you young boundah, I insist——"

"Oh, rats!" said Wally cheerfully. "Run away and play, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

To be told to run away by his minor was a little too much. Arthur Augustus strode towards the muddy fag. Wally did not retreat. He held the ball in his hand, and calculated the distance for a drop-kick.

"Look out, Gussy!" roared Tom Merry, reading Wally's nefarious purpose in his grinning face. "Look out, you ass!"

"I wefuse to be called an ass! I——Ow! ow!"

D'Arcy was within six feet of Wally. Wally dropped the ball and kicked it as it rose. Right into the face of the swell of St. Jim's it whizzed.

Arthur Augustus gave a wild yell, and staggered backwards. His silk topper fell off behind him, and Arthur Augustus landed

upon it as he fell. There was a terrific crunch as the topper was reduced into a curious imitation of a concertina.

"Ow! Bai Jove! Ow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Gweat Scott! Ow!"

"Pass that ball!" yelled Curly Gibson.

"Let's have our ball, D'Arcy major!" shouted Joe Frayne.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wally ran up and recovered the ball, and punted it over to Jameson. Arthur Augustus staggered to his feet. He rubbed the mud from his face and gasped. The Terrible Three roared.

"Oh! Bai Jove! There is no cause whatever for wibald laughah!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Ow! Where is my hat?"

"Ha, ha, ha! You've been sitting on it!"

"What?"

Arthur Augustus looked at the wreck of the beautiful topper, and his wrath overflowed. He made a wild rush at Wally, and the scamp of the Third fled at top speed. Arthur Augustus dashed wildly in pursuit.

"Well, if we wait for Gussy to chase round the quad, we shall miss the train," Monty Lowther remarked, grinning. "Come on."

The Terrible Three walked down to the gates. Wally and Jameson and Curly and Joe Frayne disappeared round the New House, and D'Arcy halted, panting.

"Wait for me, deah boys," he shouted after the Shell fellows.

"Buck up, then!"

"I shall have to go and wash and change my waistcoat and get out a new toppah, deah boys. I shan't keep you waitin' more than half an hour!"

"That you jolly well won't!" roared Tom Merry. "You jolly well won't keep us waiting half a minute, my son. Ta-ta!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy——"

But the Terrible Three were gone.

CHAPTER 3.

An Unexpected Meeting.

"RAIN!" growled Monty Lowther. It started before the juniors were half-way down the lane. Thick clouds were rolling across the sky, but the rain had been holding off for some time, and Tom Merry had hoped that they would be able to get into Rylcombe before it started. But by the time they reached the cross-roads, it was coming down, and coming down more heavily every moment.

The Terrible Three halted under a tree.

"Oh, blow!" said Manners.

"Might have brought an umbrella," grunted Tom Merry. "You chaps never think of anything."

Monty Lowther looked up at the sky.

"It's going to be pretty thick," he said. "I think we'd better get into shelter while it lasts. After all, we've got lots of time to get to the station."

"Good; cut across into the barn."

"That's the idea!"

The old barn was only fifty yards from the road, and a gap in the hedge gave admittance to the field. The Shell fellows turned up their collars, preparatory to making a dash through the rain. Tom Merry uttered a sudden exclamation. From the lane leading away from the main road in the direction of Glyn House, a figure had suddenly emerged. It was that of a tall, soldierly-looking man, with an overcoat on, and the collar turned up. He had a large cap pulled well down, but the Shell fellows knew him at once. It was Captain Mellish, a guest at Glyn House, and cousin of Mellish of the Fourth, the man who had played for the St. Jim's juniors in their footer match with the Fifth Form the previous Saturday.

Captain Mellish did not glance in the direction of the juniors, who were standing close to the tree at the side of the road. He crossed the road and passed through the gap in the hedge, and hurried towards the old barn in the field. In a moment the hedge hid him from sight.

"He's going to get shelter from the rain, too," said Manners. "You'll be able to get him Kildare's note now, Tommy, and save going to Glyn House. No catch walking there in this rotten rain."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Good!" he said. "Come on, let's run for it."

They ran along the hedge to the gap the captain had passed through. Through the driving rain they caught a glimpse of the tall figure, just disappearing into the barn. It struck Tom Merry as curious that Captain Mellish should be going there for shelter from the rain, after coming from the direction of Glyn House. It would not have taken him much longer to get back to the house, since he had come from that direction. But the junior did not give the circumstance two thoughts.

The juniors ran quickly across the intervening field towards the barn. The barn was an old building, used only as a shelter for cattle. There was no door to it, the doorway standing wide open to wind and weather. The tall figure of the captain had disappeared inside. The juniors had almost reached the barn

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when Monty Lowther caught his foot in a trailing root and stumbled. Manners and Tom Merry turned back for him. As they did so, they heard the voice of Captain Mellish from the open doorway of the old barn.

"Have you waited for me?"

"Yes, captain," said another voice, harder and rougher than the cultivated tones of Captain Mellish. "But it's all right. I s'pose you couldn't get away?"

"I have to be careful, Nat."

There was a chuckle.

"I s'pose so, captain."

"Take the packet—just as it is! I can't stay a minute, but I must tell you about the telephone business."

Another chuckle.

Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther looked at one another. They understood now that Captain Mellish had not gone into the barn for shelter from the rain. He was keeping an appointment there with another man. The Terrible Three were undecided for a moment. They were close to the doorway now, and they did not want to appear to be interested in what did not concern them. But the rain was coming down in great drops now, and they had to have shelter. Tom Merry coughed loudly as a warning to the captain that there were other ears to hear.

There was a sharp exclamation inside the barn.

The tall figure of the captain reappeared in the doorway just as the chums of the Shell plunged in. They almost ran into him.

For a second there was a strange look on the captain's face. But it was only for a second; it was gone almost before the juniors observed it. Then he smiled.

"Hallo, my young friends from St. Jim's!" he exclaimed.

"Yes," gasped Tom Merry, shaking off the raindrops like a Newfoundland dog. "We're getting out of the rain, sir."

"Coming down in bucketsful!" said Monty Lowther.

"Grooooh!" gasped Manners.

The captain laughed.

"Yes, it's rotten weather," he said.

The juniors glanced at the man the captain had been talking to. He was a powerfully-built fellow with a very square jaw, and little, sharp eyes half hidden under thick brows. He was glancing at the St. Jim's fellows with suspicion in his look.

"It's all right, Nat, my man," said the captain easily.

"These young gentlemen are from the school. We can go on with our business; I haven't a minute to stay."

"We didn't mean to be in the way, sir," said Tom Merry awkwardly. "We saw you come into the barn, and thought you were getting out of the rain."

Captain Mellish nodded.

"Oh, no!" he said. "I came here to meet Mr. Perkins. But Mr. Glyn is expecting me back, so I'll get on, if you don't mind. I was telling you about the telephone, Perkins," the captain resumed. "They've charged me for nearly twice as many calls as I really had, and, unless the matter can be settled, I shall have the telephone removed from my quarters. It's as much trouble as it's worth, anyway, and as I'm so seldom at home I don't use it much, either."

"Yes, sir," said Perkins.

"In future I shall have it disconnected while I'm away," went on the captain. "You'll see to that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you'll have my rooms ready for me on Saturday? I shall be coming up by the afternoon train, and you can expect me at five. Take the letter I've given you to the colonel."

"Yes, sir," repeated Mr. Perkins.

"I think that's all," said the captain. "If there's anything else, I'll send you a wire. How is the bulldog?"

"Going on splendidly, sir," said Perkins. "Likewise the pup!"

"Good! Well, good-bye, Perkins!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

The captain nodded to the juniors, and moved towards the doorway.

"Just a minute, sir," said Tom Merry. "I've got a letter for you."

"A letter for me?" repeated Captain Mellish.

"Yes, sir—from Kildare."

"Kildare! The captain of the school?"

"Yes. He'll be rather cut up when he knows you're going on Saturday, sir. He's asking you to play for St. Jim's on Saturday afternoon," said Tom Merry, as he handed the captain Kildare's letter.

The captain looked thoughtful.

"H'm! I dare say it could be arranged," he said, as he opened the letter and glanced through it. "I should like to please Kildare, if possible."

The letter ran:

"Dear Captain Mellish,—If you are still down here on Saturday, would you care to play for St. Jim's First? We have a very tough match for the afternoon, against Wayland

Ramblers, and we should take it as a great honour if you would play for us.—Yours sincerely, ERIC KILDARE."

"By Jove," said the captain, "I should like another game before I go! Yes, I think I'll come over on Saturday and lend a hand against the Wayland Ramblers, Merry. I saw them play the other day; and they're hot stuff—rather a big team for schoolboys to tackle, eh?"

"Oh, I think St. Jim's First will handle 'em all right, sir!" said Tom Merry. "Our First Eleven is a jolly good team, you know. But if you play for Kildare, there won't be any doubt about it—they'll be wiped out."

The captain smiled.

"In that case, I'm bound to play," he said. "Yes, certainly I'll come. I can easily go up by a later train. Tell Kildare he can rely upon me."

"Thank you, sir. It will be ripping."

"So you need not expect me at my quarters till the evening, Nat," said Captain Mellish.

"Yes, sir," said Perkins.

And he left the barn, careless of the rain. Captain Mellish turned to the St. Jim's juniors with a smile.

"Perkins used to be in my regiment," he explained. "He is my servant now, and looks after my quarters while I'm away. But what are you young fellows doing out in the rain?"

"We're going to the station to meet Mr. Locke, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Ferrers Locke, the detective, you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! Mr. Glyn told me he was coming down," said the captain. "Your headmaster expects him this afternoon, I understand?"

"Yes; he's coming by the three train."

"Very good. You may mention to him that I shall come over to the school this afternoon," said Captain Mellish. "You see, as I was one of the persons keeping watch at the time the picture was stolen, I am keenly interested in the matter, and Mr. Locke may very likely want to ask me about it, as well as the others."

"I'll tell him, sir."

"Good!"

And, with a nod, the captain left the barn, and walked away towards Glyn House. The Terrible Three watched his tall figure disappear in the mist of rain. Monty Lowther had a somewhat curious expression on his face. Tom Merry looked at him.

"What are you thinking about, Monty?" he said quietly.

"Queer thing that Captain Mellish should meet his servant here, instead of having him at Glyn House," said Lowther.

Tom Merry nodded.

"No business of ours," remarked Manners. "That fellow Perkins may be an old soldier, and a good servant, but he doesn't look it. Looks more like a giddy prizefighter than a valet, to my mind. But I dare say Captain Mellish knows his own business best."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Tom Merry, laughing.

The Shell fellows waited and watched the rain. The shower passed over, and as soon as it was clear the Terrible Three left the barn and hurried on to the station. Three was chiming out from the church as they arrived, and a few minutes later the train came in. The chums of the Shell were on the platform to meet it.

Tom Merry caught sight of a face at a window as the train stopped, and ran towards the carriage. It was a clear-cut, thoughtful face, with clear, steady eyes, and a slight wrinkle between them—the face of Ferrers Locke, the famous detective.

"Here we are, sir!" said Tom Merry cheerfully, as he opened the carriage door.

Ferrers Locke alighted.

He shook hands with the Terrible Three, with a smile.

"So you've come to meet me?" he said.

"Yes, rather, sir! Quite like old times to see you again," said Tom Merry. "And I hope you will be able to find the Head's picture for him, sir."

"I shall try," said Ferrers Locke quietly.

And he left the station with the juniors.

CHAPTER 4.

The Mystery.

DR. HOLMES, the Head of St. Jim's, was seated in his study.

The Head's face was clouded and troubled.

He was not working, though it was unusual for him to be idle. He seemed to be mastered by troubled thoughts. As he sat at his writing-table his gaze turned alternately upon the window which gave a view of the quadrangle, and upon a picture-frame which hung upon the wall opposite him. The frame was empty, but inside it were tags and rags of canvas, showing where a picture had been roughly slashed out.

That frame had held a real Rembrandt—a masterpiece of the famous Dutch master, and the apple of the doctor's eye.

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The frame remained; the picture was gone. And since the robbery Dr. Holmes's face had been clouded. It seemed as if he would never get over his loss. It was not only the monetary value of the picture, though that was considerable, as the Head had refused two thousand guineas for his Rembrandt. But it had been his most cherished possession—and now that it was gone, it was almost as if his child had been taken. Dr. Holmes was the kindest and most gentle-hearted of men, but when he thought of the theft of his picture his eyes gleamed with anger. He had never hated anyone in his life, but now he came very near to hating the unknown cracksman who had robbed him of his treasure.

A dozen times that day Dr. Holmes had been at the telephone, asking whether any progress had been made in the search for the cracksman. And always the same answer had come—that nothing had been discovered. The police did not add that they expected to discover nothing, but the Head knew that without being told. The mysterious cracksman, who was known to the police as "X"—whose name, whose appearance, they did not know—had baffled Scotland Yard for years, and was likely to baffle them still.

Dr. Holmes's Rembrandt was only one more item in the list of his loot. Only a few days before the mysterious cracksman had stolen a golden statuette from Glyn House, and had left no clue. The Head's picture had been taken now, and there was no clue—not the shadow of one. The police were baffled, and the Head's slender hope rested upon Ferrers Locke, the famous private detective. But the hope was very slender, indeed. What could Ferrers Locke hope to effect, when the police of the whole country were baffled?

All the St. Jim's fellows sympathised with the Head in his loss. Only D'Arcy, of the Fourth, it is true, thought of playing detective and trying to recover the picture for him. But all the fellows were sorry.

There was a tap at the door at last, and the Head rose eagerly. Toby, the School House page, showed in the gentleman Tom Merry had met at the station.

"Ferrers Locke!" exclaimed the Head.

He shook hands with the detective.

Ferrers Locke's glance wandered to the empty frame.

"Yes," said the doctor, with a nod, "that is where it was—my Rembrandt. Mr. Locke, if you can recover my picture for me, you shall name your own fee. I know that considerations of that kind do not appeal to you very much, but I shall be grateful—more grateful than I can say. And if you could lay that unknown scoundrel by the heels, it would be a service to the whole country."

Ferrers Locke smiled slightly.

"It is a big task," he said.

The Head sighed.

"I know it—I know it!" he said. "The chance of success is very remote—I am aware of that. But I would leave no stone unturned—so I have sent for you."

The detective sat down as the Head pulled a chair to the fire for him.

"I came as soon as I could," he said. "I was absent when your letter came. I was not able to get here before to-day. I understand that the robbery took place on Saturday?"

"On Saturday night—at exactly midnight," said the Head.

The detective smiled.

"You are very exact," he said.

"Ah, I see you do not know the story yet," said the Head.

"No; I depend upon you for that. I have only just returned to England from abroad, as a matter of fact."

"Then I had better explain the thing from the beginning."

"Please do."

"You have heard of X, of course?"

"Who has not?" said Ferrers Locke, with a smile. "The man has made himself a kind of fame. He is undoubtedly a very clever and determined scoundrel; he has genius, which he has misapplied. He is the most dangerous kind of criminal; he has talents which might have made him famous in another way. The strangest thing is that the police have not even the remotest suspicion of his real identity. They would not even know that he called himself X but for his trick of leaving a card with an 'X' inscribed upon it in the place where he commits his robberies. A very interesting criminal. I shall be glad of the opportunity of measuring strength with him."

"I hope you will succeed," said the Head. "The man is an impudent scoundrel. He adds impudence to dishonesty. There was a robbery at Glyn House, a place near here, last week, and it was known that this man X was the perpetrator. That day I received a telephone message from him."

"From the cracksman?"

"Yes. Captain Mellish, a gentleman who is staying at Glyn House, came over here to give me a warning, as he had heard of my valuable picture. I was talking the matter over with Mr. Raiton, my Housemaster, when the telephone bell rang. You may judge of my amazement when I found that I was speaking to X over the telephone."

"I should say so!"

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"He told me explicitly that he would steal my picture on Saturday night at twelve o'clock precisely."

The detective whistled softly.

"That is in keeping with his character," he said. "I have heard of his sending a telegram to a nobleman whom he intended to rob—and he carried out the robbery in that case."

"And in this case!" said the Head. "We were not sure that it was not a hoax. But to make certain of the safety of the picture, we waited up that night and watched over it."

"And it went?"

"Yes."

"This is very interesting," said Ferrers Locke. "Pray give me all the details. How many of you were here?"

"Five in all—myself, Kildare, of the Sixth Form, Inspector Skeat, of Rylcombe, Mr. Raiton, my Housemaster, and Captain Mellish. You are acquainted with all of them excepting Captain Mellish. Captain Mellish is—or, rather, was—an officer in the Indian Army, and he is cousin to a boy in the Fourth Form at this school. He had been here on that afternoon, playing football for a junior team—he is very popular with the boys—and he offered to stay and watch with us—and I was glad to have him."

The detective nodded.

"Tom Merry mentioned the gentleman to me to-day," he said. "He is coming here this afternoon, in case I want to ask him questions."

"Ah! Then you will see him!"

"Yes. Describe what happened on Saturday night, sir."

"We waited up and watched. You can imagine our feelings as twelve o'clock came round. There was an iron, burglar-proof shutter fastened over the window, and every window and door in the house had been carefully examined. There was a mastiff turned loose in the quadrangle, and a policeman with the porter in the lodge, and two more officers on duty in the road. That, in addition to the five of us watching here! One would have said that the picture was safe enough."

"Indeed, yes."

"Almost on the stroke of twelve he came."

"You saw him?"

"No. He was seen by nobody but Captain Mellish, who caught only a glimpse of him. The captain heard him in the passage; we heard nothing. The captain gave the alarm. He threw the door open—he had his revolver in his hand. Both of them fired—there were several shots—but the cunning rascal fired at the lights, and they went out. We had not thought of that."

"Naturally he would want to work in the dark."

"Yes. There was great confusion. We were stumbling over one another in the dark—none of us knew quite what was happening—and when we obtained lights the man was gone. He cannot have been inside the house a few minutes—perhaps not two minutes."

"How did he get away?"

"The window in the passage was smashed through with a chair, and he must have jumped out into the quadrangle. Captain Mellish was convinced that one of his shots struck the rascal, but no blood was seen anywhere."

"Was Captain Mellish wounded—you say there was shooting on both sides?"

"He had a scratch on his cheek—a bullet had narrowly missed him." The Head shuddered. "I should never have forgiven myself if he had been injured. He was really the only one of us to keep his head in the excitement."

"And the picture—"

"In the excitement and confusion we had forgotten the picture. But when we looked at it—never dreaming that the villain had succeeded in his design—we saw that the picture had been cut out of the frame. Up till that moment I had not thought that the burglar had succeeded in entering the study—and I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw that the picture was gone. But it was gone; the frame was left as you see it now."

Ferrers Locke glanced at the empty frame.

"An extraordinary story!" he said.

"It is amazing! It seems like a dream to me now," said the Head. "The lights were extinguished so suddenly that nobody had a chance of seeing the cracksman. Captain Mellish had a glimpse of him, as I have said, but that was all. He has an impression that he was a short, thick-set man, but he is not sure of even that."

"The man jumped out through the window in the passage?"

"Yes."

"Was he seen to do so?"

"No; but we heard the crash of the glass."

"And the mastiff in the quadrangle?"

"That is very curious. The dog appears not to have heard him, seen him, or scented him. He had extraordinary good fortune."

"How did he escape from the quadrangle? The school wall is high."

"He climbed over by means of the ivy."

"Ah! Traces were found?"
 "Yes, Captain Mellish found the place—the ivy had been dragged loose."
 "And the policemen in the road?"
 "Saw nothing."
 "They were upon the spot?"
 "They were patrolling up and down outside the wall. No part of the wall could have been out of their sight for more than a few minutes."
 "Yet they saw and heard nothing?"
 "Nothing."
 "And how did the cracksman gain admission to the house? You say that all the doors and windows were fast?"
 "All of them! And afterwards, Inspector Skeat made a round of the house, and all of the fastenings were found intact. The smashed window, of course, we could not be sure about; sash and glass were broken, and it may have been by that window that the thief entered."
 "A most extraordinary thing, sir."
 "Most extraordinary!"
 "There was a knock at the door."
 "Come in!" said the doctor.
 Captain Mellish entered.

CHAPTER 5. On The Telephone!

CAPTAIN MELLISH shook hands with the Head, who introduced him at once to Ferrers Locke. The captain turned to the detective, with a very pleasant smile.

"It is a real privilege to meet you, Mr. Locke," he said. "I have heard a great deal about you, but have never had the pleasure of seeing you before. I hope I am not in the way? If I am, please say so, and I will run away." The captain laughed his frank, pleasant laugh. "I came over because I thought you might care to have my account of what happened here the other night, but my time is my own—I can wait. I have a cousin in the Fourth Form here, and I will look him up if you are busy."

"Not at all, Captain Mellish," said the detective. "Dr. Holmes is giving me the details of the strange affair of last Saturday, and I should like to have your account, too."

"Very good," said the captain, seating himself. "I do not know that I can tell you any more than Dr. Holmes, but every little helps, I suppose."

"Undoubtedly."

"Then fire away!" said the captain. "I know you detective gentlemen have a way of drawing out unsuspected items of information by asking leading questions. Many trifles that to a layman appear insignificant have an importance for the trained mind."

"That is very true," said the Head. "It is quite possible that Mr. Locke may elicit something, even from one of us, which has escaped our own attention entirely."

"I hope so," said Mr. Locke. "You were here, I understand, with four others, captain?"

"Just so."

"And you were the first to hear the enemy?"

"Yes—I heard him in the passage."

"You have quick ears?"

"A man has to be quick of hearing on the Indian frontier, where I had my training. We get all our senses sharpened up out there," said Captain Mellish, with a smile. "Still, I would not say I am quicker than the others who were present."

"Oh, but you are!" said the Head. "Not one of us heard the slightest sound. Even when you threw the door open I thought that you must be mistaken. Though it proved otherwise."

"You fired at the man, I understand?"

"Yes—and hit him! I am sure of that."

"No traces of blood seem to have been discovered," remarked Ferrers Locke.

"No; it was not so bad as that. But I feel quite sure that at least one of my bullets went home," said the captain. "I am a pretty good shot, and it was a close range. The light, of course, was very uncertain."

"You fired first?"

"Yes—I had to. You see, the man had a revolver in his hand, and he was about to fire. I thought I was the target, but it turned out that he was firing at the electric light in the passage. We fired almost together—indeed, it sounded like one shot, as Mr. Railton observed afterwards."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"Then the light went out?"

"In the passage—yes. I brushed against the man; and the others rushed out into the passage in the dark. Then a bullet came through the doorway and smashed the light here, and the study was in the dark, too. It all passed in a second. But I had no idea that the man had contrived to enter the study itself—till we found the picture gone afterwards."

"You saw the man?"

"The merest glimpse."

"Describe him—as well as you can."

"I have an impression of a short, thickset man—I think with a moustache. I caught the glitter of his eyes, but I would not swear to their colour."

"You could not hazard a guess?"

"Well, blue, I think—but I could not be certain."

"That description, however, is something for the police to work upon?" remarked Ferrers Locke thoughtfully.

"Yes; they have it, such as it is. But it was all very vague."

"It is somewhat odd, is it not, that no one else saw the man?—because to fire into this room and smash the lamp, he must have appeared near the doorway. The passage was in darkness, but there would be some light from the doorway."

"Yes, that is true. I was in the passage, stumbling against the man at the time, as far as I can make out. It was confused, of course, and the impression left upon my mind is not very clear of that precise moment."

"Naturally!" said Ferrers Locke, with a nod. "You were in the study, doctor?"

"Yes."

"Yet you did not see the man as he fired in?"

"No; I cannot say I did. I remember catching a glimpse of the captain, and then there was the report of the pistol. If I did not know that Captain Mellish was a good shot, and that the cracksman was deliberately aiming to put out the light, I should have fancied that it was a random ball from Captain Mellish's pistol that struck the lamp here and smashed it."

"Oh, that is too bad!" said the captain, laughing. "I am too careful to fire at random, my dear doctor; a random bullet might have hit you instead of the lamp."

"I should like to see Mr. Railton and Kildare," said Ferrers Locke.

"I will send for them at once."

Dr. Holmes rang, and Toby was sent for the Housemaster and the captain of the school. Mr. Railton and Kildare arrived together.

They could add but little to what the others had related. Neither of them had seen the cracksman. But they admitted that it was very singular that they had seen nothing of him when he fired into the study and smashed the lamp. But the whole affair had passed in such a whirl of excitement and alarm that they hardly knew what they had seen and what they had not seen.

"Where was the inspector?" asked Ferrers Locke.

"He was in the study all the time, blowing his whistle," said Mr. Railton. "He was still here when we obtained lights."

"Then he must actually have been within a few paces of the thief when the picture was cut out of the frame!"

"Undoubtedly!" said the Housemaster.

"Yet he did not hear—"

"He was blowing his whistle very loudly, as a warning to the officers outside, and that probably drowned the sound made by the cracksman's knife."

"Yes, very likely. It was in the dark, too, and he saw nothing."

"Nothing."

"How the man got into the house is a mystery," said Mr. Railton. "I can vouch for it that every door and window was secured, and they were found so afterwards."

"Excepting the window in the passage here?"
 "Yes; that was smashed—the chair that stands in the corner of the passage, further along, was used for the purpose."

"The corner of the passage is some way from the window?"

"About ten or twelve feet."

"And the passage, then, was in darkness?"

"Yes."

"Yet the thief, a stranger to the school, saw the chair at that distance, fetched it, and used it to smash out the window."

"It appears so."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. "It is very extraordinary. But you would not suggest, Mr. Locke, that the cracksman had any knowledge of the interior of this house—that he had any opportunity of exploring the place?"

"It is very singular, at all events. He could not have smashed out the window without some heavy article, and it looks as if he knew the chair was there."

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"HARD TIMES!"

"Perhaps he saw it when he entered—if he entered by that window!" said the captain reflectively.

"That window is flush with this study window, I think. If the thief entered by that window, he would be entering from the open quadrangle—and you tell me there was a dog loose there. Was the dog near the house?"

"Yes, indeed," said the Head. "I remember hearing him under my window only a few minutes before the alarm."

"Barking?"

"No; he was not barking."

"Then he was not alarmed?"

"I suppose not."

"Yet at that moment the cracksmen must have entered by that window—only a few yards from this, in the same wall."

"Yes; it is very peculiar."

"It seems impossible that he could have entered by the passage window, considering all the circumstances," said Mr. Railton, very thoughtfully. "Yet all the other windows and the doors were found intact."

"You have formed some theory already, Mr. Locke," said the captain, with his keen brown eyes on the detective's face.

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"Not exactly a theory," he said; "but it is possible that, after sending that impertinent telephone message which gave you all the impression that he was coming to the house at midnight, the thief may have contrived to conceal himself in the building, and may have been lurking in some empty room or garret for hours before the alarm."

The Head started.

"By gad!" cried the captain. "We never thought of that, doctor—and the inspector never thought of it, either, by Jove!"

"Upon my word," exclaimed Mr. Railton, "it is quite possible. In a rambling building like this, it would be easy enough for someone to slip in after dusk, and remain concealed—there are old rooms that are never entered."

"By George!" said Kildare.

"I do not say so," said Ferrers Locke; "I suggest it as a possibility. It would account for the fact that the man was in the house, with no apparent means of entering. But we shall see. I—"

The detective broke off as the telephone bell rang.

"Pray excuse me a moment!" said the Head.

He crossed to the telephone and took up the receiver.

"Yes!" he said.

He listened, and an expression of utter amazement came over his face. He turned to the others, without putting the instrument down.

"Mr. Locke!" he exclaimed.

"Yes?"

"Come here—quick!"

"What is it?" The detective strode towards him.

"The cracksmen!"

"What!"

"X!"

CHAPTER 6. The Wire Between.

"X!" Every voice in the study uttered the exclamation at once.

"X! The cracksmen!" cried Mr. Railton.

"The thief! By jingo!" said Kildare.

"Well, by Jove!" said Captain Mellish. "Ten to one he knows Mr. Locke is here, and this is a piece of sheer cheek!"

Dr. Holmes motioned to Ferrers Locke to take up the second receiver, the telephone being fitted with two. The detective obeyed.

He heard now the voice that was coming through to the doctor.

"Are you there, Dr. Holmes?"

"Yes."

"Is your detective with you?"

"Yes; Mr. Locke is here. Are you indeed the robber, as you have said, or is this some hoax?" gasped the Head.

A chuckle was audible on the telephone.

"You asked me that question last time, doctor."

"It is really he!" exclaimed the Head.

"By Jove!" said the captain. "Who ever heard of such a thing! I've met some cool johnnies, in different parts of the world, but this takes the cake!"

"My hat, it does!" murmured Kildare.

The voice came along the telephone. Ferrers Locke listened to it keenly. It was a harsh voice, so far as he could make it out at all—the wires disguised the real tones to a great extent.

"Send your detective to the 'phone!" went on the voice.

"He is there!" said the Head.

"Good! Let him speak!"

"Speak, Mr. Locke!"

The detective nodded.

"You are there, Ferrers Locke?"

"I am here," said the detective quietly.

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"You know who I am?"

"Yes; you are X, the cracksmen."

"Correct."

"What do you want?"

Another chuckle.

"Nothing. I've got what I want. I learned that you were coming down to look for the lost picture."

"How did you learn that?"

"It's the talk of the neighbourhood," said the voice. "Everybody knows it. I do not think Inspector Skeat is pleased."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Because he thinks you may succeed where he has failed. But he need not be alarmed."

"Ah!" said Ferrers Locke quietly. "You think there is no cause for alarm?"

"None at all."

"We shall see."

"As soon as I heard you were coming, I determined to ring you up. It is a pleasure to have a talk with Ferrers Locke, the famous detective—with a few miles of telephone wire between, of course!" and the speaker chuckled.

"Yes; that is a necessary precaution, under the circumstances," said Ferrers Locke.

"You have come down to look for the picture?"

"Yes."

"And for me?"

"Probably."

"Well, the best thing you can do for Dr. Holmes is to advise him to come to terms. I am going to sell the Rembrandt over the water for three thousand guineas."

"Well?"

"But if Dr. Holmes chooses to pay two thousand for it, he can have it—and my promise not to touch it again."

"The rascal!" murmured the Head.

"Dr. Holmes declines your offer," said Ferrers Locke.

"Then he will never see his Rembrandt again."

"Possibly not."

"I suppose you are full up to the chin with clues, like the gentleman from Scotland Yard," remarked the voice on the telephone.

"Yes; we are all the same," said Ferrers Locke grimly.

"You are on the track?"

"I hope so."

"Good! When do you expect to have the handcuffs upon the celebrated X?"

"Within twenty-four hours, I hope."

"Ha, ha, ha! Quick work, Mr. Locke!"

"Quite so!"

"Allow me to give you a warning; X will be a dangerous man to run down. If you should, by a miracle, get me cornered, it will be exactly as much as your life is worth!"

"I shall risk that!"

"One of you, at least, had a narrow escape the other night. I fully expected to see in the papers that a dead man had been left behind when I took the picture!"

"You will be pleased to hear that Captain Mellish received a mere scratch!"

"It would have been his own fault if it was worse, and the same applies to you. Not that you are ever likely to see me unless I choose!"

"We shall see!"

"Bah! You do not even know whom or what to look for; I am as great a mystery to you as to the police!"

"You are mistaken; I have a description," said the detective calmly. "You were seen here on Saturday night."

"Nonsense! By whom?"

"Captain Mellish."

"And he has described me?"

"Yes, if you are X."

"May I hear the description?" went on the voice, in mocking tones.

"Certainly!"

"Well, I am listening!"

"Short, thick-set, with a moustache and blue eyes."

"By Jingo!"

It seemed to be an involuntary exclamation from the man at the other end of the wire. Dr. Holmes looked at the detective with very bright eyes.

"That touches home, Mr. Locke!" he whispered. "The description is accurate! The man was taken by surprise when he heard it!"

"It seems so."

There was a pause on the telephone. Captain Mellish had gathered what was being said on the wire from what he had heard Dr. Holmes and Ferrers Locke say.

"Is it quite judicious to let the man know that we have his description?" he asked. "Of course, I am not counselling you, Mr. Locke; you know better than I do! But it occurs to me that he may now adopt a disguise which otherwise he might not have thought of doing!"

The detective smiled.



There was a shout of amazement from the juniors, and they gathered round the guy. The flare of the fire fell full upon the face of it, and the eyes could be seen working and rolling and glaring. Harry Wharton sprang towards it and tore the mask off the lower part of the face. The gagged mouth of Bob Cherry was revealed. The juniors gazed at the unfortunate Removite for a moment, and then there was a tremendous yell. "My hat! It's Bob Cherry! Ha, ha ha!" (*An amusing incident from the splendid complete school tale of Harry Wharton & Co., entitled "THE BOUNDER'S TRIUMPH!" by Frank Richards, which is contained in this week's issue of our popular companion paper, "THE MAGNET" Library. Now on Sale. Price One Penny.*)

"If he is a short man he cannot become a tall one, at all events!" he said.

"No; that is true!"

"Besides, Mr. Locke has surprised him into the admission that the description is correct; a fact we were not aware of before!" said the Head. "That was your object, Mr. Locke?"

"I did not speak without an object, certainly, sir!" said the detective, with a smile.

The voice was heard again.

"Well, search if you like, Mr. Locke; good luck to you! You are measuring strength with X, who has defeated the police for years, and will defeat them for many years yet, and retire on his plunder! If it is a battle between you and me, I am sorry for you! You are wasting your time; you may as well go back to London!"

"Thank you!"

"I defy you!"

"Thanks again!"

The telephone rang off; apparently the cracksman was satisfied. Ferrers Locke rang up the exchange immediately.

"Hallo!" came through a feminine voice.

"Are you the exchange?"

"Yes."

"Can you give me the number that was just speaking? I am a detective, and it is a very important matter!"

"You were rung up from the railway station call-office!"

"Thank you!"

Ferrers Locke put down the receiver. Captain Mellish was watching him with a curious gaze.

"You could ring up the station-master," the captain suggested. "He might have noticed—"

"Useless! X knows whom he is dealing with, and he is long gone; and undoubtedly he would be in disguise. The nerve of the man is extraordinary; I do not think that any case has hitherto occurred in which a criminal had the hardihood to ring up the detective engaged in tracking him down!"

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"X is a very unusual character altogether!" the captain remarked, with a nod.

"He is, indeed! Now, Dr. Holmes, may I ask you for a complete and detailed description of the missing picture?"

"Certainly!" said the Head.

The others understood that it was their conge, and they left the study. Ferrers Locke remained alone with the Head. He remained some minutes in deep thought after the study door had closed.

"The picture——" began the Head.

"Never mind the picture for a moment, sir! You listened carefully to the voice that was speaking to you just now?"

"Yes," said the Head, in surprise.

"Was it the same voice that spoke to you last week, and warned you that X was about to pay you a visit?"

Dr. Holmes hesitated.

"You are not sure?"

"No; but if it is X, it must be the same voice!"

"Yes, undoubtedly!" said Ferrers Locke, with a nod.

"Now about the picture!"

And for the next quarter of an hour the Head was plunged into an accurate description of the missing Rembrandt, a description of which probably Ferrers Locke did not hear two words. His thoughts were very busy while the doctor was speaking.

CHAPTER 7.

Assistance Accepted.

"TEA'S ready!"

"Pway don't wait for me, deah boys!"

"Oh, we won't!" said Blake cheerfully. "But I suppose you're coming to tea, aren't you?"

"Not just at present!"

"Aren't you hungry?" demanded Tom Merry.

"Yaas, a little bit peckish!"

"Then why don't you come to tea?"

"I'm waitin'!"

"What are you waiting for?"

"Fewwahs Locke!"

The juniors looked at D'Arcy in astonishment. He was standing at the end of the passage that led to the Head's study, leaning in an elegant attitude against the wall. His eyeglass was turned towards the door of Dr. Holmes's study.

"You're waiting for Ferrers Locke?" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Oh, you're thinking of bringing him to tea in the study?" said Blake.

D'Arcy shook his head.

"I am not thinkin' of anythin' so fwivolous, deah boys!"

"Then what——"

"I have already acquainted you with the fact that I am goin' to look into the case of the missin' picture, deah boys!" said D'Arcy, with dignity.

"But the picture wasn't in a case!" said Monty Lowther.

"It was just ripped out of the frame by the giddy cracksmen!"

"Pway don't be an ass, Lowthah!" said Arthur Augustus, as the juniors chuckled. "This is not a time for wotten puns! I am goin' to speak to Mr. Locke about it, and I twust he will allow me to help him in the mattah! I believe I shall be able to give him gweat assistance!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I see no cause whatever for wibald laughtah!" said the swell of St. Jim's. "Pway vun away and have tea; Mr. Locke will not want to be bothaxed by you youngstahs!"

"Oh, come and have tea!" said Tom Merry. "Captain Mellish is staying to tea in the study, and you've got to ask Mellish of the Fourth to come! It's only fair to have him, as we've captured his cousin!"

"You can ask him, deah boy!"

"No, I can't! The feed's in your study, No. 6, not in mine! I can't invite Mellish to tea with you!"

"Then Blake can ask him!"

"Yes; but we want it done in your unrivalled manner!" said Tom Merry solemnly. "Mellish is rather touchy, you know! He knows we don't like him, and if he refuses to come it will make it rather awkward about entertaining the captain! We want you to put it to Mellish in your best Vere de Vere manner!"

"There's somethin' in that!" said the swell of St. Jim's thoughtfully.

"Come on, then!"

"Bai Jove! here's Mellish!" The cad of the Fourth was coming along the passage, and Arthur Augustus beckoned to him. "Mellish, deah boy!"

"Hallo!" said Mellish, stopping.

"We shall all be honahed if you will come and have tea in our study!" said Arthur Augustus. "We shall take it as a gweat favah!"

Mellish looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Nothin', deah boy! We want you to come to tea, that's all!"

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"What for?" persisted Mellish.

"Well, your cousin is comin', and we should like you, too!"

"Oh, rats!" said Mellish. "I suppose you're going to jaw footer all the time! I'm going to tea with Crooke!"

"Weally, Mellish——"

"I've promised Levison and Crooke!" said Mellish loftily. "Crooke will stand a better tea than you chaps, too! Crooke's got plenty of money!"

"Bai Jove!"

"So you must excuse me!"

And, with that courteous negative, Mellish walked on.

"Nice boy!" murmured Monty Lowther. "How his family must love him—I don't think!"

"Bai Jove! I wegard Mellish as a wude wottah!" said Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, I have done my best, deah boys!"

The juniors looked at one another. They did not want Arthur Augustus to wait for Ferrers Locke, but there seemed to be no way of preventing him. Tom Merry thought it out.

"You're really taking up this detective bizney, then, Gussy?" he said.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then I'll tell you what: come and tell us all about it over tea!" suggested Tom Merry. "Captain Mellish will be very glad to hear about your——your methods! The cracksmen wounded him the other day, you know, and he must be awfully keen to lay X by the heels! He will be glad to know that you are on the track!"

Arthur Augustus nodded.

"Vewy good, deah boy! I will join you as soon as I have seen Mr. Locke!"

"Better come now!"

"Imposs, deah boy!"

"Look here, you silly ass!" exclaimed Blake. "If you talk rot to Mr. Locke, he will sit on you! You've got to keep off the grass!"

Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass upon Blake with lofty disdain.

"I twust Mr. Locke will be glad of my expert assistance," he said, "and I wegard you as an uttah ass, Blake!"

"Are you coming?" roared Blake.

"No, I am not comin'!"

"Then we'll carry you!"

"I wefuse to be cawwied!"

"Collar him!" said Blake.

The juniors closed in upon the swell of St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus backed away, and put up his hands and pushed back his beautiful white cuffs.

"I twust you will not compel me to thwash you, deah boys!" he said.

"Yes; I can see you thrashing the lot of us!" said Tom Merry cheerfully. "Now, take an arm or a leg each, and heave away!"

"Hands off, you wottahs! Ow!"

"Collar him!"

"Bai jove! Oh—ow!"

There was a wild struggle, and Arthur Augustus was swept bodily off the floor. He struggled furiously in the grasp of the juniors, and in the terrific din the fellows did not hear the Head's door open, or see Ferrers Locke come down the passage.

The detective stopped, and looked at them with a smile.

"Ahem!" he said.

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"Mr. Locke!"

The juniors let go Arthur Augustus as if he had suddenly become red-hot.

It was rather unfortunate that they should have let go suddenly at that moment, for D'Arcy was raised a foot from the floor, all ready to be carried away.

He dropped. Bump!

"Yawoooh!"

"Pray don't allow me to interrupt you, my dear boys," said Ferrers Locke blandly.

"Ow! Bai Jove! Wow!"

"Ahem!" said Tom Merry.

"Er—er—h'm!" said Blake.

Arthur Augustus sat up.

"You silly asses!" he roared. "You fwightful wottahs! I—— Oh, bai Jove! Is that you, Mr. Locke?"

"Yes, it is I," said the detective, smiling.

Arthur Augustus scrambled up. He bestowed a wrathful glare upon the grinning juniors, and then turned to the detective.

"I was waitin' to see you, Mr. Locke," he explained.

"Indeed!"

"Yaas, wathah! I was goin' to come to the station and meet you, sir, but I was detained by a——an accident."

"Thank you for the intention," said Ferrers Locke.

"I want to speak to you about a wathah important mattah, sir," said Arthur Augustus, "if you have a few minutes to spare——"

"Oh, you ass!" murmured Blake.

"Oh, you chump!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Ring off, Gussy!"

"Cheese it!"

"Dry up!"

Ferrers Locke looked surprised.

"What is it?" he asked. "I have no time to lose. I am going over to Glyn House now; but if you have something to say to me——"

"It's about the wobbewy, sir," said D'Arcy, unheeding the looks of the other fellows.

"You know something about that?"

D'Arcy coughed.

"Ahem! Not exactly, sir; but——"

"Oh, you ass!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Pway don't intewrupt me, Tom Mewwy. As a mattah of fact, sir, I am vevy gweatly intewested in detective work, and I want to help to look for the Head's missin' picture, sir. I want you to let me help you in lookin' into the case, sir."

The juniors held their breath.

That offer from a junior schoolboy to the celebrated detective was so unheard of that they would not have been surprised if Ferrers Locke had told Arthur Augustus D'Arcy exactly what he thought of it.

But the thunder did not come.

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"That is very kind of you, D'Arcy," he said.

"Oh!" murmured Tom Merry. "My hat!"

"The fact is, sir, that the Head has been so cut up by his picture goin', sir, that we all feel vevy wotten about it," said D'Arcy confidentially, "and I weally think, sir, that I have some gifts as a detective."

"Quite possibly," said Ferrers Locke. "I shall be very pleased to accept your assistance, D'Arcy."

The juniors gasped.

Arthur Augustus gave them a triumphant glance.

"Jollay good, sir!" he exclaimed. "You can wely upon me."

"I am going over to Glyn House about the matter now," said the detective calmly. "Pray get your hat and come with me."

"Yaas, wathah, Mr. Locke!"

And Arthur Augustus rushed away for his best topper.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at Ferrers Locke. They could hardly believe their ears. That the famous detective really considered that D'Arcy could be of any use in helping to investigate the case seemed incredible. But it was still more likely that Ferrers Locke was amusing himself by pulling D'Arcy's leg. The juniors simply could not make it out.

Ferrers Locke chatted pleasantly with them while D'Arcy was gone for his hat. When the swell of St. Jim's returned Ferrers Locke walked away with him.

Tom Merry & Co. watched them crossing the quad, Ferrers Locke with his steady stride, and D'Arcy as if he was walking on air.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath as they disappeared out of the gates.

"Well, my hat!" he exclaimed. "What does that mean?"

"What silly ass was it said the age of miracles was past?" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Mr. Locke must be pulling his leg," said Blake.

Tom Merry shook his head.

"It's not that," he said. "But I'm blessed if I can make it out. Let's go to tea."

And they went.

CHAPTER 8. In Study No. 6.

CAPTAIN MELLISH had consented to stay to tea in Study No. 6, and the juniors had excelled themselves in the preparation of a feed worthy of such a guest.

Fatty Wynn, of the New House, had been invited to take charge of the feeding arrangements, and Fatty Wynn had accepted that invitation with alacrity.

Figgins and Kerr, Fatty's special chums, of course, had been asked to come to the feed too. Quite a little army, in fact, was collecting in Study No. 6 with Captain Mellish, and Tom Merry went along the Sixth-Form passage to Kildare's study to ask the captain of St. Jim's.

The head of the Sixth, of course, was not in the habit of having tea in junior studies; but this was a special occasion, as Captain Mellish was present.

Tom Merry found Kildare in his study, conning over a list of names. It was the list of players for the Wayland match on Saturday.

Kildare gave him an inquiring look as he tapped and entered.

"We're just going to have tea," Tom Merry began.

Kildare looked surprised.

"Well, you're quite at liberty to have tea without notifying me," he said.

Tom Merry laughed.

"But we want you to come," he said.

"Thanks. I can't."

"It's a very special tea——"

"I can't come."

"And Captain Mellish is there."

"Oh!" said Kildare, his expression changing.

"And I thought you might like to have a jaw with him about the footer on Saturday," said Tom Merry, laughing.

"Oh, good!" said Kildare. "I'll come!"

"It's all ready."

Tom Merry looked very pleased as he marched into Study No. 6 with Kildare. It was not often that a junior could secure the head prefect of the School House for tea in a study.

The juniors looked properly impressed.

Captain Mellish shook hands with Kildare in his frank, pleasant way.

"You had my message?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," said Kildare. "You're playing for us on Saturday."

"Yes."

"We're jolly glad," said Kildare. "I watched you playing for the juniors last Saturday, you know. It was ripping. Wayland Ramblers are a strong team, and you'll find it a good match."

"I enjoyed the match last Saturday," said Captain Mellish. "I wish I could see that cousin of mine playing footer more. It would do him good."

"I'll take him in hand, if you like," said Kildare.

"It would be a good thing," remarked the captain.

"All's ready!" said Fatty Wynn, turning a crimson face from the fire. "The rashers and the eggs are done to a turn. Have you opened the jam, Lowther?"

"Yes; here you are!"

They sat down to tea. There wasn't too much room in Study No. 6 for so large a party; but room was made for the two distinguished guests, and the rest of the fellows did the best they could.

"Where's D'Arcy?" asked Figgins. "Isn't he coming?"

Tom Merry laughed.

"No. He's taken up the case."

"Taken up the case?" repeated Figgins.

"Yes. He's offered his services to Mr. Locke to help look for the missing picture and the missing cracksman."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Captain Mellish and Kildare joined in the laughter.

"What on earth did Mr. Locke say?" exclaimed Kerr.

"That's the queerest part of it," said Tom Merry. "He's accepted!"

"Accepted!" shouted Figgins.

"Yes."

"Accepted D'Arcy's help to search for the cracksman?"

"Yes."

"Go hon!"

"It's a fact," said Tom Merry. "Blessed if I can make it out myself; but it's so."

"Mr. Locke must have a peculiar sense of humour," said Captain Mellish, smiling.

"He's pulling Gussy's leg," said Manners.

"Well, they're gone over to Glyn House together to investigate," said Tom Merry.

"To Glyn House?" said the captain.

"Yes. You remember Mr. Glyn had something stolen a day or two before the robbery here. I suppose Mr. Locke is going to look for that—it was a golden statuette, or something very valuable. Young Glyn says it was worth a thousand quid."

"By jove!" Captain Mellish exclaimed suddenly. "I quite forgot. A man is calling to see me at Glyn House this afternoon, and I shall miss him."

The captain rose to his feet.

"I must ask you to excuse me," he said. "I shall have to hurry off. I'm sorry."

"But you haven't had your tea, sir," said Fatty Wynn.

The captain smiled.

"I'm sorry," he said; "but I had forgotten my appointment. I am sure you will excuse me."

"Yes, sir, if you must go," said Tom Merry reluctantly.

"Good-bye, my lad. Good-bye, Kildare. I shall see you on Saturday," and the captain hurried off.

His sudden departure surprised the juniors, and quite spoiled that tea-party. They had made so many preparations for doing honour to the gallant captain, and it was too bad to lose their distinguished guest all of a sudden in this way.

"Well, that's rotten!" said Plake.

"What a sell!" said Figgins.

"Never mind. Pass the eggs!" said Fatty Wynn.

"I suppose you haven't got a sudden appointment, have you, Kildare?" Digby asked, a little sarcastically.

"No," he said; "I'll finish my tea."

And Kildare and the juniors finished their tea without the captain. Captain Mellish was striding away towards Glyn House, and he had reached the millionaire's mansion before tea was over in Study No. 6.

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CHAPTER 9. Ferrers Locke's Assistant.

FERRERS LOCKE seemed deep in thought as he left St. Jim's. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not venture to interrupt the detective's meditations. He walked along beside Ferrers Locke in silence, occasionally glancing up at the face of the detective. Arthur Augustus was exceedingly proud and exceedingly pleased at the acceptance of his offer to assist. He would have stated his views on the case at full length if the detective had asked for them. That, however, Mr. Locke omitted to do.

They had reached the turning in the lane which led to Glyn House before the detective broke the silence. There he paused, and turned to the swell of St. Jim's with his kind smile.

"So you want to help me?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"You think you have an aptitude for detective work, eh?"

"I twust so, Mr. Locke," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "I have wead all the Sherlock Holmes stowies, and pwactised makin' deductions and things. I believe I am a wathah keen observah, you know? F'winstance——" He paused.

"Well, for instance?" said Ferrers Locke, with a smile.

"F'winstance, Mr. Locke, I can tell somethin' about your journey down here, some conclusions which I have awwived at by deduction on the Sherlock Holmes' system."

"I shall be very pleased to hear your conclusions, D'Arcy."

"Vewy well, sir. You came down in a crowsded cawwiage."

"Anything more?"

"Yaas; there was an old lady next to you."

"Indeed?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir! I deduced all that f'rom your appwance."

"Extraordinary, D'Arcy!" said Mr. Locke. "Will you tell me how you did it? I am not above learning, even in my own profession."

"Oh, I shouldn't think of twyin' to teach you anythin', Mr. Locke," said Arthur Augustus, with becoming modesty. "I deduced it in this way. I observe that there is a long gwey hair on your coat."

"Oh!"

"Now, you couldn't have picked that up at St. Jim's," said D'Arcy sagely. "Therefore, I deduce a crowsded railway cawwiage, and an old lady next to you. The crowsded state of the cawwiage bwought her so near you that one of her gwey hairs was left on your coat."

"Amazing!"

"It comes f'rom pwactice, sir."

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"I am afraid that your practice has not quite made your deductions perfect, D'Arcy," he said. "As a matter of fact, I was in an empty carriage coming down."

"Oh!" said D'Arcy.

"The grey hair you have observed upon my coat," said Mr. Locke, as he brushed it off, "was probably left there by my dog. He often leaves hairs over me."

"Bai Jove!"

Arthur Augustus looked so dismayed that Mr. Locke burst into a laugh again.

"Never mind," he said, "practice makes perfect, and if you keep on, no doubt you will arrive—somewhere."

"But—but you think I shall be of some use to you in this case, Mr. Locke?" asked the junior anxiously.

Mr. Locke nodded.

"I hope so, D'Arcy."

"You can vely upon me to do anythin' I can, sir."

"I am sure of that, although I do not think it will be in the line of making deductions. Now, D'Arcy, I am going to confide in you."

Arthur Augustus felt his very ears burn with gratification.

"Oh, Mr. Locke!" he gasped.

"About your abilities as a detective I will say nothing; but certainly you can be of use to me, if you choose."

"Anythin', sir!"

"Very good. Now, I suppose that in the School House at St. Jim's there are some empty rooms—rooms that no one ever enters?"

Arthur Augustus looked surprised.

"Plenty of them, sir," he said. "Lots of the gawwets aren't used, and then there's the punishment room—Nobody's Study, as we call it. Nobody ever goes in there."

"Unless some boy is confined there for punishment, I suppose?"

"Yaas; but it doesn't happen once in a blue moon, sir. Lunley-Lunley was shut up there the othah week; but it's not likely to be used again—hardly."

"Where is that room?"

"It's at the corner of the Fourth Form passage, Mr. Locke. There's a deep wecess, and a door at the end of it, and that's the door of Nobody's Study. You wouldn't notice it goin' down the passage—the wecess looks like an alcove."

"Good! Where does the window look out?"

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"On a nawwow passage between two walls, sir—part of the School House and the gym. You can't see it f'rom the quad-wangle."

"Very good. Is there any way of getting to the window?"

"Oh, no; it's a sheer wall."

"No way of climbing?"

"Not unless a wope was let down f'rom the window."

"Suppose, D'Arcy, that I wanted to get into that room, unknown to the school—even to the Head himself!"

"You, Mr. Locke!" exclaimed D'Arcy, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"Bai Jove!"

"Could I rely upon you to leave your dormitory without exciting an alarm, and let a rope down from that window for me?"

"Gweat Scott!"

"Well?" said Mr. Locke.

"Yaas, wathah, sir! But why——"

The detective made a gesture.

"My assistants are not allowed to ask questions, D'Arcy."

"Pway excuse me, sir. But do you weally want me to do that?" asked the astounded swell of St. Jim's.

"I think so."

"I'll do it, sir, like a shot!"

"Very good. You will not mention the matter to anyone—even to your closest chum?"

"Not a whisper, sir."

"You know the old saying, D'Arcy—that a man who has a secret to keep should not only hide the secret, but hide the fact that he has one."

"I undahstand, sir."

"Not a syllable on the subject—not a whisper?"

"I will be careful, sir."

"Good! Now, to-morrow night, say at eleven o'clock, can I rely upon you to do this for me?" said Mr. Locke quietly.

"Yaas, sir."

"You will obtain a rope without attracting attention—I am sure I can rely upon your discretion," said the detective, with a keen glance at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Yaas, wathah, sir! I flattah myself that I am a fellow of tact and judgment."

"Then I shall depend upon you."

"Yaas, Mr. Locke."

"Describe the situation of the window to me, so that I shall be able to find it after dark without trouble."

Arthur Augustus did so, and the detective listened keenly. Ferrers Locke knew St. Jim's pretty well, and he was satisfied.

"Quite clear," he said. "I rely upon you, then. And not a word—either to any fellow belonging to St. Jim's, or to anybody else."

"Not a word, sir."

"You may hear that I have gone back to London," said Mr. Locke. "Whatever you hear, it is to make no difference to this arrangement?"

"Yaas," said D'Arcy.

"You understand perfectly?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Very well. Now I will leave you."

The detective shook hands very warmly with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. Arthur Augustus was in the seventh heaven. He intended to keep his word to Mr. Locke most carefully, but afterwards—when it was all over, and the detective's scheme, whatever it was, had been crowned with success—then the swell of St. Jim's would enjoy his triumph. He would have proved to the unbelieving St. Jim's fellows that he had been able to help Mr. Locke, after all!

Arthur Augustus held his head very high as he walked back to St. Jim's. Ferrers Locke, with a thoughtful expression upon his clear-cut face, turned into the lane that led to the big metal gates of Glyn House, and a few minutes later arrived at the millionaire's residence. He was shown in at once to Mr. Glyn.

CHAPTER 10.

The Detective's Device!

MR. GLYN was in the library when Ferrers Locke was shown in. The millionaire greeted the famous detective warmly.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Locke!" he exclaimed. "It appears that Dr. Holmes and myself have both called upon you for your services at the same time."

The detective nodded, with a smile.

"Yes; and as both cases are in connection with the same criminal, I am fortunately able to handle both at once," he said.

"I am glad of that," said the millionaire, rubbing his hands. "Scotland Yard seems to be able to do nothing; but I have faith in you, Mr. Locke."

"I hope I shall justify it, sir."

"I hope so, indeed. Look at thi!"

The millionaire opened a drawer in his desk, and took out a telegraph-form. He spread it out upon the table before the

detective. Ferrers Locke glanced at the dead-black writing of the telegram.

"Handed in at Charing Cross, 5 p.m. Will call for diamond necklace Thursday evening. Expect me at eleven.—X."

The millionaire gazed at Ferrers Locke as he read the telegram.

"When did you get this?" asked Mr. Locke.

"Half an hour ago."

"Then, when you sent for me—"

"I did not know then that I was to have a second visit from X, but I feared it. I told you in my letter that I had purchased a diamond necklace for my daughter Edith. It is a well-known necklace, and has an historic as well as an intrinsic value—but the money value is seven thousand pounds."

"That is a large sum—a temptation to our friend the enemy," said the detective, with a smile.

"Yes. I should not have been surprised if the cracksmen had heard of it—the sale was mentioned in several papers, so he would have no difficulty in getting the information—and I wished to consult you about it, Mr. Locke. As I stated in my letter, the necklace will be delivered to me to-morrow morning. What astounds me is the insolence of this thief in warning me of his intention to steal it. That is the most singular circumstance about this criminal. He telephoned to Dr. Holmes—that he was going to steal his Rembrandt, and in spite of the watch that was kept, he succeeded. In the same way he sent a wire some time ago to Lord Westwood, and stole the bonds he threatened to steal. It appears to amuse him to steal his plunder while a watch is being kept upon it—for the watch, of course, must add to his danger in making the attempt."

A peculiar smile glided over Ferrers Locke's clear-cut face.

But it was gone in a second, and the millionaire, who was looking at the telegram, did not notice it.

"Now, what would you advise me to do, Mr. Locke?" asked Mr. Glyn. "Of course, I could wire to the jewellers not to deliver the necklace to-morrow. But that would only be putting off the evil day; it must be delivered some time, and when it is delivered, X will know about it—"

"Yes, that would not improve matters in any way; it is useless to postpone the contest, if the contest is to come."

"I want you to advise me what to do. As I told you in my letter, the necklace will be here to-morrow; to-morrow night it will be in my safe. X declares that at eleven to-morrow night he will be here to take it. What do you advise?"

"Let it be delivered."

"And then—keep a strict watch to-morrow night, I presume."

"Undoubtedly!"

"You will remain?"

"I think so. And Captain Mellish—doubtless he would like an opportunity of measuring strength with the rascal again."

"Undoubtedly; he is very anxious for a chance at him. He is leaving my house on Saturday, to return to town, so this will be his only opportunity. And he will be a good man to help; he is a dead shot."

There was a tap at the door, and Captain Mellish looked in. He had just arrived from St. Jim's. He coughed slightly.

"H'm! I did not know Mr. Locke was here," he said. "If I am in the way—"

"On the contrary, please come in," said Ferrers Locke, "we were just speaking about you."

"In my favour, I hope?" said the captain, laughing.

"Yes. There will have to be a watch kept here to-morrow night, and Mr. Glyn and I both think that, if you care to run the risk a second time, you are exactly the man to help."

"By Jove, I shall be glad! I owe the cracksmen an account, as you know," said the captain, lightly touching his cheek, where a slight scratch was still visible on the sunburnt skin. Ferrers Locke nodded.

"Look at that telegram!" he said.

Captain Mellish read the telegram.

"Jove! That fellow's insolence knows no bounds!" he exclaimed. "Surely this must be bluff; he could never venture upon such a feat a second time."

"It may be bluff; but I shall keep watch all the same," said the millionaire. "And Mr. Locke will be here, also—and I shall have a couple of my strongest footmen in the room, too."

"A good idea," said the captain. "I shall be only too happy to help. It would be infamous if Miss Glyn were to be robbed of her necklace."

Ferrers Locke crossed to the door, opened it, and glanced into the passage. Then he closed the door again, and came back quietly. Mr. Glyn and the captain were watching him curiously.

"I suppose there is no danger of being overheard in this room?" asked the detective, glancing round at the panelled walls.

"None," said Mr. Glyn. "Surely you do not imagine, Mr. Locke, that the cracksmen has a confederate in the house?"

"I do not think so—but it is possible, and I am in the habit of leaving nothing to chance, Mr. Glyn."

"Quite right," said Captain Mellish, with a nod of approval.

"Quite right!"

The detective lowered his voice.

"I have an idea," he said. "We shall keep strict watch to-morrow night—to capture the cracksmen, if possible—but the necklace need run no risk."

"How so?"

"It will not be in your safe."

"Ah! You mean I had better leave it in the jeweller's hands?"

Ferrers Locke shook his head.

"No. Depend upon it, X has his eyes open, and he will know whether the diamonds have been delivered or not."

"That is very probable," the captain remarked. "It is amazing how the rascal seems to get his information."

"Probably he or a confederate will keep watch upon the jeweller's place, and satisfy himself whether the necklace has been delivered. No, the necklace must be delivered here," said Ferrers Locke. "That is essential."

"But then—" said the millionaire.

"But it need not remain in the safe here. When it is here, I will take it—"

"You!"

"Yes; I shall be going over to St. Jim's, to consult with the Head about the missing picture, you know. Even if the cracksmen is watching the house—as is quite possible—he will see nothing suspicious in that; but I shall take the diamonds with me, and ask Dr. Holmes to keep them locked up in his safe for the night. They can be fastened up in a packet, and even the doctor need not be told what the packet contains. I will simply ask him to mind it for me. No one, but ourselves, will have the slightest suspicion that the necklace is at the school. The cracksmen will make his attempt here, and we may capture him; but if, with his usual wonderful luck, he succeeds in getting at your safe—he will find nothing there."

Mr. Glyn burst into a laugh.

"Excellent!" he cried. "Excellent!"

Captain Mellish was silent.

"You do not approve of the idea, captain?" asked Ferrers Locke, looking at him.

"Yes, I approve," said the captain. "But I cannot help thinking that the cracksmen may get wind of the transfer in some manner."

"In what way?"

"Ah, do not ask me that," said Captain Mellish, laughing. "I cannot account for his cunning. But certainly he has marvellous means of keeping himself posted. He may suspect you are taking the necklace there, if he is watching the house and sees you leave."

"I do not think it likely. At all events, the diamonds will be safer there than here—you must admit that."

"Yes, no doubt that is the case."

"The idea is excellent!" exclaimed Mr. Glyn. "Simply excellent! We shall have the chance of capturing the thief, without the risk of losing the necklace."

"But—" said the captain.

"Oh, come, captain, don't throw cold water upon an excellent idea," said the millionaire.

"But what would you say if you heard, on Friday, that X had paid his visit to the school instead of to this house, and that the diamonds were gone?" said the captain.

"Impossible, my dear fellow."

"Well, of course, Mr. Locke's judgment is the best," said the captain frankly. "I hope the affair will turn out successfully. And, by Jove! I should like to get to close quarters with that scoundrel once more!"

And the three sat for some time, discussing in low tones the plans for the morrow.

CHAPTER 11.

Captain Mellish Plays Footer.

TOM MERRY & CO. came out of the Shell Form-room, after morning lessons the next day, and made a rush at once for the quad. The day was fine and bright, and all signs of rain were gone, and the St. Jim's fellows were rejoicing.

"We're going to have a fine week-end, after all, Kildare," said Tom Merry, as he passed the skipper of St. Jim's in the passage. "The match will be all right."

"Yes, rather," said Kildare.

"Sure you don't want me to play centre-forward?" asked Tom Merry; and he dodged away, laughing, as the Sixth-Former reached for his ear.

The sun was shining in the quadrangle. The ground was dry, and if the fine weather continued, there would be every chance for a good match on the Saturday afternoon. The whole of St. Jim's was looking forward to it. The Wayland Ramblers' match was one of the most important the St. Jim's First played; the fact that Captain Mellish was playing for St. Jim's lent it, of course, an additional interest. Mellish of

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the Fourth was "swanking" considerably about it. Mellish of the Fourth never played footer himself; he hated the game, and every other form of manly exercise. But he was very proud of his cousin's exploits, and he shone in the reflected glory of the captain. Mellish had come in lately for a very unusual amount of attention and politeness from the other fellows. They did not think much of Percy Mellish as a rule. But, as Blake remarked, one was bound to be civil to a chap who was the cousin of such a ripping footballer and ripping fellow generally as Captain Mellish was.

Jack Blake came out of the School House with an old footer under his arm, for a punt about. Kildare and the seniors were going down to the senior ground for some regular practice. The evenings had drawn in too much for practice after school. Blake had just dropped the ball in the quad, when he gave a shout.

"Hallo! Here's the giddy captain—and Ferrers Locke!"
"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Both of them!"

Ferrers Locke and Captain Mellish had entered the gates, and were coming up towards the School House. Ferrers Locke was walking with one hand in his coat pocket. There was something in that pocket which the detective did not mean to leave out of his fingers.

"Buck up, D'Arcy!" said Tom Merry.
Arthur Augustus turned his eyeglass inquiringly upon the Shell fellow.

"I fail to undahstand you, Tom Mewwy," he said.
Tom Merry nodded towards the detective.

"Mr. Locke has come over to consult you, I expect," he said. "He wants you to bring your mighty brain to bear on the case, of course."

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

Arthur Augustus sniffed.
"Weally, Tom Mewwy—" he began.

"You will be able to tell by the mud on his boots whether he's had his lunch or not, and then you'll know whether to ask him to come into the tuck-shop!" Monty Lowther remarked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
Ferrers Locke nodded to the juniors, and went into the house. Captain Mellish caught sight of Kildare coming out of the house with a footer under his arm, and crossed over to him. The St. Jim's skipper greeted him very warmly.

"I thought you would be at practice to-day," the captain explained, "and so I walked over with Mr. Locke. As we're going to have a pretty stiff match on Saturday, I thought it just as well to practise with you a bit. It will give me some idea what the rest of the team is like."

Kildare looked very gratified.
"You're very kind, sir," he replied. "I never expected you to take so much trouble over a schoolboy match."

"What's worth doing is worth doing well," said the captain, smiling. "Besides, as a matter of fact, there's nothing I should like so much as a little footer practice this keen day."

"You can lend me some togs, I suppose?"
"Certainly, sir! Come up to my room."

A few minutes later Captain Mellish walked down to the footer ground with Kildare. As soon as the news spread that the captain was at practice with the seniors, there was a crowd round the ground at once. Shell and Fourth and Third quitted their various occupations, to crowd round and watch the captain play.

"Now we're going to see some footer!" said Blake emphatically.

"Yaas, wathah!"
"Hear, hear!" said Wally of the Third. "Make room for us, you Shell bounders. Sorry if I'm treading on your feet, Gussy!"

"Ow! You young rascal!"
"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fwightful young ass, you've spoiled all the polish on my boot!" howled Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, don't you begin, Gussy!"

Arthur Augustus made a rush at his exasperating minor, but Wally dodged away in the crowd.

Arthur Augustus paused, breathing hard.

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"Pway lend me your handkerchief to wub my boot, Lowthah," he said.

"Eh?"
"My boot is all mudday!"

"Can't you use your own handkerchief?"
"It would spoil it, deah boy."

"Why, you—you—" said Lowther, almost stuttering with wrath. "What about mine?"

"Weally, deah boy, what a fellow you are for arguin'! I considah—"

"There goes the leather!"
"Bravo!"

"On the ball, captain!"
"Play up!"

All eyes were on the tall figure of the captain. Kildare's team was playing a scratch eleven picked from the Fifth and Sixth. There were some good players in the scratch team—Rushden of the Sixth, Cutts of the Fifth, and others. But they did not have much chance against the captain. His play was certainly splendid. He passed, as Blake said, like an angel and kicked like a cherub.

"Bravo, captain!"
"On the ball!"

"Hurray!"
The captain put the leather in twice, amid roars from the crowd. Kildare's eyes sparkled as the team lined up after the second goal. Captain Mellish was making hay of the scratch players; and Kildare's heart was light as he thought what a rod in pickle the captain was for the Wayland Ramblers on Saturday.

"It's ripping, sir!" he exclaimed. "Play up like that on Saturday, and the Ramblers won't have much of a show!"

Captain Mellish laughed.
"Bai Jove, he's a wippin' playah!" Arthur Augustus remarked. "Fancy that splendid chap nearly bein' potted by a wascally burglah!"

"But you're going to hunt the burglar down, ain't you, Gussy?" Monty Lowther remarked.

And the juniors chuckled.
"My hat, how they're going!" exclaimed Tom Merry, his eyes on the game.

Kildare's men were racing for goal. Captain Mellish was about to kick, when he was seen to stumble. He spun round on one foot and fell heavily to the ground.

CHAPTER 12.

Crocked!

THERE was a shout of alarm at once. The players ceased immediately, and gathered round the captain, who lay helplessly on the ground, supporting himself on his elbow.

There was a drawn look upon his face, his features twisted as if in an effort to keep back a cry of pain.

Kildare bent over him.
"Are you hurt, sir?" he exclaimed.

The captain suppressed a groan.
"My ankle!" he said.

"Clumsy ass that I am, I'm afraid I've twisted it."

"Oh, what rotten luck!"
Kildare may be pardoned if he was thinking as much about Saturday's match as about the captain. He saw all his golden prospects gliding away like a dream at the thought that the captain was "crocked."

"Can you get up, captain?" asked Darrel.

"I—I'm afraid not. The ankle's twisted."

"I'm sorry!"
"It was my own fault!" groaned the captain. "The ground's a bit slippery there—I ought to have had more sense. Hang the luck! Help me up on the other foot, will you?—get me into the house. I must sit down."

The footballers raised the injured man.

He stood upon his left leg, leaning heavily upon Kildare and Darrel.

He turned a painful look upon the dismayed seniors.

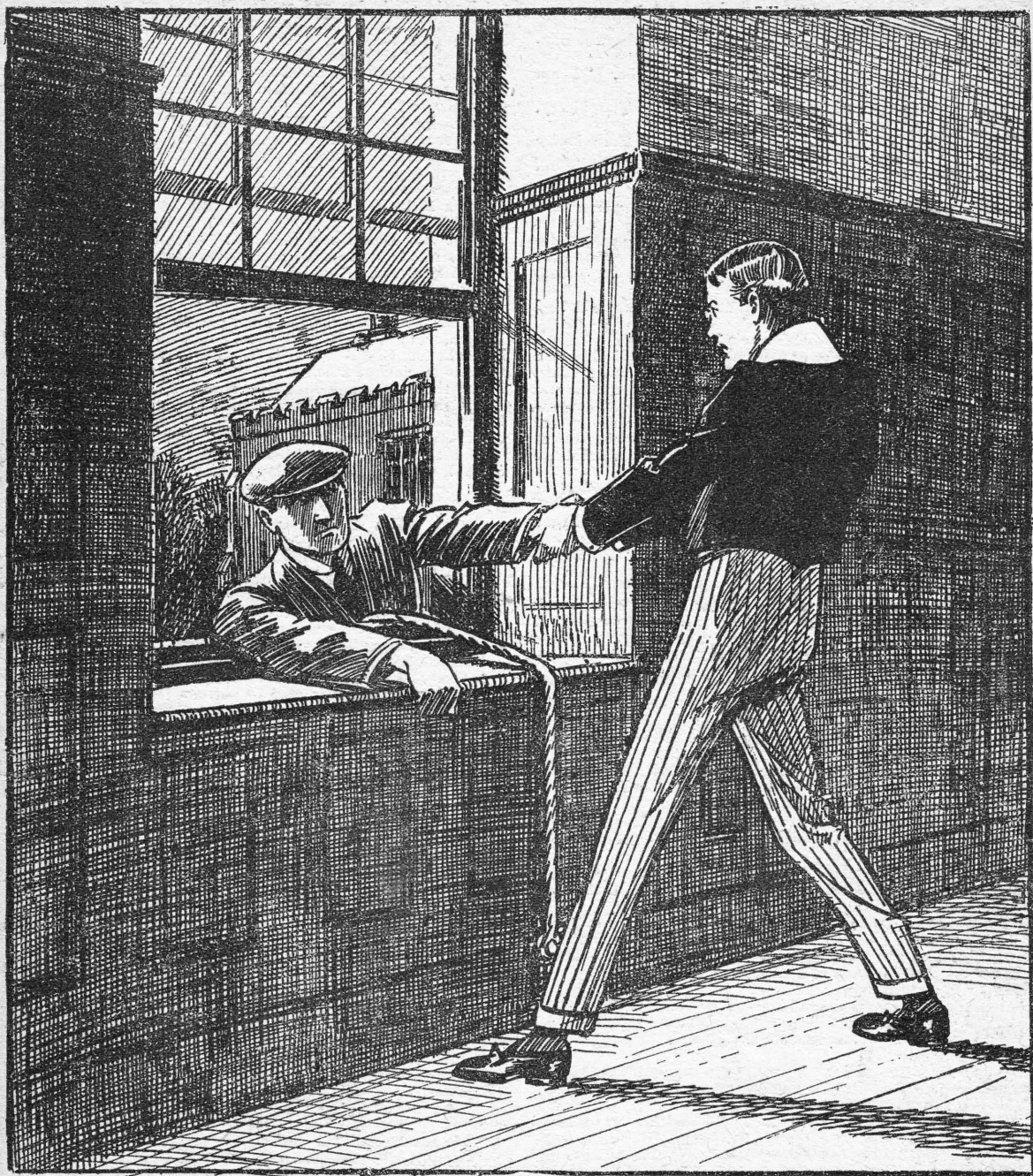
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The detective came up the rope hand over hand, and a dim form appeared below the window. "I'm here, Mr. Locke!" whispered D'Arcy. Ferrers Locke climbed in at the window. (See Chapter 14.)

"I'm sorry to bother you like this," he said. "Don't mind me. Go on with your practice."

Kildare and Darrel helped the captain to the School House. The captain hopped between them, and once or twice a low moan of pain escaped his lips, firmly as he appeared to keep himself under control.

"I hurt my ankle in India," he explained. "A fall from a horse in the hills. It has played me tricks like this before—confound it!" And he finished with a groan.

A crowd of fellows followed him into the house. All the juniors were looking very much concerned. They had an impression that the captain was suffering more pain than he cared to show, and some of them knew what a sprained ankle was like.

Captain Mellish was assisted into Kildare's study. He sank down in the armchair.

"I'm all right now," he said. "Run back and get on with your game. Yes, I insist."

"But if the injury's bad, you'd better see a doctor, sir," said Kildare.

"Oh, I don't think it's so bad as that! But I'll see. But go back and get on with your practice; you don't get much daylight in November, and I won't have your time wasted."

And as the captain insisted, Kildare & Co. left him.

Captain Mellish beckoned Tom Merry in from the passage.

"Tell Mr. Locke, when he comes out of the Head's room, that I've hurt my ankle, and sha'n't be able to walk back to Glyn House with him," he said. "Tell him I'll borrow the Head's trap and drive over later."

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry.

Tom Merry met Ferrers Locke ten minutes later, and gave him the captain's message.

For a second a very strange expression came upon the detective's face. Tom Merry was startled by it, he hardly knew why. But it was gone in a moment, and a look of grave concern came in its place.

"Captain Mellish injured!" said Ferrers Locke. "I am very sorry to hear that."

"Yes; he slipped as he was taking a kick," said Tom Merry. "Taking a kick?" repeated Ferrers Locke.

"He was practising footer with the seniors," Tom Merry explained. "He's going to play for the first eleven on Saturday, against Wayland Ramblers—if he's not crooked, of course."

"Oh, I see!"

"It will be rotten if he's crooked," said Tom Merry ruefully. "Rotten for him, of course, and rotten for the team. Langton's crooked, you know, and Captain Mellish was going to play in his place. Of course, Kildare would have left anybody out to play the captain, but Langton was out anyway, as it happened. Rotten, isn't it?"

"Very," said Ferrers Locke. "Where is the captain?—I will see him."

"He's in Kildare's study—this way!"

Ferrers Locke looked very concerned as he entered Kildare's study. The captain had his injured leg resting across a chair. He had pulled up the trouser-leg and pulled down the sock, and was rubbing the ankle with Elliman's, which Blake had thoughtfully brought him. There was a smell of embrocation in the study, and two or three juniors were standing looking on at the operations. Captain Mellish glanced up at the detective with a rueful smile.

"This is rotten luck, isn't it?" he said. "It's all right about to-night, though—I shall drive back presently, Locke, and I sha'n't want my feet to-night—only my hands, if there's anything at all to do."

"It's hard lines, though," said the detective. "I'm sorry. I suppose it hurts?"

The captain made a grimace.

"Well, it's not pleasant," he said; "but it's not so bad as it might have been. There is no swelling; it's simply a twist of the old sprain, I think. I shall be all right presently."

"Good! I am staying over here to-day," said Ferrers Locke. "I shall be able to take care of you when you go back."

"Oh, good!" said the captain.

Ferrers Locke walked away with a thoughtful brow. He returned to the Head's study, and found Dr. Holmes there. Dr. Holmes was looking at the empty frame of his Rembrandt, and he smiled ruefully as the detective came in.

Ferrers Locke glanced at the safe in the study.

"You are thinking of your packet?" asked the Head. "It is quite safe. You saw me lock it up."

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"Yes; that is all right. But I am going to ask you a favour, sir."

"You have only to ask. You have told me that you have hope of recovering my Rembrandt, and if you do that, I am your debtor for life," said the Head earnestly.

"I am staying down here over to-morrow," Ferrers Locke explained. "But I have some work to do—a long report of a case, which I cannot put off; and I shall have time to attend to it, if I may have the use of a room, pen and ink here."

The Head smiled.

"You may command everything in the place, Mr. Locke," he said. "I will see that you are left undisturbed in the library."

"You are taking a class this afternoon, sir?"

"Yes; the Sixth."

"Could I venture to ask you to let me use your study while you are in the Form-room? I should prefer it to the library."

The Head looked surprised.

"Quite so; as you wish," he said. "I shall be very pleased to place my study at your disposal, Mr. Locke."

Ferrers Locke did not seem to notice the Head's surprise.

"Thank you very much," he said. "I have my papers with me, and I can set to work as soon as you are finished with the study."

"You will lunch with me?"

"Thanks; I have lunched already."

The doctor glanced at the clock.

"Then you may instal yourself here now," he said. "I am just going to lunch."

"Thank you once more."

Ferrers Locke was left alone in the Head's study.

He drew a packet of papers from his pocket and laid them on the table and placed a pen and inkstand close at hand. But he did not write. Anyone who had observed the detective would have guessed, perhaps, that the papers, the work, were only a blind, and that Ferrers Locke's real wish was to remain in the Head's study. Perhaps he was thinking of the diamond necklace in the packet in the safe.

The cheery voices in the quadrangle died away, the Form-rooms filled for afternoon lessons, the quadrangle and the passages were silent.

Ferrers Locke took a volume from the Head's bookcase. He

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sat by the study fire and read. He read on patiently till the door opened and Dr. Holmes came in. Lessons were over at St. Jim's for the day.

"Busy?" asked the Head, with a smile.

"No; I have borrowed one of your books," said Ferrers Locke, smiling too. "Captain Mellish has not yet returned to Glyn House?"

"He—he is resting in Kildare's study."

"A very unfortunate accident."

"Very," said the Head.

"I will go and see him now."

Ferrers Locke made his way to Kildare's study. He found Captain Mellish, who had changed out of his football things, with his injured leg propped on a chair, having tea with Kildare and Darrel and Rushden. In spite of his injury, the captain was in good spirits, and the tea-party were very cheerful.

"Still crooked?" said the detective.

The captain nodded.

"I'm afraid so," he replied.

"Then we cannot depend upon you for to-night?"

"Oh, yes; I shall drive over," said Captain Mellish. "If I should feel that it would be too much for me, I will ask Dr. Holmes to give me a bed here. But I do not think it will be so bad as that. The ankle is better already."

"Right! I hope you will be able to come—I think you will be needed."

"Depend upon me to do my best."

And Ferrers Locke withdrew, leaving the captain talking football with the three Sixth-Formers.

CHAPTER 13.

The Cracksmen Does Not Come!

"A H, you are late! Where is the captain?" Mr. Glyn greeted Ferrers Locke anxiously as he came in. It was nearly dinner-time at Glyn House, and the millionaire had been growing uneasy.

"I'm sorry to say that the captain cannot return," said Ferrers Locke. "He was doing some football practice at the school, and slipped and strained his ankle."

"How very unfortunate."

"Yes. He is going to drive over later," said Ferrers Locke.

"It is possible, however, that he will not feel equal to it, and in that case Dr. Holmes will give him a room for the night. He asked me to make his excuses to you."

The millionaire nodded.

"That is all right," he said. "But it is very unfortunate. I depend upon Captain Mellish more than anyone else for the work we have before us to-night—excepting yourself, of course, Mr. Locke," he added hastily.

The detective smiled.

"No need to make that exception," he said. "Captain Mellish is exactly the man for what is to be done to-night. But if he cannot come, we must do the best we can without him. X has promised us a visit at eleven."

"Yes."

"You have telephoned to Inspector Skeat?"

"Yes; he has promised to come."

"And you have a couple of strong footmen?"

"Yes. That will be four of us and the inspector."

"Four should be enough," said Ferrers Locke. "For myself, I think it would be judicious for me to be on the watch outside the house."

"Well, I suppose four in the room here will be enough for anything that can be done at all," the millionaire remarked. "But if you should meet him singly, Mr. Locke, he is a dangerous character."

"I know he is; but I do not think he will get the better of me."

"He goes armed."

"So do I!" said Ferrers Locke, with a laugh.

"I should not like harm to come to you, Mr. Locke!"

"You may rely upon me for that!"

Ferrers Locke dined with the millionaire. The millionaire's daughter Edith and Mr. Wodyer were at dinner with them. Mr. Wodyer was Edith's fiancé, and had once been a house-master at St. Jim's. He was well known to Tom Merry & Co., and he had heard them speak of Ferrers Locke, and so he was much interested at meeting the famous detective. He had learned what was "on" for the evening, and over dinner he asked Ferrers Locke's permission to be one of the party on the watch.

Ferrers Locke assented at once.

"Quite the thing," he said. "You can take Captain Mellish's place."

"Captain Mellish is not returning, then?" asked Mr. Wodyer. "No, I think he will not return so late as this. He hurt his foot in playing football at the school, and he is crooked."

When Miss Glyn had retired, the men discussed their plans for the evening. Mr. Wodyer had a heavy Malacca cane, and the millionaire carefully loaded a handsome nickel-plated revolver. Inspector Skeat arrived later in the evening. The

inspector was looking very grim. He had been one of the party keeping watch at St. Jim's on the night that the Rembrandt was stolen, and he nourished a bitter resentment towards the mysterious cracksmen who had so easily and so completely defeated him.

Inspector Skeat met the famous detective with much respect in his manner. They took up their posts in the millionaire's library, into the wall of which was let an iron safe. That was the safe which would have contained the diamond necklace, but for Ferrers Locke's device of transferring the jewels to the Head's safe at St. Jim's.

There were French windows from the library to the terrace outside, but they were closed now, and guarded with strong shutters.

"We will have the door locked and bolted," said Mr. Glyn. "If the cracksmen can get in, after that, he must be a wizard and not human at all. And if he should get in—"

"He will not get out again!" said Arthur Wodyer.

"He would not have got away at the school, gentlemen," said Inspector Skeat. "But he shot the lights out, and that was a move we were not expecting. But in this case—"

"There are lights on in three different parts of the room," Ferrers Locke remarked. "It would require a volley."

"There is no telling what the rascal's dodge may be," said the millionaire. "I wish the captain were here."

"I think there are enough of us, sir, to handle one man," said the inspector.

"He is not an ordinary man, Mr. Skeat."

Mr. Glyn called two powerfully-built footmen into the library. He had already explained to them what was required. They brought in thick oaken cudgels with them, and sat down at the further end of the room.

Mr. Glyn, Arthur Wodyer, and the inspector placed their chairs before the door of the safe, and sat there.

Truly, the cracksmen had a difficult task before him to crack the safe.

Ferrers Locke watched all the arrangements made, and then put on his coat.

"You will be outside?" asked the inspector.

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"Blow your whistle if you require help, then."

"Oh, no," said Ferrers Locke. "Police-whistles can be counterfeited. On no account get out of this room."

"By George, sir, you're right! We won't stir."

"Keep a strict watch, and rely upon me to be near at hand if the cracksmen appears," said Ferrers Locke. "You will lock the door after me, Mr. Glyn."

"Certainly."

Ferrers Locke passed out into the hall. The millionaire watched him stride out of the house and disappear into the darkness of the grounds.

He shivered a little.

"Mr. Locke has an iron nerve," he said. "I should not care to be out there in the dark, knowing that the most desperate criminal of modern times had promised a visit."

"I agree with you," said Arthur Wodyer.

"Well, I will lock the door now."

"I—I suppose Miss Glyn is quite safe?" hesitated the young man.

"Quite!" said the millionaire. "There are two maids in Miss Glyn's room with her to-night, to say nothing of an electric burglar alarm and a dog outside on the landing. It is not Miss Glyn who is in danger—it is ourselves." The young man coloured, and Mr. Glyn laughed. "Never mind, Arthur; I don't blame you for thinking of it. But we've got to think of X now."

He turned the key in the lock, then he returned to his seat.

"It means a long wait," he remarked. "The cigar-box and the decanters are here, gentlemen."

But the watchers did not care for either. They were too excited and strained. Every sound of the November wind outside made them start.

The hours struck from the clock on the mantelpiece.

Ten o'clock!

"Another hour before our friend the enemy is due!" said the millionaire, with a yawn. "I hope he will not disappoint us."

"I think he will come," said Wodyer.

"I hope so," said the inspector, between his teeth.

"I wonder where Mr. Locke is?"

"Keeping watch, no doubt."

"It would be terrible if—if—" Arthur Wodyer hesitated. The millionaire shivered a little.

"Mr. Locke is not likely to be taken by surprise," he said, "and it was his own wish to be out of the house."

"True! I wish eleven o'clock would strike."

Half-past!

The time was getting close now, and the watchers felt their hearts beat fast, in spite of their efforts to remain calm.

A quarter to eleven!

Mr. Glyn rose restlessly, and paced to and fro. Arthur

Wodyer rose to his feet and leaned against the safe. The inspector sat bolt upright, grim and unbending.

Chime!

"Eleven!" cried the millionaire.

The strokes chimed out softly from the silver-toned clock on the mantelpiece! Eleven strokes! It was eleven o'clock!

The men gazed at one another!

It was a thrilling moment!

Eleven o'clock! The hour at which the mysterious cracksmen had promised his visit. They listened—the house was still! Only a faint rustle of the wind in the trees outside—nothing else in the stillness of the night.

A minute passed—another—and another!

Their eyes were fixed upon the door, as if they expected to see it fly open, in spite of lock and bolt.

But the door remained fast.

Their hearts beat in unison with the ticking of the clock.

Five minutes—ten minutes—a quarter!

"A quarter past eleven!" breathed the millionaire.

"He isn't coming!" said Wodyer.

The inspector shook his head.

"X has broken his word!" said Mr. Glyn. "Aha! his teeth are drawn, then!"

The minutes ticked away. Half-past eleven—twelve! Mid-night sounded!

Mr. Glyn put away his revolver.

"X has failed!" he said. "He has broken his word!"

"And the diamonds are safe!" said the inspector.

Mr. Glyn started.

Back into his mind came the vague suspicion Captain Mellish had entertained—that somehow the cunning cracksmen might get wind of the transfer of the diamonds to the Head's safe at St. Jim's. It seemed impossible, but that would account for the cracksmen having failed to appear! Mr. Glyn's face went white!

"The diamonds safe?" he exclaimed. "I do not know that they are safe! Where is Ferrers Locke? Why does he not return?"

But Ferrers Locke did not return. Mr. Glyn sank into his seat again, his face pale with anxiety. While they were keeping watch and ward over the empty safe, what might have happened at the school?

CHAPTER 14.

Arthur Augustus Helps.

TOM MERRY & CO. had gone to bed at the usual time. Arthur Augustus, remembering the advice of Ferrers Locke, not only concealed his secret, but concealed the fact that he had one to conceal. Not one of his chums noticed anything unusual in his manner that evening, and not one of the Fourth guessed, for a moment, that he went to bed with the intention of getting up before rising-bell.

Arthur Augustus was lying very low!

There was the usual chatter in the Fourth Form dormitory in the School House, till one by one the juniors dropped off to sleep.

At length only one of them remained awake. It was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The swell of St. Jim's propped himself upon his pillow, afraid to lay his head down lest he should slip into slumber.

Half-past ten sounded from the clock tower then the quarter. Then Arthur Augustus stirred.

The dormitory was still and silent; all the fellows were fast asleep.

The swell of St. Jim's slipped quietly out of bed and dressed himself. As a rule, Arthur Augustus took a good deal of time to dress. But on this occasion he completed that operation in ten minutes.

He made hardly a sound as he dressed. Then he stole on tiptoe to the door of the dormitory, opened it, and quitted the room. He drew the door softly shut behind him.

The passage was in darkness. Downstairs, a light was burning—some of the masters had not yet gone to bed. But the dormitory passages and the juniors' studies were in darkness, and D'Arcy had no fear of being seen. He crept down the stairs to the Fourth-Form passage. At the end of the passage was the deep shadowy recess which gave admittance to the punishment-room. At the end of the recess was the heavy oaken door of the old room.

D'Arcy was in complete darkness now; but he knew the way well enough. It came eerily into his mind at that moment that that room was the haunted room of St. Jim's, and he shivered for a moment. But he did not hesitate. He opened the door and entered Nobody's Study.

There was the faintest glimmer of light from the single window. The room struck the junior with a chill; the walls and the floor were of solid blocks of stone—the massive stone that was used in the construction of the oldest part of St. Jim's. D'Arcy closed the door behind him.

From the dark chimney he drew a coil of rope, which he had concealed there during the day. He uncoiled it, and stepped

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to the window. The window creaked as he pushed up the sash with a cautious hand.

Arthur Augustus looked out of the window. The window opened upon an entry between two high buildings, into which little of the starlight penetrated. Below was a mass of darkness. Eleven o'clock had chimed out from the tower.

Was Ferrers Locke there?

D'Arcy wondered.

Bernard Glyn, of the Shell, had been home that day, and he had brought back to St. Jim's the story of the telegram from the cracksman. All the fellows knew of the vigil that was being kept at Glyn House. It seemed to D'Arcy, as to the rest, that Ferrers Locke would certainly be watching with the rest. But the detective had bidden him keep the arrangement, whatever happened; and Arthur Augustus, whether he had abilities as a detective or not, was showing that at least he could obey orders.

He lowered the rope from the window. If the detective was there, he would hear the sound it made as it slithered down.

The rope reached the ground. Arthur Augustus listened intently.

There was a slight pull on the rope.

The junior felt the pull, and he understood. Ferrers Locke was there! The watchers at Glyn House were watching without the detective.

There was no sound, no voice from below. There came another pull on the rope, to feel if it was secure. Arthur Augustus tied the end of it to the bar of the grate in the room. Then there came another pull, and the rope was taut.

"It's all wight," D'Arcy breathed into the darkness below the window.

There was no reply.

But he heard the faint sounds of a man climbing the rope.

The rope was knotted at intervals, and the climb was easy enough to an active man like Ferrers Locke. The detective came up hand over hand, and the dim form appeared in the gloom below the window.

"I'm here, Mr. Locke!" whispered D'Arcy.

"Good!"

Ferrers Locke climbed in at the window.

He stood for a moment or two breathing deeply; then he closed down the sash of the window. Arthur Augustus waited. The detective broke the silence. He spoke in so faint a whisper that the swell of St. Jim's had to strain his ears to listen.

"You did not wake anybody in leaving the dormitory, D'Arcy?"

"No, Mr. Locke."

"No one knows you are here?"

"Nobody."

"No one suspects?"

"No one, sir."

"Very good! Now, how many people are still up—do you know?"

"I think the Head is still in his study, sir," said D'Arcy. "Pewwaps Mr. Waitton is up. But neahly ewevybody is in bed."

"And Captain Mellish?"

"Oh, he went to bed early. His ankle was hurtin' him," said Arthur Augustus. "Dr. Short has been fwm Wylcombe to see him, and he wecommended Captain Mellish to west it."

"Then he is in bed?"

"Yaas, sir."

"Where is his room?"

"He has the woom next to Mr. Linton's—you have slept in it yourself when you were stayin' here, Mr. Locke."

"Yes, I remember the room. Thank you for what you have done, D'Arcy; I am very much obliged to you."

"Not at all, sir," said Arthur Augustus modestly. "Is there anythin' else I can do?"

"Nothing, thanks. You had better go back to bed now."

Arthur Augustus felt a very keen sense of disappointment. He knew, of course, that Ferrers Locke had not entered the School House in this mysterious way for nothing. The detective had some plan in his mind, some work to do. And Arthur Augustus had hoped to be able to help in it, whatever it was.

"Can't I help you, Mr. Locke?" he asked.

The detective shook his head.

"Not now, D'Arcy. You have helped me, you know. But if you like to remain awake, I may call you presently—possibly. But I should advise you to go to sleep; if there is an alarm, you will wake soon enough."

D'Arcy breathed hard.

"I'm not likely to go to sleep aftah that, sir," he said. "But I'll go back to the dormitoway if you wish."

"Do so. And thank you for what you have done. One word—the Head been in his study all the evening?"

"Yaas, sir, I believe he has not left it."

"Good!"

Arthur Augustus moved silently away. He left the detective in the punishment-room, and returned silently to the Fourth-

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Form dormitory. But he did not go to bed. He lay down in his clothes, and drew a blanket over him, fully intending to stay awake. But the hour was late, and Arthur Augustus was sleepy. Ere long his eyes had closed, and he was slumbering as soundly as any fellow in the Fourth-Form dormitory.

Ferrers Locke remained some minutes in Nobody's Study. He felt in his pocket, as if to make sure that a weapon was there, and ready. Then he drew on a pair of soft rubber shoes. Then, without a sound, he quitted the room, and moved along the passage to the stairs.

It was a quarter past eleven. Everyone in the School House of St. Jim's was in bed, with the exception of the Head.

Ferrers Locke, moving as silently as a ghost, came to the end of the passage where the Head's study was situated. A light was still burning there, and there was a light under the study door.

Ferrers Locke drew back, and disappeared into a deep shadowy alcove at the end of the passage.

Half-past eleven struck from the clock tower.

Then there was a movement in the Head's study. A few minutes later, the light was turned out and the door opened. Dr. Holmes came out of his study, locked the door carefully on the outside, and put the key in his pocket. He switched off the electric light in the passage, and walked away towards the stairs. He passed the alcove where the detective stood in the darkness, without a suspicion. His footsteps died away in the distance.

The School House was plunged into deep silence.

Ferrers Locke waited!

CHAPTER 15.

Capturing the Cracksman.

FERRERS LOCKE stood silent, hardly breathing, in the deep dark alcove.

For what was the detective waiting?

It would have been hard to tell. If Mr. Glyn, who was keeping watch and ward at Glyn House, had known that the detective was in the School House of St. Jim's, he would have been amazed. The millionaire supposed Ferrers Locke to be keeping watch in the grounds of Glyn House. No one but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and Ferrers Locke himself knew where the detective was. Why was he there? The threatened visit of the cracksman was to be paid to Glyn House, not to the school. Did the detective suspect that, perhaps, the cunning criminal had become aware of the transfer of the diamonds? Even so, why was he waiting alone—unknown to Mr. Glyn, unknown to Captain Mellish, unknown to Dr. Holmes, in the dark alcove near the Head's study?

It would have been difficult to explain. But it was certain that the famous detective was waiting for something—for some happening that he expected.

Midnight!

The last stroke of midnight died away, leaving, as it seemed, a deeper silence behind it. No sound in the house—nothing but the scuttling of a rat behind the wainscot, and the rustle of the leafless branches in the quad.

Dead silence!

Half-past twelve! The detective had hardly stirred. His ears were strained to listen.

A slight sound in the silence!

Ferrers Locke's eyes gleamed, and he bent his head a little, his eyes fixed upon the black darkness of the passage before him.

A sound again—a scarcely audible sound of a cautious footstep. Had not the detective's ears been of the keenest, he could not have heard it, though it was passing within a couple of yards of him. Whoever was passing him in the darkness was accustomed to moving about with caution, evidently.

The sound died away—and then Ferrers Locke moved silently to the opening of the alcove, and looked along the passage.

He could see nothing; the passage was densely dark.

But he could hear!

The unseen, unknown individual who had passed him in the darkness had stopped outside the door of the Head's study.

That door was locked! Faintly through the darkness came a sound—

Click!

Ferrers Locke smiled grimly.

The lock of the study door had been picked. He strained his ears, and heard the door close softly.

The unknown was in the Head's study.

What was he doing there?

Ferrers Locke thought that he knew.

He did not move from the alcove. Whatever the unknown was doing in the study, he was to effect it uninterrupted by the detective.

Ferrers Locke waited.

In his mind's eye, it seemed to him that he could see the unknown—he could see him stop before the safe in the study—

he could see him pause there, and work silently, hard, grimly, till the safe yielded to him, and the iron door swung open.

Yet the detective did not stir.

He knew that the Head's safe was being cracked—he knew that the packet he had brought over from Glyn House and placed in the safe was being taken—and he did not move!

He waited.

One!

The deep boom sounded through the still, chilly air of the November night.

It was one o'clock.

St. Jim's was plunged into grave-like stillness. Ferrers Locke listened. There was a faint sound from the direction of the Head's study—the door was opened, and it had closed again.

Click!

It was locked. In the morning it would look as it had looked over-night—only an expert eye would be able to detect the fact that the lock had been picked in the hours of darkness.

Ferrers Locke drew a deep breath.

He felt in his pocket again, as if to make sure that something was there—and stood ready, where the alcove opened into the passage, his hand outstretched in the darkness.

The unknown was returning.

But this time he could not pass without coming into contact with the detective.

Closer, closer!

He was moving as silently as before—the detective rather felt than heard his approach. Closer—till something touched the detective's outstretched hand in the darkness, and there was a sudden, startled exclamation.

"Ha!"

Ferrers Locke sprang like a tiger.

The unknown, taken utterly by surprise, went heavily to the floor, with the detective on top of him, holding upon him with an iron grip.

There was a cry from the man as he fell, a cry in which surprise and terror were mingled.

Then he began to struggle.

But it was too late—he had met his master. Ferrers Locke had won. There was a click in the darkness—click!

Then a savage oath.

For the unseen man, as he struggled, found that his wrists were locked together, and he could not get at his weapon, and he could not escape.

He lay panting under the detective.

Ferrers Locke, gasping for breath, rose to his feet.

He had succeeded. He had taken his enemy by surprise, and he had handcuffed him before he could reach a weapon—or there might have been grim murder done there in the darkness. And now the detective broke silence at last.

"Caught!" he said.

There was a gasping breath from the man on the floor.

"My Heaven!" he muttered. "Caught, by gad! Trapped!"

"Yes, trapped!" said Ferrers Locke. "Caught at last—X!"

"My heavens!"

Ferrers Locke felt in his pocket and took out a police-whistle. He blew it sharply.

The sharp, sudden blast rang through the silent house. Twice again the detective blew, filling every recess of the old School House with echoes. There was a cry from the handcuffed man. He had staggered up.

"Ferrers Locke—it is you?"

"Yes."

"Half the diamonds if you let me go."

"Not for all the diamonds in South Africa, my friend."

"All of them—and the picture—everything!"

"You are wasting your breath."

There were sounds in the house now—opening doors, calling voices. The shrill blasts of the whistle had awakened every sleeper. Lights flashed on the stairs.

Ferrers Locke replaced the whistle, and stepped to the switch of the electric light in the passage. He pressed the switch, and the passage was flooded with light.

The handcuffed man reeled back. He leaned against the wall, panting. He was a tall, powerfully-built man. His face could not be seen—there was a crape mask over it, and only the chin and the eyes gleaming through the openings in the crape could be seen. The mask had been pulled a little aside as he fell, but it still hid the face of the cracksman.

Footsteps and voices came, down the stairs, along the passage. Kildare, half dressed, with a poker in his hand, was the first to reach the spot. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was a good second, and he was dressed. A crowd of seniors and juniors came behind, wild with excitement. Dr. Holmes and Mr. Railton hurried down together.

"What is it?" exclaimed the Head. "What—Mr. Locke?"

"You here?" exclaimed Mr. Railton.

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"Yes; and I have been fortunate enough to capture the cracksman."

"The cracksman!"

"X!"

"There he stands!"

Every eye was bent upon the gasping man, as he reeled against the wall of the passage. His wrists were dragging convulsively at the handcuffs, but the steel was too strong for him. His lips were set in a tight line, his eyes were burning.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head. "It is really the cracksman—X?"

"Yes."

"Let us see his face!" exclaimed Mr. Railton. "This is a very remarkable thing, for Captain Mellish's impression of the cracksman was that he was a short, thick-set man."

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"I have no doubt Captain Mellish had his reasons for making that statement," he said.

"What—you do not imply——"

"That the captain was not stating the facts, undoubtedly!"

"Mr. Locke!"

"You shall see the prisoner," said Ferrers Locke. "I warn you to be prepared for a surprise."

The detective stretched out his hand and tore the mask from the face of the handcuffed man.

The electric light shone upon the face that was revealed—a face white with rage and shame—a face that all knew well.

It was the face of Captain Mellish!

CHAPTER 16.

"X"

"CAPTAIN MELLISH!"

The name leaped to every lip.

"Captain Mellish!" said the Head dazedly. "Is this a—a joke? What does it mean, Ferrers Locke? What have you handcuffed Captain Mellish for?"

"Captain Mellish! Bai Jove!"

"My hat!" gasped Tom Merry. "It's impossible! It can't be! Captain Mellish—he can't—he can't be the cracksman!"

"Good Heavens!" cried Kildare.

Mellish of the Fourth was in the crowd. He turned a face stricken with terror and dismay upon the handcuffed man.

"Cecil!" he exclaimed. "Cecil, what does this mean?"

Captain Mellish gnawed his lip.

"Get me out of this, Mr. Locke," he said. "You have caught me—the game is up! Get me to prison—get me anywhere—out of this!"

Even the hard, unscrupulous heart of the cracksman was moved by the horror and dismay in the faces round him. All these fellows had known him, admired him, liked him—he had been a hero in their eyes. And he was exposed before all of them as a common thief—as a guest who robbed his host—as a traitor and robber. Even into the cracksman's face there came a flush of shame.

He gave his cousin a haggard look.

"I'm sorry for you, Percy," he said. "But—but the fellows won't be hard on you for what I've done—it wasn't your fault."

"Oh, good heavens!" groaned Mellish. "Then it's true!"

"Can't you see it is?"

"Bai Jove!"

"Take me away, Ferrers Locke!" said the cracksman.

"For mercy's sake get me out of this! You have no right to torture me."

The detective nodded.

"Come!" he said.

"You may take the diamonds," said the captain bitterly.

"The packet is in my breast pocket."

The detective smiled slightly.

"You may keep that packet," he said. "I did not trust seven thousand pounds worth of diamonds to chance, Captain Mellish. The diamonds are in my own pocket; that is a dummy package."

"What! Then you knew——"

"I knew."

The captain bowed his head.

"Then I have been trapped?" he said.

"It was the only way."

"I was a fool to enter into a contest with you, Ferrers Locke. Take me away."

The detective led the prisoner away. He was locked in his room, and a messenger was sent at once to Glyn House for Inspector Skeat. The St. Jim's fellows returned to bed.

ANSWERS

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but not to sleep. Groups of them stayed talking in the dormitory passages, where all the lights were on. All order was at an end for the time.

"But how on earth did Ferrers Locke come to be in the house?" Tom Merry exclaimed, in amazement.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy chuckled.

"Pewwaps I could explain that!" he remarked.

"You!" exclaimed Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"What on earth do you know about it?" demanded Monty Lowther.

"Ewevythin', deah boy!" replied the swell of St. Jim's serenely.

"Then explain, you ass!" exclaimed Bernard Glyn. "Did you know Ferrers Locke was here?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"How did you know?"

"Because I let him into the house," said Arthur Augustus cheerfully.

There was a shout of astonishment

"You let him in?"

"Rats!"

"If you say wats to me, deah boys, I shall wefuse to explain," said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity.

"Then it's really true that you were helping Mr. Locke?"

Tom Merry exclaimed.

"Yaas, wathah! It's not a secwet any longah, as the cwacksman is capchahed."

"Why didn't you tell us?" demanded Blake indignantly.

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"An expwienced detective knows how to keep a secwet," he said sagely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, deah boys——"

Kildare came along the dormitory passage.

"Now, then, you kids, back to bed!" he exclaimed. "You can't stay up all night."

And the juniors were herded off to their dormitories, to continue the excited discussion in bed.

Meanwhile, the Head and Mr. Railton had dressed, and joined Ferrers Locke in the Head's study. Ferrers Locke

was waiting for the arrival of Inspector Skeat from Glyn House, to hand over the prisoner to him. Dr. Holmes was looking very pale and troubled. The discovery of the rascality of Captain Mellish was a very great shock to him. And even now he did not understand. The captain had been caught in the very act, with the stolen packet in his breast, and the mask on his face. He had confessed his guilt, since it was useless to deny it; but how Ferrers Locke had discovered it was a mystery. Certainly no one else had had the slightest suspicion.

"Have you any objection to explaining how you brought this about, Mr. Locke?" asked Mr. Railton.

"None at all, sir."

"We are all in a state of utter amazement. The man's guilt is clear, but how in the name of all that is wonderful did you discover it?"

"I am utterly amazed," said the Head.

"I knew it would be a great surprise to you," said Ferrers Locke. "It is not such a surprise to me. The police have long since guessed that X, when he was discovered, would turn out to be a man moving in a decent station of society—his knowledge of the places he robbed, his inside information concerning valuables, all pointed to that. The police knew it, and I knew it—and I should have expected the thief to turn out to be some man like the captain. Certainly, however, there was nothing in his ways or his manner to suggest a man leading a double life."

"Nothing, certainly," said the Head. "He made the most agreeable impression upon us. He was very popular here."

Ferrers Locke nodded.

"It was his object to make himself so," he said. "The fact that he had a relation here gave him a footing in the school, but he could not have carried out his objects without making himself popular. Otherwise, you would not have asked him to remain on the watch with you last Saturday night, and Kildare would not have asked him to play football. But undoubtedly there is an agreeable side to the captain's character. He is one of the most unscrupulous rascals I have ever encountered, but he is a very pleasant fellow in a social way. Criminals are not infrequently so, and I have not the slightest doubt that he enjoyed popularity, and liked to be liked by people he met."

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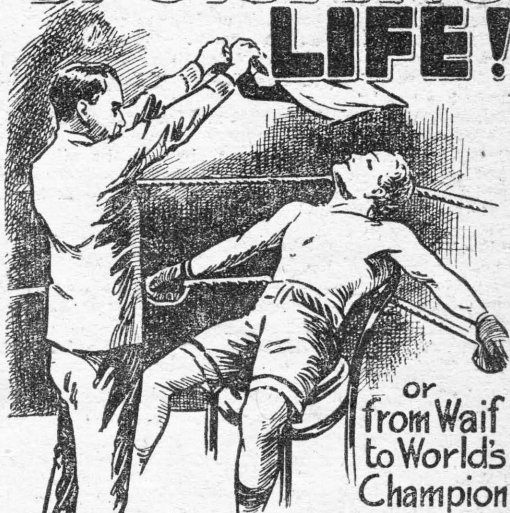
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BOYS' FRIEND

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"Yet he was a thief."

"Yes, and a most unscrupulous one."

"But how—"

"It was not an easy case," said Ferrers Locke. "But I had a clue from the start—a clue which had escaped the police."

"And that clue?"

"The telephone message you received before the robbery."

The Head stared.

"But in what did the clue consist, Mr. Locke?"

"In this. The conclusion was, that the cracksmen was a man of iron nerve and unlimited impudence, that it amused him to display his power by warning his victim before he robbed him, in order to make a sensation by committing the robbery in spite of the watch that was kept."

"Yes. Was that not the case?"

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"There are criminals like that," he said. "Criminals suffer from 'swank' like any other class of men. But X, I think, was a little too hard-headed for such boasting. No; I did not believe that the telegrams and telephone messages were merely criminal swank. I believed that they had an object."

"And that object?"

"To cause a watch to be set over the article he wished to steal."

The Head started.

"But surely that would make the robbery more difficult and dangerous?" he exclaimed.

"It would make it easier. Because Captain Mellish, in each instance, contrived to be one of the watchers."

"Oh," exclaimed the Head, with a deep breath, "I see it now!"

"I had thought over the matter a great deal," said Ferrers Locke. "I had formed that theory, even before I took up the case—that the insolent messages were sent, because the keeping watch gave the cracksmen an opportunity to be upon the spot unsuspected. I came down here with Captain Mellish's name in my mind. Captain Mellish had been present at Lord Westwood's house when a watch was being kept, after an insolent telegram had been received from the cracksmen. Captain Mellish was a guest in Mr. Glyn's house when the golden statuette was taken. Captain Mellish was one of the party that watched here. Now, if my theory was correct, it was evident that Captain Mellish must be the man, because the other members of the watching party here were above possible suspicion—youself, Mr. Railton, Kildare, and Inspector Skeat. I do not mean to say that any person is above suspicion to a detective; but I mean that any member of the party, with the exception of Cecil Mellish, could not possibly have been the cracksmen."

"True!"

"At Glyn House to-day a telegram was received from X, threatening the robbery of Miss Glyn's diamond necklace to-night at eleven. Captain Mellish was to be one of the party staying up to watch—the same old game. I suggested transferring the diamonds to your safe here, Dr. Holmes, in order that they might run no risks. Captain Mellish and Mr. Glyn knew of the transfer. Captain Mellish expressed a fear that X, with his usual cunning, might get wind of it. That was a feeler, to prepare our minds for the discovery we were to make on the morrow. Now, I knew that if my theory was correct, Captain Mellish must devise some excuse for not keeping watch with us at Glyn House this night, as obviously he could not watch there and crack the safe here at the same time."

"And he—"

"He managed to get himself crooked in football practice here," said the detective, with a smile. "Exactly."

"Ah, we never dreamed—" said Mr. Railton.

"That is why I borrowed your study this afternoon, sir," said Ferrers Locke, with a smile. "I knew pretty accurately that Captain Mellish's ankle was as sound as ever, and I thought that he might venture upon cracking the safe while the school was busy at lessons. The afternoon would have been almost as safe as the night. I remained in here all the time you were in the Sixth Form room for that reason."

"Ah, I never guessed—"

"I should have done my work badly if you had guessed, sir."

"I suppose so," said the Head. "But he made no attempt—"

"He probably knew that I was here. Having left it, he left it till the night, when he expected me to be keeping watch at Glyn House with Mr. Glyn and the rest, and so he had not the slightest doubt that I was safely out of the way."

"And you—"

"I introduced myself secretly into the house to watch. I had to allow him to go ahead with his work to obtain proof against him. There was no way of capturing him but by a trap. And so I trapped him. And I took him by surprise when he came out of your study, otherwise I might not be alive now to tell you what had happened."

The Head shuddered.

"Yet—I do not see it all," he said. "The other night, when we were watching here, who was it, then, that came and took the picture?"

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"No one came," he said.

"No one!" exclaimed Dr. Holmes.

"No one," said Ferrers Locke. "From the precautions that were taken, sir, it was practically impossible for anyone to enter the house. You will remember that it was Captain Mellish who gave the alarm, Captain Mellish was the only one who saw the intruder, Captain Mellish did all the shooting. As a matter of fact, he had sent you the telephone message, with the intention of being one of the watching party here, otherwise he could not have been in the house at all, and would have had no opportunity of committing the robbery. He did not hear a noise in the passage—you remember no one else heard it."

"I remember."

"He affected to hear it, and when he went into the passage, he himself fired at the light and extinguished it. He smashed through the window with the chair, but no one leaped out. He shot the lamp out in this study, and he, in the darkness, whipped out a knife and cut the picture from the frame!"

"And afterwards, when you were searching for the picture and the cracksmen, that picture was folded up, or rolled up and hidden on the person of the cracksmen, under your eyes—Captain Mellish himself!"

Dr. Holmes gasped.

"I understand now," he said. "And that was why he discovered the ivy loosened—he loosened it himself, to give the impression that someone had escaped into the road."

"Exactly."

"But I am still amazed!" cried the Head. "What of the telephone message to-day when Captain Mellish was himself in the study?"

"Ah, that was a master stroke!" said Ferrers Locke.

"But the explanation was quite simple—the captain had a confederate, as many details in his robberies amply prove, and it was this confederate who rang you up while the captain was here to-day. You remember that the voice did not sound quite the same."

"Yes, I remember now. I suppose the telephone call was really on your account. He knew that you would be here, and instructed his confederate."

"Precisely."

There was a sound of wheels in the quadrangle.

"Inspector Skeat!" said Ferrers Locke.

The inspector arrived in a state of almost dazed amazement. He could scarcely believe the message he had received, and he could scarcely believe his eyes when he gazed at Captain Mellish, alias X, with the handcuffs upon his wrists. His look of almost idiotic amazement brought a grim smile to the face of the cracksmen himself.

"Well, you've got me," said Captain Mellish. "Dr. Holmes, before I go, allow me to express my regret. I have treated you very badly, and I have no excuse to offer. I came home from India with expensive tastes and little to gratify them with; I had peculiar talents, and I made use of them—that is my history. But you shall have your picture back. It has not been disposed of, and it is uninjured. Forgive me if you can."

"I forgive you," said the Head sadly. "I am only sorry that such a man should have come to this. It is never too late to repent, Captain Mellish."

It was a nine days' wonder at St. Jim's.

No one would ever have dreamed of suspecting Captain Mellish, but now the truth was known, Tom Merry & Co. remembered some little circumstances that had not engaged their attention before. They understood the meeting in the old barn on that rainy afternoon. It had probably been the plunder of a robbery that the captain was handing to Nat Perkins on that occasion; and doubtless, after the man had left the barn, Captain Mellish had met him again unseen by the juniors, and given him the instructions for that surprising telephone call to St. Jim's. Dr. Holmes recovered his picture, and Captain Mellish went to his proper punishment. And disgrace, too, fell upon one who had not earned it—Mellish of the Fourth. While Captain Mellish was honoured and popular, Percy Mellish had "swanked" considerably about his relation; but he would have been very glad to forget the connection now, and to have others forget it. It was not agreeable to a fellow to have a relation in Portland Prison, and to have the fact known to the whole school. But Mellish, somewhat to his surprise, found that Tom Merry & Co. stood by him, and their countenancing him enabled him to hold up his head.

Mellish of the Fourth hoped eagerly that the matter would be forgotten. But it was likely to be a long time before the St. Jim's fellows left off discussing, over and over again, the mystery of X.

THE END.

(Another splendid, long, complete tale of TOM MERRY & CO. at St. Jim's next Wednesday, entitled "Hard Times," by Martin Clifford. Don't forget to order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance. Price One Penny.)

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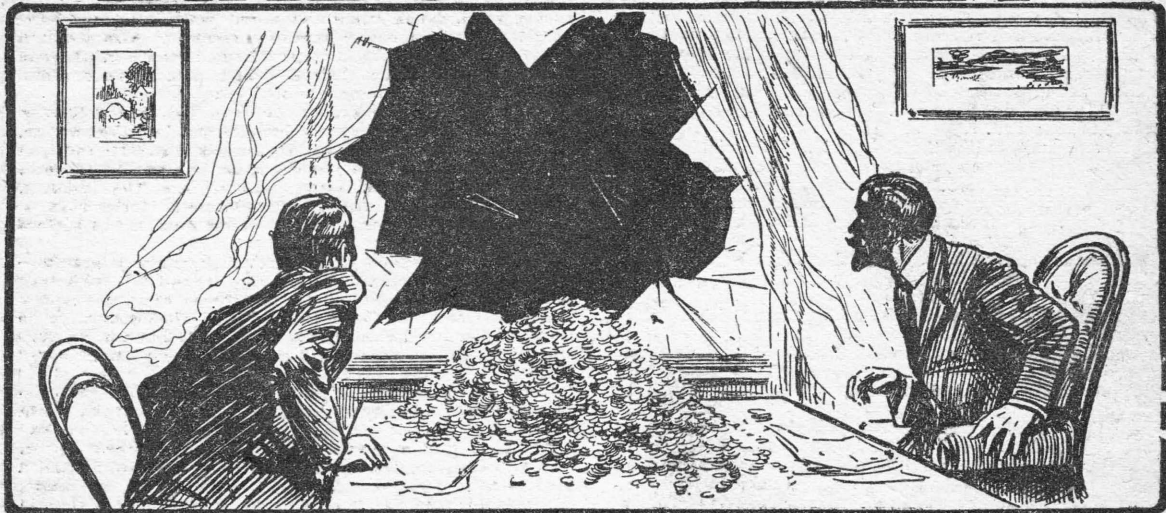
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On the bleak November afternoon when we first make the acquaintance of Jack Langley, the famous consulting electrical engineer, he is sitting in his office, writing out a report, when his clerk ushers in a man dressed entirely in black, who tells Jack that he is a member of the Sheffield Town Council. Something has gone wrong with the electric machinery, and he asks Jack to accompany him to the town to attend to the matter.

Jack Langley agrees, and the two enter the Sheffield train. A little while before the train is due to steam into Sheffield Station, the Man in Black offers Jack a drink from his flask. Suspecting nothing, Jack drains it off at a single draught; but the moment he has swallowed the stuff he knows that he has been drugged.

He becomes insensible, and the Man in Black then quickly opens the carriage door, and flings him out on to a tarpaulin held by four masked men stationed on the side of the line.

When the young engineer recovers consciousness, he finds himself in an enormous coiners' den—a miniature Royal Mint. He is told by the man who successfully duped him, and who appears to be known as the Squire, that if he

repairs one of the coiners' dynamos he will be allowed to go free.

Jack executes the repair, but the promise is not kept, and instead of being allowed his freedom, he is forced to go aboard the yacht *Dolphin*, which belongs to the great secret society known as the Order of the Ring, of which the Squire is one of the heads. Jack, however, succeeds in freeing himself from his bonds in the darkness, and plunges over the rail into the dark waters of the Channel, followed by several revolver shots.

He escapes the shots, but by ill-luck is picked up by the *Firefly*, another ship belonging to the Order of the Ring. On board he meets Nelson Lee, who is trying to break up the secret society. The two make an attempt to capture the officers of the ship, but they fail, and while trying to escape Nelson Lee is imprisoned in the hold of the ship. Suspicion is aroused amongst the passengers, and when the Chief boards the *Firefly* he tries to plan with the Doctor as to the best method of getting rid of them, having already imprisoned them all below deck. "What's to prevent shooting them?" asks the Doctor. "Nothing," answers the Chief. "But how are you going to explain the deaths of all your passengers on arrival in England?"

*(You go on with the story.)***A Fiendish Plot.**

"Humph! I hadn't thought of that!" said the Doctor. "Couldn't we invent some yarn about a mysterious epidemic having broken out on board?"

"An epidemic that carried off all the passengers, and never attacked a single member of the crew," said the Chief ironically. "I haven't a very high opinion of the intelligence of the British public, but I scarcely think they would swallow a yarn like that. No, no, my dear Doctor. You haven't grasped the seriousness of the present situation. If the passengers are to disappear—and they must—the *Firefly* must disappear too. In other words, the only possible way in which we can get rid of the passengers without exciting suspicion, is to send the *Firefly* to the bottom with every soul on board—passengers, officers, doctor, and crew!"

The Doctor laughed an uneasy laugh.

"If it's all the same to you," he said, "I'd rather not go to the bottom just yet!"

"But you must," insisted the Chief. "At least, the public must be made to believe that you've gone to the bottom."

"Ah!" The Doctor heaved a sigh of relief. "If it's only to be make-believe," he said, "I've no objection. What is your plan?"

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"First of all," said the Chief, "I should like to be sure that I've understood you rightly. Nelson Lee is in the lower hold?"

"Yes."

"There's no possibility of his escaping, I suppose?"

"None whatever."

"Miss Aylmer is in the captain's cabin, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Is there any fear of them breaking out if they're left to themselves for an hour or two?"

"Not the slightest."

"Very well, then," said the Chief, rising to his feet. "I will now return to the *Dolphin*. I will take Jack Langley and Miss Aylmer with me."

"What's the good?" interrupted the Doctor. "You'll never make him join us, so why not leave him to perish along with the rest?"

"That is my affair," said the Chief coldly. "I've sworn to make him join our ranks, and no man living ever knew me to draw back from an object upon which I had set my mind."

"All right," said the Doctor, shrugging his shoulders, "sorry I spoke! You'll take Jack Langley and Miss Aylmer with you. What next?"

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"I have an infernal machine on board the Dolphin," continued the Chief. "It is fitted with an ingenious clockwork arrangement, and is quite capable of blowing the Firefly into smithereens. If you'll let one of your men come with me, I'll give him this machine, and also half a dozen nitro-glycerine bombs. I'll then steam away in a westerly direction, and the Firefly must follow suit, and keep the Dolphin in sight until it is dark.

"As soon as I think it is dark enough for our purpose, I'll hoist a green light at the Dolphin's masthead. When you see this light, you must damp down your fires, and blow off steam. Having brought the Firefly to a standstill, you must muster the crew, and order them to lower the boats. Whilst they are doing this, you must place the infernal machine on the engine-room floor, and arrange the bombs in a circle round it. You must then return on deck, and order the crew to get into the boats. When everybody but yourself is in the boats, you must run down into the engine-room again, and press the button on the outside of the infernal machine. You must then return on deck, take your place in one of the boats, and row to the Dolphin as hard as you can.

"The clockwork arrangement inside the infernal machine is timed to run for exactly forty-five minutes. By pressing the button, you will have started the clockwork going, and, in forty-five minutes, a spring will be released, a cap will be fired, and the whole affair will suddenly explode with the violence of a lyddite shell. The concussion, of course, will explode the nitro-glycerine bombs, and the result will be that the Firefly, with Nelson Lee and all her passengers, will be blown into thousands of separate fragments.

"By that time, you and the rest of the crew will be safely aboard the Dolphin. We'll cruise round at a safe distance, of course, until we see the Firefly blown up, and then we'll steam away, and land the crew in twos and threes at various foreign ports. Both you and they, of course, will have to change your names, and alter your personal appearance, and, as soon as the public have ceased to talk about the awful disaster to the Firefly—which will be reported as having foundered with all hands—we'll purchase another vessel with the insurance money, and start the whole business over again."

For half an hour longer these two arch-villains continued to discuss this fiendish scheme; then the Chief returned to the Dolphin, taking Jack and Ethel with him. The Firefly's mate accompanied them; but presently returned with the infernal machine and the nitro-glycerine bombs, which he handed over to the Doctor. The two vessels then steamed off towards the west, the Dolphin leading the way, and the Firefly following in her wake.

As the morning wore on, the Dolphin gradually increased her lead, and by noon she was fully a couple of miles ahead. She kept this distance until sunset, when both she and the Firefly hoisted the regulation lights—a white light at the masthead, a green light on the starboard side, and a red light on the port side. For two hours longer these were the only lights the Dolphin showed; but at six o'clock, by which time it was perfectly dark, a green light suddenly flashed into view below the white one at the masthead, and the Doctor accordingly set to work to carry out the Chief's instructions.

First of all, the Firefly's furnaces were extinguished, and all the steam in her boilers was allowed to escape. As a natural consequence of this, her engines ceased to work, and the vessel came to a standstill. The Doctor then ordered the boats to be lowered, and, whilst the crew were engaged in this operation, he went down into the engine-room, placed the infernal machine on the floor, and arranged the bombs around it.

He then returned on deck, and ordered the crew to take their places in the boats. When the last of them had obeyed, he hurried down to the engine-room again, and pressed the button which started the clockwork inside the infernal machine. He then rushed upon deck once more, and lowered himself into one of the boats.

Two minutes later the crowded boats, six in number, were speeding through the darkness towards the green light which was burning at the Dolphin's masthead.

Half an hour later still, the Doctor and the Chief, surrounded by their respective crews, were standing on the Dolphin's deck, gazing at the Firefly's twinkling lights, which were all that was visible of the vessel in the darkness, and waiting, with feverish impatience, for the flash and the roar which would signalise her doom.

Nelson Lee to the Rescue.

In the meantime, how fared it with Nelson Lee? A man of his indomitable pluck, limitless resource, and unconquerable spirit, was not exactly the sort of man to lie on his back and twiddle his thumbs for twelve long weary hours. What, then, was the great detective doing whilst this fiendish scheme for encompassing his death, and not only his death, but the deaths of a hundred and fifty of his fellow-creatures, was being hatched and carried into execution?

In order to answer this question, we must go back to the time when the trapdoor closed above his head, and he found himself a prisoner in the Firefly's hold.

As soon as he had recovered from the stunning effects of his fall, he struck a match, and proceeded to take stock of his surroundings. He then discovered that the place in which he was immured was that portion of the lower hold which was nearest to the Firefly's stern. It was separated from the hold in which the passengers were imprisoned by a water-tight bulkhead, and the only means of entering it—with the exception of the trapdoor in the floor of the Doctor's cabin—was a hatchway in the lower deck, which was covered with a wooden hatch, and secured by iron bars.

Rising out of the middle of the floor was the dome-shaped roof of the "shaft-tunnel"—a massive iron tube, six feet high and four feet broad, covered on the outside with wood, and containing the long steel shaft which turned the screw-propeller. This tube, of course, ran all the way along the bottom of the vessel, from the engine-room to the stern, but only the last few yards of it were in the hold in which Nelson Lee was confined.

"In cargo-ships, this portion of the hold—the "afterhold," as it is called—would doubtless have been crammed with cargo. In the Firefly, however, it was merely used as a sort of general dumping-ground for superfluous stores and lumber. In one corner stood a crate of crockery, in another was an empty medicine-chest. A hamper of tinned provisions stood side by side with a broken-down electric battery, and a case of rifle-ammunition was all but buried by a pile of worn-out ropes and tattered sail-cloth. Here was a keg of Irish butter; there was a heap of rusty tools, and between the two was a jumbled litter of cardboard boxes and brown paper parcels.

By the time the detective had taken in all these details, his small supply of matches was almost exhausted. By rummaging amongst the cardboard boxes, however, he was lucky enough to discover a box of candles, and as soon as he had lighted one of these, and had stuck it in an empty whisky bottle, he seated himself on the crockery crate, and set to work to devise some scheme for making his escape.

A few minutes later the Firefly came to a sudden stop, and, after remaining at a standstill for upwards of half an hour, her propeller once more began to revolve, and the vessel resumed her voyage. It was during this time, as the reader knows, that the Dolphin steamed alongside, that the Chief came aboard, and that he and the Doctor concocted their villainous scheme for blowing up the Firefly as soon as it was dark. The detective, however, knew nothing of this, and the moment the Firefly came to a standstill he sprang down from the crate on which he was seated, and began to pace the hold with rapid, agitated steps.

"Some passing vessel has seen the fight on the Firefly's deck!" he muttered excitedly. "They've ordered the Firefly to leave to, and they're coming aboard to see what it all means!"

When minute succeeded minute, and nobody came to rescue him, his new-born hopes began to die down, and when at length the Firefly resumed her voyage, he gave vent to a sigh of bitter disappointment, and returned to his seat on the crockery-crate. Whatever might be the reason why the Firefly had stopped—and he could not for the life of him imagine what the reason could be—it was clear that he could no longer expect any help from outside. If he meant to escape—and he was firmly resolved to make the attempt—it would have to be by his own unaided efforts.

After carefully considering the situation from every point of view, and after thoroughly exploring every nook and cranny of the hold, he came to the conclusion that the only possible way in which he could hope to effect his escape was to break into the shaft-tunnel, and crawl along it to the engine-room. If fortune favoured him, there was just a chance that he might be able to gain the deck before he was discovered, and if once he succeeded in leaping overboard, he had every confidence in his ability to keep himself afloat until some passing vessel picked him up. When that occurred, the rest would be comparatively easy. He would bribe the captain who picked him up to follow the Firefly until they fell in with the Channel Squadron, which was manoeuvring off the coast of France. He would then go on board one of the battleships and tell his story to the commander.

The latter, no doubt, would immediately overhaul the Firefly and order her to surrender, with the result that the Doctor and the crew would be taken into custody and the passengers released.

Fired by these hopes, he took up the candle, and started to hunt amongst the lumber for suitable implements to aid him in his task. From amongst the pile of tools already described he unearthed an axe, a couple of chisels, a hand-drill, and a hammer-head. The haft of the axe was split up the middle, and practically useless, but by unwinding several strands of wire from the wire-rope alluded to above, and by wrapping this wire tightly round the broken haft, he managed to patch it up sufficiently for his purpose. By

smashing off a portion of the medicine-chest, and shaping it with his knife, he fashioned a handle for the hammer-head, and then, having rolled up his sleeves, he set to work.

With the aid of the axe he chopped away about two square yards of the wooden casing in which the shaft-tunnel was enclosed. This brought to view the outer surface of the massive tube, which was composed of iron plates riveted together in the same way as the plates which formed the vessel's hull. In order to reach the interior of the tunnel, it was necessary for Nelson Lee to make an opening in one of the plates sufficiently large for him to crawl through, and this he proposed to do by means of the hand-drill in the first place, and the hammer and chisels later on.

By way of a beginning, he marked out a circle on one of the plates with the point of a rusty nail. He then took up the drill, with the object of boring a number of holes all round the circle, but just as he was about to commence operations, he was startled by a muffled hum of voices in the tunnel.

This was something which he had not bargained for. Dropping the drill, he applied his ear to the outside of the iron tube, and presently discovered that the voices were those of two of the Firefly's engineers, who had entered the tunnel for the purpose of oiling the bearings of the propeller-shaft.

"I'd better go back for a spanner," the detective heard one of them say. "This nut is as loose as can be."

"I wouldn't trouble, if I were you," said the other. "It will hold all right for the few hours that the Firefly remains afloat."

"What do you mean?" demanded the other in a startled voice. "You talk as though you knew what was going to happen!"

"Perhaps I do," said his companion mysteriously.

"The deuce you do!" exclaimed the first. "I thought nobody except the Doctor knew what the Chief had arranged!"

"Nobody is supposed to know," said the second voice. "You'll promise not to split if I tell you what I know?"

"Of course!"

"Well, when the Dolphin came alongside, and the Chief came aboard, I was down in the Doctor's cabin, talking to the fellows who were guarding Langley. By-and-by I heard the Chief and the Doctor coming down the alley-way, so I slipped into the cabin next door, and by putting my ear to the partition-wall I heard everything that was said. You saw the Chief go back to the Dolphin with the mate, and Langley and Miss Aylmer, and you saw the mate come back to the Firefly with a big wooden box under his arm?"

"Yes."

"Well, inside that box was an infernal-machine and half a dozen explosive bombs. We're going to keep the Dolphin in sight until it's dark, and as soon as she shows a green light we're going to draw fires and let off steam. The doctor is then going to put the infernal-machine in the engine-room and start the clock-work, and as soon as everything is ready we're all going to lower the boats and row off to the Dolphin. The Chief reckons that the infernal-machine will explode in forty-five minutes, and that the Firefly and all the passengers, including that detective chap, will be blown into smithereens. We shall then—"

"S-sh! There's somebody shouting for me," said the first voice. "Come along. You can tell me the rest as we go back to the engine-room."

The voices grew fainter and fainter, and finally ceased to be audible. Then a far-off sudden clang announced that they had left the tunnel and had closed the water-tight door which led into the engine-room.

The detective raised his head, and by the flickering light of the candle his face looked positively ghastly in its death-like pallor. Now he knew why the Firefly had stopped; now he understood why his foes had not molested him; now he knew the awful doom to which they proposed to consign him!

He pulled out his watch. It was a quarter to ten. The sun would set—it was mid-November—a few minutes after four. By six it would be dark. He had eight hours and a quarter—nine at the very outside—in which to accomplish his task.

He snatched up the drill and set to work. But the drill was old and worn out. It was for that reason that it had been cast upon the scrap-heap. At the end of four hours he ought to have been exactly halfway round the circle he had marked out upon the iron-plate. He was only a quarter. His hands were bruised and bleeding, his body was bathed in clammy perspiration.

He took up the hammer and chisel. Then he laid them down again. He dared not use them yet, lest the sound of his blows should be heard in the engine-room. He returned to the drill. For four more hours he worked like a slave. Then the roar of escaping steam fell on his ears, the shaft

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inside the tunnel ceased to revolve, the Firefly slowed down, and finally came to a stop.

He consulted his watch. It was six o'clock. The crew would now be lowering the boats. The engine-room would probably be deserted. Dare he venture to use the hammer and chisel?

"I'll wait five minutes," he muttered to himself. "I'll give the Doctor time to place the infernal machine in the engine-room, and then I'll risk it."

He unfastened his watch from the chain and placed it on the butter-keg, where the feeble rays of the candle illumined the dial and enabled him to keep count of the time. For five minutes longer he slaved at the drill, then he tossed it aside and took up the hammer and chisel.

"Forty minutes now!" he muttered, glancing at his watch.

He attacked the iron plate with something akin to frenzy. The sound of his blows reverberated through the hold, and went echoing along the hollow tube like the rumble of distant thunder. But he was past caring for that now. The minute-hand of the watch was moving round and, oh, how swiftly it seemed to move!—towards the dreaded moment when the explosion would take place. Twenty minutes were all that now remained; now it was fifteen, now it was ten!

At last the plate began to show signs of yielding. He snatched up the axe and dealt it a sledge-hammer blow, which partly staved it in. A second and a third blow followed in quick succession, then the circle he had marked out fell through into the inside of the tunnel, and his way of escape was clear. The hands of the watch pointed to twenty minutes to seven. Five minutes now!

Axe in hand, he squeezed himself through the opening, and commenced to grope his way along the tunnel. Upon reaching the end he found, to his dismay, that the water-tight door leading into the engine-room had been closed and fastened on the outside. Nothing daunted, he attacked it with the axe. One, two, three minutes passed, then the door gave way, and he sprang through into the engine-room.

The infernal-machine was standing in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a circle of small glass balls filled with nitro-glycerine. He snatched it up, and staggered towards the companion-ladder. There was no time to hunt for the button, which controlled the clockwork. He must heave the thing overboard!

Quivering with excitement, he reached the deck and darted towards the vessel's side. Even as he did so his eyes fell on the green light at the Dolphin's masthead. He judged her to be about two miles and a half away.

He sprang to the bulwarks and raised the infernal-machine in the air. At the same instant a whirring buzz sent a thrill of consternation through his nerves. Quick as thought he hurled the deadly thing into the sea. Not a moment too soon, for almost before it touched the surface of the waves the darkness was rent by a terrific flash, accompanied by an appalling noise.

Huge volumes of water spouted up into the air, and fell in a miniature Niagara on the Firefly's deck. So violent was the concussion of the air that the detective was flung off his feet and hurled some distance across the deck. For several minutes the Firefly pitched and tossed in a whirlpool of seething waters. Then the tumult gradually subsided, and deathlike silence reigned.

Breathless but triumphant, the detective rose to his feet.

"Thank Heaven I was just in time!" he muttered. But the words had scarcely crossed his lips ere the green light of the Dolphin's masthead was suddenly extinguished. The white followed suit, then her starboard light and her port light also vanished from view.

"Hallo! What does that mean?" muttered Nelson Lee. "Why have they put out their lights?"

For a second or two he pondered over this problem in bewildered amazement. Then the terrible truth burst on him.

The Dolphin was bearing down upon them with the intention of boarding them!

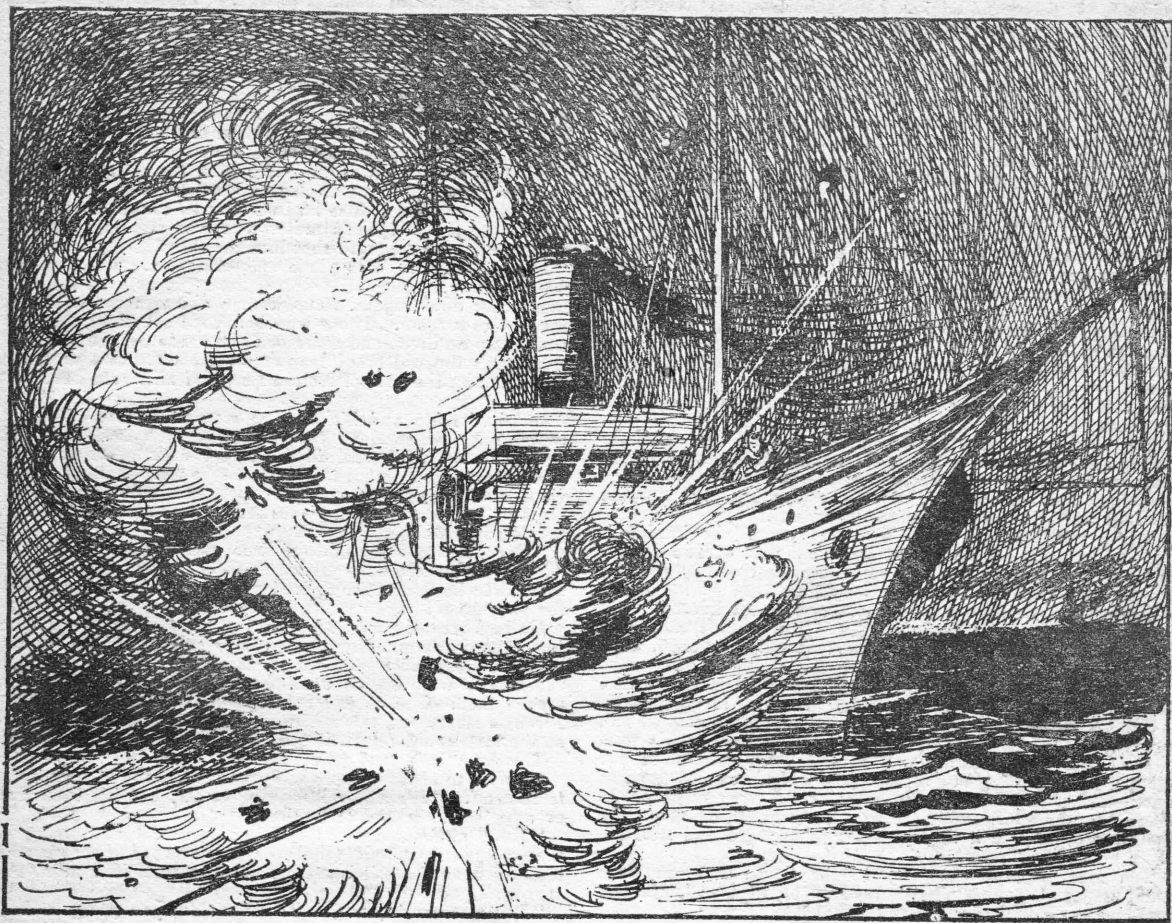
Beaten Off.

It was only too true. The Chief and the Doctor, standing on the Dolphin's bridge, saw the flash, and heard the roar which accompanied the explosion. The Chief then turned round and addressed the assembled crews, who were standing in a densely-packed crowd on the upper deck.

"It's all over now, my lads!" he cried. But almost before the words had crossed his lips his voice was drowned by an ear-splitting chorus of frenzied shouts.

"See, see! The lights are still burning! She hasn't gone down after all!"

The Chief spun round with a startled oath. One glance at the twinkling triangle lights, a couple of miles away,



Quick as thought the detective hurled the deadly machine into the sea—and not a moment too soon! Almost before the bomb touched the surface of the water, the darkness was rent by a terrific flash, accompanied by an appalling explosion! (See p. 24.)

showed him that the men were right. The Firefly was still afloat, and apparently unharmed.

"What can have happened?" he gasped, turning to the Doctor. "The thing exploded right enough. We saw it explode. If you placed it in the engine-room, as I presume you did, the Firefly ought to have been blown into fragments and utterly destroyed. Yet yonder are her lights, as clear and as steady as our own. What does it all mean?"

"I think I can guess," said the Doctor. "It's Nelson Lee whom we have to thank for this. In some way or other he has managed to escape from the hold, and has heaved the thing overboard. By this time, no doubt, he's hard at work setting the passengers free!"

"Then we must board the Firefly at once!" said the Chief decisively. "You raked out the fires and blew off steam before you left?"

"Of course!"

"Then she can't escape us!" said the Chief, rubbing his hands. "We'll put out our lights and steal upon them unawares, and before they know we're coming we shall have them at our mercy."

Once more he turned and faced the crew.

"Let every light on board be instantly extinguished!" he shouted. "When that has been done, let the engineers and firemen return to their posts, whilst the rest of you swing out the boats and get ready the grappling-irons. After that, let every man secure his revolver and his rifle, and see that they are loaded."

Almost before he had finished speaking the masthead lights came down, and the port and starboard lights were extinguished. Having ordered the man at the wheel to steer for the Firefly's lights—which were all that were visible of the vessel in the darkness—he sprang to the telegraph and pushed the handle over to "Full steam ahead."

As if by magic, the Dolphin's propeller commenced to revolve, and her head swung round in the direction of the

Firefly. A moment later, like a greyhound slipped from the leash, she was racing towards her prey.

Let us now return to the Firefly and see how it fared with Nelson Lee. As the readers know, he guessed the Dolphin was bearing down upon them as soon as he saw that she had extinguished her lights, and a moment or two later his suspicion was converted into certainty by hearing the throb of her engines, faint and far away at first, but rapidly growing louder and more distinct.

For a second or two he was tempted to yield to despair. And who can blame him? If the boilers had been full of steam, if the fires had been still alight, there might have been a chance of giving his foes the slip. But the boilers were empty, and the furnaces cold. If any other vessel had been in sight, and reasonably near, he might have signalled for assistance. But the only lights that were visible were those of a sailing-ship, which was beating up to windward five or six miles away. Surely, if ever a man was justified in yielding to despair, that man was Nelson Lee as he stood on board the Firefly on that dark November night, with the throb of the Dolphin's engines pulsating through the darkness like the short, sharp pants of an oncoming beast of prey.

What could he do? In ten minutes' time the Dolphin would be alongside, and the crew would be swarming aboard. Ten minutes, and every man on board, except himself, was imprisoned in the steamer's hold! What could he do?

The answer came like a flash of inspiration. The Firefly, of course, was provided with sails, and the mainsail, as is usually the case, was furled to the boom. A stiffish breeze was blowing from the south, and was freshening every minute. He would first extinguish all the lights, so as to conceal the vessel's whereabouts from those on board the Dolphin. This would throw them off the scent for a time, and delay their arrival. He would then liberate the passengers and get them to assist him to unfurl and set the

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mainsail. If this could be done before the Dolphin discovered them, there was just a chance that they might be able to slip away under cover of the darkness.

To decide what to act. In less time almost than it takes to tell, he hauled down the masthead light, and tossed it into the sea as the readiest way of extinguishing it. Having served the port and the starboard lights in similar fashion, he hurriedly set to work to remove the iron bars and wooden planks which covered the hatchway of the hold in which the passengers were confined. When this had been done, he fastened a rope to one of the stanchions and lowered himself into the hold, where his simple announcement, "I am Nelson Lee, don't be alarmed!" gave rise to a scene of indescribable enthusiasm and excitement.

Men sprang to their feet and cheered until they were hoarse, women clasped their children to their breasts and wept aloud for very joy. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, rushed into each other's arms and hugged each other in a perfect frenzy of delight. None of them knew what had happened, of course; but such was the magic of the great detective's name that the mere fact that he was on board was sufficient to banish all their fears and fill them with rapturous confidence.

The detective would have been more than human if he had not been touched by this spontaneous tribute to his greatness. Yet the only words he uttered were words of impatient remonstrance; the only expression that crossed his face was a frown of deep displeasure.

"Will you listen to what I have to say?" he implored, striving to make himself heard above the din. "The danger is by no means over yet. If you'll only keep quiet and let me tell you what has happened, you'll see that we haven't a moment to spare if we mean to escape with our lives."

His words had the desired effect. The tumult ceased as if by magic, and in half a dozen sentences he told them what had occurred.

"You will now understand what I meant when I said that the danger was by no means over," he said, in conclusion. "Our enemies evidently mean to board us, and, unless we can prevent them, our lives are not worth half an hour's purchase. The only possible way in which we can effect our escape, is by hoisting one of the sails, which must be done at once—within the next five minutes at the very outside. If there are any gentlemen here who know anything about the handling of sails, will they please step forward and lend me their assistance?"

Ten men promptly stepped to the front. Seven were amateur yachtsmen, two had served in the mercantile marine, and one was a lieutenant in the Royal Navy.

"And now, if you please, I want six more men to act as look-outs," said Nelson Lee. "Hurry up, for it's time we were at work!"

Six times six responded to his call, and, from amongst them, he selected the six he required.

"That's all the help I need at present," he said. "The women and children had best remain here, but the rest of you may as well employ your time in rummaging the vessel for arms and ammunition. Come along!"

This last remark was addressed to the sixteen men who had volunteered to help him. One by one they scrambled up the rope which was dangling through the hatchway. The detective brought up the rear, and the moment he gained the deck he pricked up his ears and held up his hand for silence.

"What is it?" asked one of the men, in a breathless whisper. "I don't hear anything!"

"Neither do I," said Nelson Lee. "That's exactly what startled me. When I was on deck before, I could distinctly hear the throbbing of the Dolphin's engines. Now I can hear nothing. She has evidently pulled up, probably for the purpose of lowering her boats, so the need of haste is greater even than I thought."

The lieutenant was accordingly told off to take charge of the wheel. The six look-outs were posted at various points around the deck.—two on the starboard side, two on the port side, one in the bows, and the sixth in the stern. The remaining nine, with Nelson Lee at their head, set to work to unfurl the sail.

Three minutes passed, then one of the passengers who had been rummaging below came on deck and accosted the detective:

"There's a tar-barrel down in the carpenter's shop," he said. "It has evidently been prepared for use as a flare, and only needs the application of a lighted match to set it ablaze. Don't you think it would be wise to bring it up on deck? We shall need some illumination, you know, if those scoundrels succeed in boarding us."

"True," said Nelson Lee. "Bring it up and stick it in a prominent position on the upper deck. Take your stand beside it with a box of matches in your hand, and if I need it lighted I will signal to you by whistling like this—"

He whistled, to show what he meant, then returned to his THE GEM LIBRARY.—No 248.

work. Three more minutes passed. The sail was unfurled, and was mounting upwards towards the gaff, when, all of a sudden, a pealing cry rang out from the look-out in the stern:

"Mr. Lee—Mr. Lee! There's a boat—"

The rest was drowned by the crack of a rifle, followed by a piercing shriek, and the next instant the unfortunate look-out threw up his arms and fell lifeless on the deck.

He had spied a boat, crowded with men, creeping up to the Firefly's stern. Unluckily for him, the men in the boat had discovered him at the same moment that he had discovered them, and before he had time to complete his warning shout, the Dolphin's mate, who was steering the boat, snatched up his rifle and shot him through the head.

In an instant all was panic and confusion. The men who were hauling up the sail dropped the rope, and the sail came lumbering down again. The women down in the hold commenced to scream. Those who had been searching for arms rushed up on deck, and some of them made for the steamer's side, with the object of leaping overboard. One moment's hesitation on the part of Nelson Lee, and all would have been lost.

But hesitation and Nelson Lee were strangers. Quick as thought he whistled to the man whom he had placed in charge of the tar-barrel on the upper deck. Almost in the same breath he shouted to the men who were making for the vessel's side, and ordered them to fling themselves on their faces on the deck. Then he turned to the men who had been helping him to hoist the sail.

"For Heaven's sake, don't lose your heads!" he cried. "See what you've done—three minutes' labour thrown away, and all to be done over again! Pick up that rope and haul for your lives!"

He had scarcely finished speaking ere the tar-barrel burst into flame. By means of its ruddy glow the Dolphin was revealed less than a hundred yards astern. Between her and the Firefly were half a dozen boats, all of them filled with armed men. One of the boats was immediately under the Firefly's stern, and the rest were hastening after her as fast as the men could ply their oars.

The detective's face grew hard and stern.

"I wish to Heaven there was any other way!" he muttered to himself. "It's a horrible thing to do; but it's their lives or ours, so it's bound to be done!"

"Keep on hauling, you fellows!" he said, addressing his nine companions. "Whatever happens to me, keep on hauling until the sail is set! I shall be back in a minute or two if all goes well."

"But where are you going? What are you going to do?" they cried.

"You'll see," he answered grimly.

He darted away and vanished into the engine-room. The six nitro-glycerine bombs, as already described, were lying in a circle on the floor. None of the passengers had dared to touch them. He picked up two and returned to deck. At the same moment the Dolphin's propeller began to revolve, and she drifted towards the Firefly at half-speed.

The wind was rising rapidly, with every prospect of an early gale, and the tar-barrel was blazing like a miniature volcano. He glanced at the sail and saw that it was all but set. He spoke to the man at the wheel, then he mounted the ladder which led to the upper deck.

The Chief and the Doctor were still standing on the Dolphin's bridge, each with a magazine-rifle in his hand. The men who were hauling the Firefly's sail were hidden from their view by the swelling mass of the steamer's poop. The man who had fired the flare had concealed himself in the smoke-room. The rest of the passengers had taken cover behind the bulwarks. Not a soul could the scoundrels see till Nelson Lee stepped on to the upper deck, where his clean-cut figure was sharply outlined against the blaze.

Crack—crack—crack—crack! Four shots in quick succession rang out. Then a cry of triumph burst from the Doctor's lips. The detective had dropped.

It was true. The detective had dropped, but only on his hands and knees. One of the bullets had furrowed his cheek, and another had grazed his temple. Except for this he was none the worse.

With the bombs in his hands, he crawled towards the stern. By that time the Dolphin's mate—he who had shot the look-out—had made his boat fast to the rudder-chains, and his men were preparing to swarm aboard. He was in the act of giving them their final orders, when all of a sudden, above the rim of the steamer's stern, there appeared the face of Nelson Lee.

Quick as thought the mate whipped out his revolver, but ere he could take aim, the detective stretched out his hand and dropped the bomb into the boat. At the same instant the Chief and the Doctor fired again, but the crack of their rifles was drowned by the roar of the exploding bomb, and the next moment all that was left of the first of the Dolphin's

boats was a drifting mass of splintered wood and dead and wounded men.

Nothing daunted, the second boat, which was less than twenty yards away, made a reckless dash for the Firefly's stern. Regardless of the peril to which he was exposing himself, the detective sprang to his feet. A dozen bullets immediately whistled past his head, but almost by a miracle he escaped unharmed, and in less time than it takes to tell, the second bomb went flying from his upraised hand, and landed on the nose of the rapidly-advancing boat.

There was another loud report, accompanied by a dazzling flash. The bows of the boat were splintered into matchwood, and she sank like a stone. The man who was rowing stroke was killed on the spot, and the rest, who escaped with more or less severe contusions, were precipitated into the sea.

Dismayed by these catastrophes, the rest of the boats hung back. Foaming with rage, the Chief snatched up a trumpet and bellowed to them to continue to advance. By that time, however, the Firefly's sail had at last been set, and a moment or two later, to Nelson Lee's relief, the vessel heeled over to starboard and began to draw away.

"Now's the time to douse the glim!" he muttered to himself.

He crawled on his hands and knees to the spot where the far-barrel stood, just inside the taffrail on the port side of the upper deck. The Dolphin's bows were then almost level with the Firefly's stern. The boats were a couple of lengths away.

With a vigorous push, the detective hurled the blazing beacon into the sea. As a result of this, the scene was instantly enveloped in impenetrable darkness. At the same instant, the man at the wheel—in accordance with the instructions which Nelson Lee had previously given him—ported his helm, and completely changed the Firefly's course.

For a second or two the detective held his breath in agonised suspense. Then a sigh of relief burst from his lips, and he hurried away to consult the young lieutenant on the bridge.

"So far, my plan has answered to perfection," he said, in a low, excited whisper. "The Dolphin has shot past us in the darkness, and the boats have pulled up. Keep her on this tack for the next five minutes, then put her before the wind, and, with Heaven's help, we'll show them a pair of clean heels after all!"

The Chase.

As soon as the passengers realised that the danger was over, as they thought, they crowded round Nelson Lee, and overwhelmed him with congratulations.

"It will be time enough to thank me when we're safely ashore," was his significant reply. "Unless I greatly misjudge the character of the men with whom we have to deal, we haven't finished with them yet."

His words were only too prophetic, for almost before he had finished speaking, a brilliant blue light burst into flame on the Dolphin's deck. By means of this illumination the Firefly was clearly visible to those on board the Dolphin, and as soon as they had picked up their boats and men, they crammed on every ounce of steam, and started out in hot pursuit.

The moment the blue light illumined the scene, the Firefly was promptly brought round and put before the wind, which was now blowing in gusty, tempestuous squalls. The delay which took place whilst the Dolphin was picking up her boats enabled them to put more than a mile between themselves and their antagonists; but when the latter took up the chase in grim and deadly earnest, this distance grew rapidly and steadily less.

"They're going to try a different plan this time," said Nelson Lee, who was standing by the lieutenant's side, with a glass to his eye. "Most of the crew are drawn up on deck, with grappling-irons, cutlasses, and rifles, all complete. They evidently mean to run alongside, and hold us fast with the grapnels whilst they board us."

"If we could only set the jibs—" began the young lieutenant; but the detective interrupted him with a gesture of impatience.

"It would be no use at all!" he said. "If we were to set every sail there is aboard, we couldn't out-distance them. In a quarter of an hour, at the very outside, they'll be up to us."

This thrilling adventure serial, by Maxwell Scott, will be continued in next Wednesday's number of "The Gem" Library. Order a copy now. Price 1d.

A NEW FREE CORRESPONDENCE EXCHANGE.

The only names and addresses which can be printed in these columns will be from those readers living in any of our Colonies who desire Correspondents in Great Britain and Ireland.

Colonists sending in their names and addresses for insertion in the columns of this popular story-book must state what kind of correspondent is required—boy or girl, English, Scotch, Welsh, or Irish.

Would-be correspondents must send with each notice two coupons. One taken from "The Gem," and one from the same week's issue of its companion paper, "The Magnet" Library. Coupons will always be found on page 2 of both papers, and requests for correspondents not containing these two coupons will be absolutely disregarded.

Readers wishing to reply to advertisements appearing in this column must write to the advertisers direct. No correspondence with advertisers can be undertaken through the medium of this office.

All advertisements for insertion in this Free Exchange should be addressed: "The Editor, 'The Gem' Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C."

S. Debeno, 66, Sda. St. Lucia, Valletta, Malta, wishes to correspond with readers of "The Gem" living in any part of the world.

Miss E. Renfield, 100, Lyon Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader living in England.

H. Jones, Collingwood East Post Office, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader living in England.

W. Grenberg, 14, Minghong Road, Shanghai, China, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in Melbourne, Victoria, age about 16.

G. Day, c/o Dept. Marine and Fisheries, St. John's, Newfoundland, wishes to correspond with a girl, age 17 or 18, living in Canada.

H. Lund, 24, Smith Street, Toronto, Canada, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader between the ages of 11 and 20, living in the British Isles.

L. G. Williams, 401, Coristine Buildings, Montreal, Quebec, Canada, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader living in England, age about 14.

E. Watson, 287, Euclid Avenue, Toronto, Canada, wishes to correspond with a boy or girl reader living in any other English Colony.

V. Elsgood, 34, Trocde Street, West Perth, West Australia, wishes to correspond with a boy reader living in South of England or Ireland.

P. L. Smith, 16, Jenkin Street, Fremantle, West Australia, wishes to correspond with a Scotch girl reader.

A. Crole, c/o President's Office, G. T. Ry., Montreal, Canada, desires to correspond with a girl reader living in England.

L. Mackay, 18, Stanley Avenue, Ville St. Pierre, Montreal, Canada, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in England.

J. Cutler, c/o Mrs. Davidson, Waimumu, South Land, New Zealand, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 18, living in England.

L. W. Forbes, 59, Hawthorn Grove, Glenferrie, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, wishes to thank all readers who wrote to him, and regrets it is impossible for him to answer all the letters he received.

J. Macdonald, East Jandakot, West Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader, age 16, living in England.

I. Chamberlain, 42, Price Street, South Fremantle, West Australia, wishes to correspond with an English girl reader.

A. R. Kershaw, Post Office, Day Dawn, West Australia, wishes to correspond with a girl reader living in Dublin, Ireland.

The Editor specially requests Colonial Readers to kindly bring the Free Correspondence Exchange to the notice of their friends.

OUR SPECIAL WEEKLY FEATURE



For Next Wednesday.

"HARD TIMES!"

By MARTIN CLIFFORD.

In next Wednesday's long, complete story of school-life at St. Jim's, Tom Merry & Co., and their chums of the Lower School, all happen to be in a "stony broke" condition at the same time, and various ingenious methods of "raising the wind" are suggested. It is left to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, however, to start in business on his own account. As a private detective, the swell of St. Jim's has sufficiently exciting experiences to cause him to feel considerably relieved when the timely arrival of a "fiver" from his noble parent puts an end to the

"HARD TIMES!"**"The Invincible Trio" Going Strong.**

The magnificent reception which has been accorded to our new companion paper

"THE PENNY POPULAR,"

has also had the effect of adding to the popularity of the original companion papers, the "Gem" and "Magnet" Libraries, with the result that "The Invincible Trio"—as these three famous little papers were aptly termed by a reader lately, are going stronger than ever. While looking forward just as eagerly to their copies of the "Magnet" and "Gem" every Monday and Wednesday, my chums have already begun to depend upon "The Penny Pop," to provide them with just the sort of really first-class reading matter they want to last them over the week-end. My friends quite evidently realise that this is the particular function of "The Penny Pop"—to fill the week-end gap—and while they would not think for one moment of missing a single issue of either of the two original companion papers, at the same time they heartily welcome the new-comer in that it fills a long-felt want most perfectly. This is the reason why all three of "The Invincible Trio" of splendid companion papers are booming together. My chums are quite "in the fashion" in reading "The Penny Pop" every week, because

Everybody's Doing It!**Keen Readers Form a "GEM" League.**

A very cordial letter from a reader signing himself "Pat H.," of Netherton, interests me greatly, and I am sure my great army of Gemites will be interested to read it also; so here it is:

"Netherton.

"Dear Editor,—I feel that I ought to write to thank you for the lovely stories you publish in your paper. I always look forward eagerly for Wednesday, when the good old 'Gem' is sent to our house early in the morning, and I look at it over my breakfast.

"I wonder if an account of our 'Gem' League will interest you? We have formed a league with the above name, and are very proud of it. We wear badges of blue and gold enamel, inscribed with the initials 'G. L.'

"At present we consist of eight members, of which four are girls. Every week we have a meeting, where we form a sort of debating society, and discuss the week's story. Do you think it a good idea? If any other reader would like to join us, if he (or she) will let me know, through the columns of your paper, I shall be glad (on behalf of the league) to forward a badge of membership.

"I wish you and your paper a long and happy life, and all success in every new undertaking.

"Yours most sincerely, "PAT H."

I think your idea of a "Gem" League, which holds meetings weekly to discuss the stories, is a most excellent one,

and I shall be very surprised if your example is not extensively followed among your fellow-Gemites, to whom the idea has not previously occurred. From the fact of your league having a badge of its own, it is evident that you do things properly. Please write to me again, Pat H., and let me have your full name and address for publication, if you have no objection. Readers interested in your league could then respond to your invitation, and write to you direct, thus avoiding the delay which is necessarily consequent upon indirect communication. Also I think many readers would be interested to have fuller particulars about your badges, what size they are, where you got them, and how much they cost, etc. I frequently receive letters inquiring for just such a badge as you describe.

So let me have another interesting letter before long, Pat H.

Transferring a Photograph on to a Handkerchief.

In answer to a query from "Fono," of Doncaster, I am printing here a method of reproducing a photograph upon a handkerchief. First obtain a perfectly clean handkerchief, and an unmounted photo. Lay the print face downwards in a plate or saucer of strong vinegar, and leave it there for about half a minute. Then take it out and let it drain for a few seconds, and afterwards place it, face downwards, upon the corner of the handkerchief. Press it with a fairly warm flat-iron for a few seconds, and then, holding it at one corner, draw it off quickly. When the handkerchief is thoroughly dry it may be used and washed without fear of the photo coming off.

Some Hints on Chest Development.**TWO USEFUL EXERCISES.**

Every one of my young readers should be most careful to see that his chest is given every chance of attaining its full development. Weak or narrow chests usually go with indifferently general health, and any lad can increase his chest measurement, and at the same time greatly improve his general health, by going in systematically for a few simple exercises, which should be practised

Every Morning

on arising, before an open window.

No great amount of time need be spent over these exercises—two or three minutes is ample. On no account should the exercises be persisted in after a feeling of tiredness has set in. At the first sign of anything like exhaustion or giddiness, the exercises should be discontinued for the day.

The First Exercise.

Stand erect, with arms extended in a line with the shoulders, fingers outstretched, and the palms of the hands turned upwards. Draw in a deep breath through the nose, bring the hands round in front of the chest till the little fingers touch, arms kept stiff; brace the chest, and squeeze the arms down to the sides; relax completely, and let the breath out smartly but smoothly through the mouth; count seven, take up position again, and repeat the exercise. Three times is enough for this exercise at one time, if properly carried out.

The Second Exercise.

Sit on the side of the bed, take in a deep breath, and slowly sink backwards flat on the bed, without, however, allowing the arms to touch the bed; breathe out, count seven, draw in a breath again, and slowly rise to a sitting position. Breathe out again, count seven, take in a breath and repeat—three times in all.

Both the foregoing exercises will be found to be of great value in expanding and developing the chest, and in keeping the lungs in good working order. For the best results they should be practised calmly and smoothly, and without hurry; above all, regularly.

THE EDITOR.