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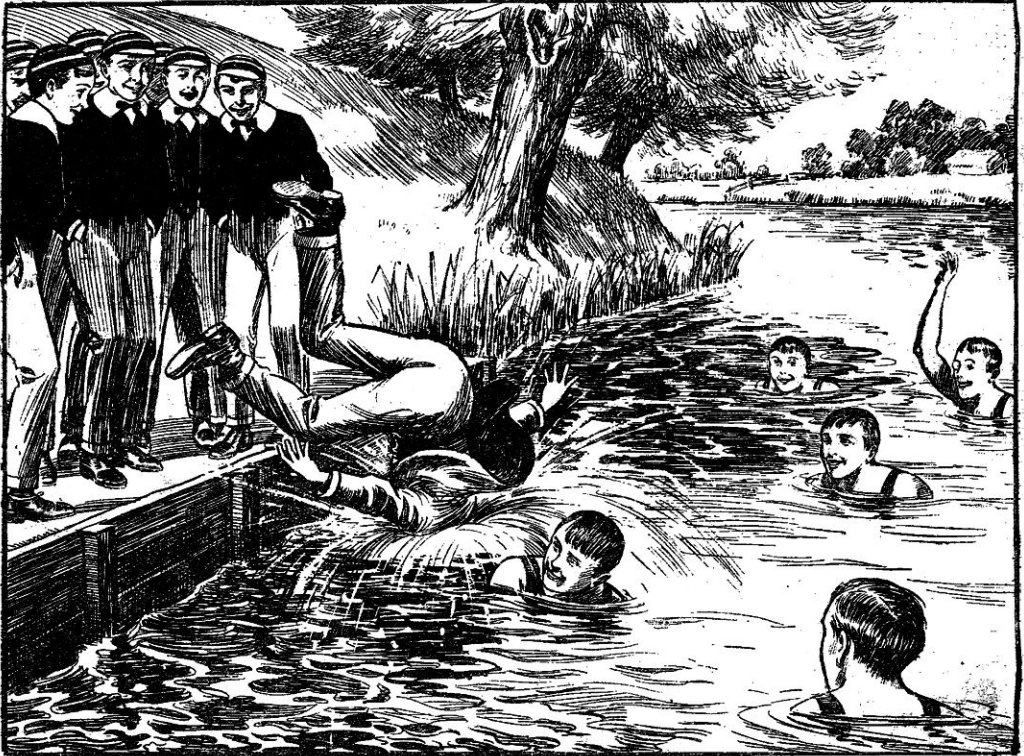


COMPLETE STORIES
FOR ALL, AND EVERY
STORY A GEM!

MASON'S LAST MATCH!

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Story of Tom Merry & Co.

By **MARTIN CLIFFORD.**



Clutching wildly at the air for support, the obnoxious prefect lurched forward and plunged heavily into the placid waters of the Ryll. "Diving; and how it is done," by Professor Knox!" grinned Monty Lowther. "Ha, ha, ha!" (See Chapter I.)

CHAPTER I. A Ducking for Knox.

"PLAYED, sir!"

"Bravo, Tommy, boy!"

The shouts of approval which rang out from a dozen youthful throats did not relate to a tremendous hit on the cricket-field; neither were they a tribute to some grand goal scored on Little Side. The chums of the Shell at St. Jim's were indulging at the moment in an exciting game of water-polo against their time-honoured rivals of the New House.

Tom Merry had seized the ball, and, flashing along with his speedy side-stroke, had got past all opposition, and effectively netted.

The shining waters of the Ryll were particularly pleasant to the St. Jim's juniors that September afternoon. The weather was so torrid that even cricket was out of the question. Whereupon Tom Merry had organised a

water-polo team, and challenged Figgins & Co., the mighty men of the New House, to battle. The challenge was, of course, accepted, and now the rival teams were hard at it, passing and plunging, and wriggling and gasping through the sparkling water. A small crowd of non-combatants had congregated on the bank, and had just yelled their encouragement to Tom Merry for netting the first goal.

The ball was set in motion once more, and Figgins & Co. pressed hotly. To be a goal to the bad in five minutes was not at all to their liking.

Figgins, whose length of limb was a great asset to him in the water, secured the leather, and although hotly pressed by Manners and Blake, succeeded in hurling it out to Redfern.

The latter had a very powerful stroke, and utilised it to excellent advantage. When within a dozen yards of the goal his right arm swept out of the water, and the

Next Wednesday:

"A SOLDIER OF THE KING!" AND "UNDER THE DRAGON!"

ball travelled hard and true into the net, in spite of Lowther's gallant attempt to save.

"Hurrah! Keep it up, you fellows!" shouted Kerr, who was among the spectators. "New House for ever!"

But to let the New House juniors get on level terms with them was not what Tom Merry & Co. desired at all. They played up desperately after this, and Fatty Wynn, who was defending the New House citadel, was bombarded with all sorts and conditions of shots.

In the ordinary way the Falstaff of the New House might easily have been expected to be beaten, but the river was very narrow where the net had been placed across, whereas Fatty Wynn was nothing if not wide. Consequently, a very powerful shot indeed was required to penetrate the New House defence.

But persistence and perseverance bring their own reward, and just before the time came for changing ends, Tom Merry passed to Noble, who was lurking in the goal-mouth, and the Australian junior, with a triumphant grin of anticipation, hurled the leather in with such vehemence that even Fatty Wynn was baffled and beaten.

Then the juniors came out of the water for a brief interval to bask in the September sunshine.

They were enjoying themselves to the full, and it was with a feeling of regret that they realised that there would be no more water-polo for a whole long year.

Many people will shake their heads solemnly, and pretend not to understand the boy who can be seen on water-polo. They will applaud the scorer of goals on the football-field with acclamation, and will lend their encouragement to the man who bangs three balls in quick succession to the boundary. Budding Bloomers and juvenile Trumplers are idolised by the beaming multitude; whereas the keen water-polo player rarely gets his due, and it is doubtful if he ever will until Britain realises to the full the superiority of swimming over every other type of sport indulged in by the youth of to-day.

After a brief respite Talbot, who was refereeing the contest, lobbed the ball into the water, and the rival teams went at it hammer-and-tongs again.

"Pile in, New House!"

"Stick it, School House!"

The spectators worked themselves up to a state of the highest excitement. They shouted themselves hoarse over minor feats of brilliance, and when at length Figgins gained possession and sent in a spanking shot, which easily scored, the air was rent with vociferous cheering.

School House or New House—which was it to be? The scoring was level now—two goals all—and ten minutes alone remained for play. The affair was touch and go.

Tom Merry & Co. pressed hard, and the New House fellows fell back to defend their own goal. Fatty Wynn, panting profusely, was kept as busy as a regimental postman delivering letters to eager Tommies. But Fatty was in great form, and, although his continual dives to save the ball caused him to swallow pints of water, he succeeded in keeping his charge intact.

Knox of the Sixth was pacing moodily along the towing-path, in the direction of the scene of the contest. But the juniors had no eyes for Knox. Their attention was all for the game, for only two minutes now remained for play.

A terrific bout of passing then took place between the School House juniors. It was a last desperate effort to bring the match to a successful issue. Manners passed to Tom Merry, and Tom passed in turn to Blake. The latter was hard pressed by Figgins and Redfern, and the only way in which he could rid himself of the ball was to send it as far away from him as possible, in the hope that the outside winger would gather it and speed with it goalwards.

Jack Blake therefore hurled the sphere straight and true out of the water, but he had taken too much foresight, to use a shooting term. Instead of reaching the outside man it passed right across the river, and blobbed full into the face of Knox, the prefect.

"Yaroooh!"

Knox let out a wild yell, and leaped into the air. That ball was wet, and the force of it made the prefect reel. Recovering himself, he gave the leather a savage

kick, which sent it yards, and then swung round on the youthful polo players.

"Who did that?" he snapped angrily. "Which young rascal had the nerve to hurl that ball at me?"

The juniors grinned. They could not help it, for the prefect's face was a study. Water was trickling down his cheeks and neck, and his nose was black where the ball had struck it. Altogether Knox looked a very undesirable person at that moment, and was certainly an object for any professional photographer to fight shy of.

Jack Blake swam over to the bank.

"It was a pure accident, Knox," he panted. "I'm awfully sorry."

"Accident be blown, you young fabricator! Take a thousand lines for assaulting a prefect!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Steady on, Knox!" said Tom Merry. "Do you call that fair play? Blake has told you it was an accident, and you're no right to doubt his word."

"Silence, Merry! You fags will come out of that at once!"

"Rats!" retorted several voices.

"What!"

"Getting deaf in your old age?" asked Monty Lowther pleasantly. "We're jolly well not coming out to please you, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Knox went positively purple in the face, and seemed to be on the verge of an apoplectic fit.

"Every junior concerned in this disgraceful affair will take five hundred lines!" he bellowed. "And if you don't obey my orders, I'll report you to your respective House-masters!"

"Yah!"

"Cad!"

"Go home!"

"What—what—"

"Go and play nap for halfpenny points at the Green Man!" said Figgins.

"You impertinent young rascal!"

"Gerraway!" growled Figgins. "Go and back geese."

Knox, almost foaming at the mouth, advanced to the water's edge.

"You'd better come out at once, all the lot of you," he fumed, "or things will go hard with you!"

"Tell you what, you fellows," said Jack Blake, with a twinkle in his eyes, "we'll meet him half-way. We won't come out, but he can come in!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And before Knox had divined his intentions, Jack Blake had raised himself out of the water, seized the prefect by the legs, and given a violent wrench.

The result was instantaneous. Clutching wildly at the air for support, the obnoxious prefect lurched forward, and plunged heavily into the placid waters of the Ryll.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Diving; and How it is Done," by Professor Knox," grinned Monty Lowther.

The prefect came to the surface, gasping and spluttering. Fortunately for him, he was not a non-swimmer.

He turned viciously upon Jack Blake, and swung out his right arm. But Blake was as elusive as an eel. He took a dive into the depths of the river, and when he rose to the surface again he was well out of reach of the enraged senior.

"Pity to do things in a half-hearted manner," observed Redfern. "Might as well duck the brute now we've got him at our mercy, you know."

"But he'll report us," said Manners.

"Report his grandmother! How can he haul so many of us up before the Head at once? There's safety in numbers, you know."

The juniors realised the wisdom of this statement, and grinned. At Tom Merry's signal, they made a sweeping circular movement towards Knox.

The prefect had started swimming towards the bank, but before he could reach his objective he was seized by many hands and pushed under the water. Each time he came up, dripping and furious, he was shoved under again; and by the time the juniors desisted, Knox had undergone the worst ducking he had ever experienced. He crawled out of the water more dead than alive.

"And now you can clear," said Tom Merry. "If you had accepted Blake's explanation at the start, instead of calling him a liar, this wouldn't have happened."

Knox turned a face full of vindictive fury upon the swimmers.

"I'll make you sit up for this," he hissed, "before you're many days older! So look out!"

"Rats!"

"Go and hang yourself out to dry!"

And Knox, muttering savage imprecations under his breath, disappeared along the towing-path, leaving the juniors to complete their interrupted game of water-polo.

CHAPTER 2.

The Heavy Hand.

BRAVO, School House!"

"Well played, Figgy!"

The match had finished with honours easy. No addition had been made to the score of two all, and School House and New House fellows alike walked back to St. Jim's on the best of terms with each other.

They had some misgivings on the subject of their treatment of Knox, and it was quite on the cards that they were booked for a warm time. True, it was not the first time in the school's history that a prefect had been ducked, but on previous occasions the duckers had been usually called upon to pay the piper. And the present case was likely to be no exception.

When trouble hung over the heads of the juniors of both Houses, rivalries were usually banished for a time, and Tom Merry & Co. and Figgins & Co. stood shoulder to shoulder for the common cause. There was to be no backing out now. No single junior was to be picked upon as ringleader, for every fellow had taken a hand, and every man jack had to take his share of the consequences.

As the juniors streamed into the quad, they espied Knox in conversation with Mr. Ratcliff, the sour, ill-tempered master of the New House. It was evident that Knox was airing his grievances, for Mr. Ratcliff darted a keen, stern look at the approaching juniors.

"Merry! Figgins! Come here!" he ordered.

The two fellows addressed obeyed the summons, while their schoolfellows brought up the rear.

"Knox has just acquainted me of a most disgraceful and unparalleled occurrence!" snapped Mr. Ratcliff. "He tells me that you had the effrontery to pull him into the river, and submerge him into the water. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir!" said Figgins, unabashed.

"Good gracious!" gasped the New House master, putting his hand to his brow. "What ever is this school coming to? Both masters and prefects are subjected to the most offensive indignities every day. But it will be stopped. I am determined to crush the rebellious spirit prevalent among you junior boys. Figgins, you and your confederates in my House will come to my study, after which I venture to anticipate there will be no further demonstrations of horse-play."

Mr. Ratcliff compressed his thin lips.

"As for you, Merry, and the rest of the School House boys concerned in this affair, I shall lay a report before your Housemaster, with the request that you are soundly flogged!" You will now apologise to Knox, in my presence.

Tom Merry's jaw set grimly.

"I refuse, sir," he said quietly.

"What!"

"It is not my place to apologise, since I am not sorry for what I did."

"Boy!"

"Knox chose to come down heavy on us for a trifling accident," said Tom, "and we were determined not to be bullied. So we gave Knox what he really deserved—a jolly good ducking!"

"Merry, how dare you talk to me like this? You must be mad, boy!"

"Mad or not, I'm not going to apologise to that—that cat!" said Tom, his eyes flashing. "It would be a wiser

administration of justice if he were made to apologise to us!"

"Bravo! Hear, hear!" came in subdued murmur from the rest of the juniors.

"Then you refuse to tell Knox you are sorry?"

"Absolutely! We don't mean to be disrespectful to you, sir, but we really can't apologise for a thing we're not sorry for."

"I feel the same, sir," added Figgins.

"There you are, sir!" shouted Knox. "That's the sort of impudence I have to put up with every day from these young rascals! They have no sense of shame, and would doubtless not have drawn the line at ducking you, sir, if you had been present when they were engaged in hooliganism in the river."

"Had they laid so much as a finger on me," said Mr. Ratcliff, in a terrible voice, "they would have left this school by the next train. You were perfectly justified, Knox, in checking the hooliganism of these juniors. I commend you on your fearless sense of duty."

"We were playing water-polo!" hooted Jack Blake. "Where's the hooliganism in that, I should like to know? Knox is a rotten Ananias!"

"Blake!"

"He is, and he knows it!" repeated Blake. "For two pins, I'd wade in and slaughter him now!"

"Enough!" said Mr. Ratcliff, with a flourish of his hand. "This affair has gone too far for my jurisdiction. You will all come with me before Dr. Holmes. Knox, you will kindly come also, to give evidence."

"Very well, sir."

And the party proceeded to the Head's study, a wondering crowd watching them go.

Dr. Holmes looked up in surprise at the unexpected invasion.

"Bless my soul!" he murmured. "Mr. Ratcliff, what is amiss?"

"I have to report these juniors," said Mr. Ratcliff, in relentless tones, "for assaulting a prefect, for insubordination, and for direct disobedience."

"Dear me!"

"The circumstances are these," pursued the aggrieved Housemaster. "The boys you see before you went down to the river this afternoon, with their usual purpose of creating a disturbance. They would have roused the entire neighbourhood but for the timely intervention of Knox. Instead of yielding to his good-natured persuasion, they laid their hooligan hands upon him, and pulled him forcibly into the water. When ordered by me to apologise for this conduct, they stubbornly refused."

The Head's brow grew stern.

"You surprise me, Mr. Ratcliff," he said. "I had no idea that boys of Merry's stamp could be capable of such conduct!"

"They are wolves in sheep's clothing!" said Mr. Ratcliff viciously. "For a long time now they have flourished to deceive. Untruthfulness and malice are part and parcel of their natures. They are a disgrace and a discredit to the school!"

"Shame!"

It was no half-hearted cry which arose from the convicted juniors. It was a unanimous protest against a cruel and bitter wrong.

"What Mr. Ratcliff says is false, sir!" said Tom Merry, stepping forward. "Surely you, sir, know us better than that?"

"Ahem! I think Mr. Ratcliff might have modified his statements, certainly," said the Head, with a side glance at the New House master. "But that has nothing whatever to do with the case in point. Do you admit that you laid hands on Knox—a prefect of my appointment?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that you created a disturbance on the river?"

"No, sir. We were merely playing a harmless game of water-polo. Blake, unfortunately, hit Knox with the ball, quite by accident."

"By design," snapped Knox, interrupting.

"Silence, Knox!" said Dr. Holmes. "If Blake assures me that the incident was unintentional, I shall cast no aspersions upon his word."

"On my honour, the thing was a pure accident, sir," said Jack Blake.

"Very well, Blake. That is quite good enough for me. I consider—"

"You take his word before mine?" hooted Knox.

"I know Blake to be a boy incapable of uttering a base falsehood," said Dr. Holmes coldly. "Keep silence, please, Knox, or I must send you from the study."

Knox scowled, and subsided.

"And do I understand that you will not apologise to Knox for handling him in such an unprecedented manner, Merry?"

"Yes, sir. You see, we weren't sorry we ducked Knox. He called us—Blake especially—names we didn't deserve, so we ragged him. None of us feel inclined to beg his pardon."

"Then I will not press the point," said the Head. "However, for the assault on Knox, and for the disrespect shown to Mr. Ratcliff, you will each be severely flogged. That is all, Mr. Ratcliff; you may retire. You also, Knox!"

With a discontented expression on his lean face, Mr. Ratcliff rushed from the room. Dearly would he have loved to remain, that he might witness the punishment. But the Head was not to be trifled with.

When the master and prefect had left the study, Dr. Holmes took down a bundle of canes from the top of the cupboard. Then he signed to each of the culprits in turn, and they received six stinging cuts on each hand. The occasions on which Dr. Holmes had to resort to the cane were few and far between, but when he did use it, it was in a way which could be felt. Most of the juniors, however, took their gruel without a murmur.

"Now," said the Head, at last, "you may go, and I want no recurrence of an exhibition such as this. Have you been punished by anyone else for this offence?"

"Knox has given us lines, sir," said Tom Merry.

"Then they are cancelled."

"Thank you very much, sir!"

And the juniors left the study, squeezing their hands. Their punishment had been pretty severe, but they were determined not to take it lying down.

They had not finished with Knox yet—not by a long way. Before many days were over, he was likely to pay very heavily for ever having fallen foul of the water-polo players!

CHAPTER 3.

Enter Dick Mason.

"O W!" grunted Manners, nursing his hands.

"Groc! The insufferable beast!" moaned Monty Lowther.

"He wants boiling in oil!" declared Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three were seated at tea in their study, hurling indictments at Knox the prefect. Each of them was feeling decidedly "fed-up." Things were getting past the limit, and the latest affair resembled the last straw which is said to have broken the camel's back.

"I've just found out why it is Knox is so beastly ratty," declared Manners. "I got it from Reilly of the Fourth, who was in Knox's study at the time. Kildare was making out the team for the next senior match—against Greyfriars First. Knox begged to be included, but the skipper wouldn't hear of it. He's put in Mason."

"Jolly good job, too!" snorted Tom Merry. "I don't think much of Mason as a cricketer, but he could give points to Knox any day of the week."

"Hear, hear! But Knox, like the cad he is, chose to get his rag out over it. He insulted Kildare, and it was just after that happened that he came and put his oar in when we were playing water-polo."

"The cad! He's going to get it in the neck over this!" said Tom Merry savagely. "And we're not going to wait a dog's age before we put him through it, either. I vote we pile in on him to-night."

"Good egg!"

"There'll be knocks for Knox, I'm thinking!" said Lowther.

"Oh, dry up, Funny-cuts! Keep that sort of thing

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for 'Chuckles.' Look here. I suppose the bounder will go out on his usual pub-haunting excursion to-night?"

"Bound to," said Manners. "He lost money pretty heavily last night at the Green Man, and he's sure to want his revenge. If we wait up for him to-night, with a nice, slimy, odorous mixture to dump upon his napper, we shall probably lay him by the heels."

"Good wheeze!"

"And if he nails us, he'll find it pretty difficult to explain why he's out of bounds at that hour," said Manners; "so we're on the safe side of the law."

"True, O king!"

And the juniors resumed their tea with better appetites than hitherto. The prospect of scoring off Knox was as balm in Gilead to their troubled minds.

Toby, the page, put his head in at the doorway.

"Seen anything of Master Mason, young gent?"

"Mason? He's playing cricket on the senior pitch," said Manners. "Who wants him?"

"Which I've got a letter for him," said Toby, "and as it's marked 'On Hactive Service,' I thort as 'ow it might be important."

"From a relative at the Front, I suppose," said Tom Merry. "Hope there's nothing wrong. Mason's a decent sort of chap."

Toby nodded, and made his way to Big-Side, where the nets had been pitched.

Mason himself was batting, and Kildare, Darrel, and Rushden were plying him with balls.

This was Dick Mason's last term at St. Jim's, and his school record had not, so far, been anything to write home about. A poor footballer, a fair-to-moderate fellow in Form, and very happy-go-lucky by nature, Mason had never done anything to be recorded in the school annals and handed down to generations of St. Jim's scholars.

But now that it was almost time for him to shake the dust of St. Jim's from his feet, as it were, Mason woke up to the fact that he must speedily do something noteworthy. To slide through his schooldays without achieving anything worth talking about, and then to take up the life of a tame and timorous City clerk, with small remuneration and a nameless grave, did not suit Mason's book at all. He had, therefore, suddenly astonished the natives by showing an aptitude for cricket.

But the way to a school's first eleven is a hard and thorny one, as Dick Mason discovered. Of two or three hundred boys, it was difficult to win a place amid the select few. And not until the tail-end of the season arrived did Kildare wake up to the fact that Mason was worth a place in the team.

The only remaining fixture was with Greyfriars First, and, after careful deliberation, Kildare had brought Mason in as eleventh man, though he realised that by so doing he would be courting the displeasure of Knox. But Eric Kildare was a fellow who did what he considered to be fair and right, recking not the consequences. And, accordingly, Mason's name had been posted upon the list in Big Hall.

The new asset to the team was thoroughly enjoying himself when Toby came on the scene with the letter. He had hit Kildare twice in succession to the hedge that skirted the lower end of the field, and treated the best balls of Darrel and Rushden with scant courtesy.

Mason swung round at the sight of the page-boy.

"Anything for me?" he asked.

"Yes, sir!"

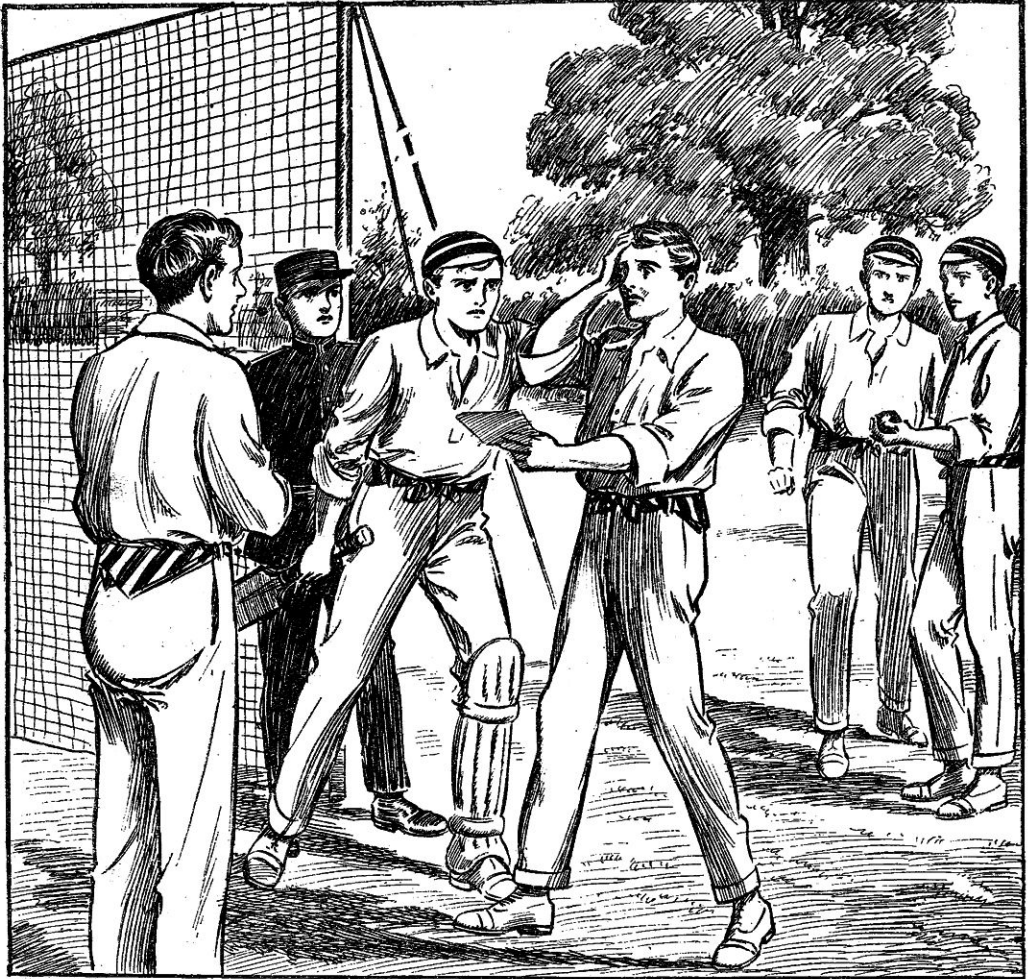
"Good! Hand it over!"

Toby handed over the letter, and departed.

The senior gave a violent start at first as he glanced at the envelope. He discerned at once that the handwriting was that of his brother Gerald, serving in France. What had happened? Was his soldier-brother wounded, or gassed, or disabled? It looked like it, for Lieutenant Mason's letters were usually sent home, whence the news was afterwards communicated to the St. Jim's fellow. Why, then, had the lieutenant sent this letter to his brother direct?

"Yes," Mason reflected, "poor old Gerald's been potted, and he wants to keep it from the people at home, if he can."

"Mason, old man, what's the matter?" asked Kildare, running up. "You look as white as a sheet!"



Mason glanced at the wording on the wire, and his face fell. One hand went to his head, and only Kildare's strong arm prevented him from falling. "Brace up, man!" said the captain of St. Jim's. "Bad news—what?" (See Chapter 7.)

"It—it's all right," said Mason huskily. "A letter from my brother, that's all."

"Hope he's getting on O.K.," said Kildare, moving away as Mason drew out the letter and started to read.

A sigh of relief escaped the senior as he scanned the closely-packed sheet. The Huns had given Lieutenant Mason a wide berth, after all.

The letter was worded thus:

"Dear Dick,—They are granting the chaps in our battalion a short leave, and by the time this letter reaches you I shall be in England.

"I am, of course, jolly anxious to see you, but shall not be able to get to Rylcombe until ten o'clock on the evening you receive this. They're not likely to admit me to the school at that hour, so could you manage to meet me in Rylcombe at the time stated? I shall be in the billiard-saloon at the Green Man.

"You won't fail me, will you?—Your affectionate brother,
GERALD."

"All serene?" asked Kildare.

"Quite!" said Mason cheerily. "I thought it was bad news at first, but everything's all right, as it happens."

"Good! I'll pitch you down a few more balls. I say, you're shaping jolly well. We shall give Greyfriars beans at this rate!"

"Hope so," smiled Mason. And, thrusting his brother's letter into the pocket of his blazer, he turned his attention once more to the charms of King Cricket.

CHAPTER 4.

At Dead of Night.

KICKING his heels on the familiar pavement of Rylcombe High Street—familiar because he himself was formerly at St. Jim's—was Lieutenant Gerald Mason, of the Loamshires. He had been to the Green Man to meet his brother, but that worthy had not yet put in an appearance, so the lieutenant had lighted a fragrant cigar, and sauntered out into the street.

He had not long to wait. A tall form loomed up in

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the dark, and a moment later he grasped the outstretched hand of his brother.

"What cheer, Dicky boy! How goes it?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks!" responded Dick Mason. "My hat! Although it's dark, I can see you look jolly fit. Been taking any trenches?"

"Helping to," said Gerald grimly. "And I'm jolly glad of a brief respite, too. Now I'm home for a bit I'm going to be a gay dog. I mean to paint the town red, or, rather, the village."

Dick Mason looked grave.

"Don't go running into trouble," he said warningly. "It would be too foul if you got into a mess at a time like this, when you're going great guns in the military world."

The lieutenant laughed lightly.

"Hang it all, Dick," he said, puffing at his cigar, "a chap can't go about like a sober old parson in these circumstances! 'Eat, drink, and be merry' is going to be my motto. Don't begrudge a fellow a little flutter when he's got to get back to the inferno of the trenches in a day or so."

The Sixth-Former did not reply. He well knew that a "blade" his elder brother could be when he chose, and the knowledge did not give satisfaction to his brotherly mind. But surely this was an exceptional case, where an evening's dissipation might willingly be granted. There had been instances in the newspapers recently where young officers, on leave from the front, had caused disturbance and annoyance in theatres and elsewhere, and were condemned for so doing. But some of them, within a few days of the offence, had laid down their lives for the sake of the very folk who had condemned them. Ruminating on these facts, Dick Mason decided that it would be as well to give Gerald his head.

They remained in the street for over half an hour, chatting over things past, present, and yet to be. Then the St. Jim's fellow realised, with a start, that it was getting on for eleven o'clock.

"I'd better be getting back," he said, "or else I shall be jolly stale in the morning."

The lieutenant nodded.

"That's right; leave me alone with the cup that cheers," he said gaily. "Hallo! Who was that?"

A dark form had passed the two brothers, and entered the Green Man.

Dick Mason gave a violent start.

"It's one of our fellows!" he exclaimed. "Knox of the Sixth!"

"Great Scott!"

"I suppose he's pub-haunting, as usual," said the Sixth-Former, with a curl of the lip.

"Well, he's got nerve, any way, to do this sort of thing. It wasn't tolerated in my day."

"It wouldn't be now, but the fellow's as cunning as a giddy fox. He lives up to the Eleventh Commandment—'Thou shalt not be found out.' One of these days I expect he'll come a cropper."

The lieutenant laughed grimly.

"Well, good-bye, Dick, old fellow! Write me a first-hand report of the match with Greyfriars, won't you?"

"Yes," said the other; adding, with a laugh, "unless I get a duck's egg!"

The brothers went their several ways—Dick to St. Jim's and Gerald to the Green Man.

In the bar parlour of the latter sat two persons—Mr. Jolliffe, the landlord, and Knox of the Sixth. Both were busily engaged in shuffling cards as the lieutenant strolled into the room.

Knox looked up with a guilty start, but the newcomer's first words reassured him.

"Any chance of a game—what?" he asked.

"Certainly, sir!" beamed the landlord. "If you're keen on nap, you'll find yourself quite at home here."

Lieutenant Mason nodded to Knox, and sat down at the table. Then the game began.

Knox and Mr. Jolliffe played carefully at first, in case their new acquaintance should prove a skilled player, up to every move of the game. But the easy-going lieutenant soon proved his guilelessness, and then his amiable companions winked slyly at each other, and proceeded to fleece him right and left.

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"THE PENNY POPULAR," Every Friday.

"CHUCKLES," ID. Every Saturday, 2

Like Sam Weller's knowledge of London, Knox's knowledge of the game of nap was "extensive and peculiar." The innocent officer from the trenches soon found himself losing at every turn, and his supply of gold gradually found its way into the possession of the two rascals sitting opposite.

Had they stopped to seriously consider the matter, both Knox and Mr. Jolliffe would have realised the utter caddishness and cupidity of fleecing a man who had risked his life for King and country in the past, and who in a short space of time would resume his operations against the German hordes. But the landlord and his confederate never possessed any scruples of this kind. They were out for the shekels, and Lieutenant Gerald Mason underwent a sorry time of it.

He had now lost over eight pounds, but with the reckless frenzy of the gambler he played on, hoping against hope. His luck would turn, he felt. So far he had been a victim of misfortune.

But, as in ninety-nine out of a hundred similar cases, his luck did not turn. He battled on with the energy of despair, but shortly before half-past eleven he was cleaned out.

"Hard cheese!" said Mr. Jolliffe, brushing a somewhat dirty mouth with an equally dirty shirt-sleeve. "You're a real sportin' gent, you are, sir, wot can put up a good game and pay the piper when your luck's out."

"You won't carry on, and take my I O U's?" asked the lieutenant wearily.

Mr. Jolliffe affected sudden alarm.

"Ahem! It's strikin' the half-hour!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet. "I must close the premises, and pretty quick! The authorities would be down on me like a ton of bricks if they knew I burned the lights so late!"

"I must be getting off, too," said Knox hastily. "Time and tide wait for no man," you know. Good-night, lieutenant! Good-night, Jolliffe!"

And the prefect, having made a bigger haul than had been his luck for months, thrust a handful of gold into his pocket and quitted the parlour.

Lieutenant Mason sat as if stunned for a few moments; then he, too, rose to his feet, and passed out without a word.

Outside, Knox drank in great draughts of the cool night air, for the bar-parlour, by way of suffocating conditions, could have given points to the Black Hole of Calcutta. Then he turned his steps towards St. Jim's.

A dark figure loomed up in the blackness of the night, and, with a tremor of fear, the prefect made out the dim outline of Police-constable Crump, of Rylcombe.

Apparently, Mr. Crump had caught sight of the school cap, for he darted forward, and the next moment a hand was clapped on Knox's shoulder.

"Got yer, you young rip! Caught in the hact—the werry hact!"

Knox ducked his head to avoid recognition, and struggled desperately. To be recognised and exposed by P.-c. Crump would write "Finis" to his long list of nocturnal escapades. Whatever happened, this enterprising minion of the law must be shaken off.

"Come quiet!" panted the burly Crump. "Come quiet, or —"

Before his hand could get to his truncheon, Knox had torn himself free. He dashed his fist full in the constable's face, and Crump fell to earth with a thud.

Then, without so much as a look at his fallen adversary, Knox took to his heels, and sprinted hard in the direction of St. Jim's.

He possessed the prefect's privilege of having a key to the side-gate of the Head's garden, and managed to reach the School House undetected.

As he neared the box-room window, however, he paused. Another figure was making across the quad for the same objective.

"Mason!" muttered Knox, under his breath. "I saw him in Rylcombe an hour ago! Where's he been, I wonder? Anyway, I'd better lay low for a bit, and let him get in."

And Knox stepped back into the shadows of the quadrangle.

If it be true that the devil careth for his own, the

devil was certainly considerate for Knox at that moment. For, inside the corridor, close by the box-room window, stood three juniors—the Terrible Three of the Shell.

They had been waiting there for over an hour, with a bucket filled to the brim with one of the most hideous concoctions it was possible to imagine. Tar and soot and glue and several brands of ink had been studiously mixed together, and Tom Merry and his vigilant chums fondly hoped to give Knox the surprise of his life.

A hand clutched the window-sill without, and the juniors waited breathlessly. Then a tall form drew itself up to the window, and a couple of feet were thrust through; then, as the rest of the body followed, the juniors raised the pail between them and tilted it relentlessly over their victim.

There was a terrible swishing sound, and a stifled roar from the recipient of the mixture. Then Monty Lowther gave vent to a sudden, sharp whisper.

"Run, you fellows! Run for your lives! It ain't Knox at all! It's Mason—Mason of the Sixth!"

With a last look at the squirming object before them, the juniors took to their heels, and bolted with the fleetness of hares for the Shell dormitory, leaving the hapless Sixth-Former to extricate himself from his uncomfortable predicament as best he could.

CHAPTER 5. A Cad's Cunning.

THESE was a tenseness in the air when rising-bell clanged out next morning, which seemed to be a premonition that something was going to happen. Exactly what, no one seemed to know, although the Terrible Three had an inward foreboding that Mason had realised their identity, and that he would come down heavily on the juniors, who, unwittingly, had smothered him from head to foot the night before.

But an hour slipped by, and the expected summons from the Sixth-Former did not arrive. The juniors, with minds greatly relieved, considered that either Mason had not recognised them, or that he was too decent a chap to call them over the coals for what had been an obvious mistake.

Then Kildare, his handsome face unusually grave, made a tour of the corridors, and announced that there was to be an assembly in Big Hall at once.

"Ow!" grunted Monty Lowther. "The worst has arrived! Mason's reported us to the Head!"

"Then he's a rank outsider!" said Tom Merry bitterly. "How's he going to explain his own absence from the school last night?"

"I suppose he relies on us not to sneak," said Manners drily.

"Well, we must keep a stiff upper lip, whatever happens," said Tom Merry. "I wouldn't mind if we'd succeeded in swamping Knox. It would have been worth a public flogging, after the way the cad's treated us!"

"This way to the execution chamber!" said Monty Lowther, leading the way to Big Hall.

And the juniors proceeded along the corridor with palpitating hearts.

Dr. Holmes was not present, but in a short time he rustled in, with no less pompous personage than P.-c. Crump toiling in his wake. The constable's nose presented a most bulbous appearance—doubtless, the result of Knox's smashing blow the night before; but there was a stern look on his florid face which made many a recalcitrant junior tremble.

"This is where we get it in the neck!" groaned Monty Lowther. "Wonder what old Crump wants?"

The chums of the Shell glanced over to where the prefects stood. Dick Mason was there, and the juniors could hardly repress their grins as they noted his complexion. The most vigorous rubbing and scrubbing had not enabled the senior to wholly remove the traces of that awful mixture.

The Head's voice broke in upon the juniors' reflections. "I have to address you," he said gravely, "on a most serious matter, affecting the honour and high standing of this school. Mr. Crump came to me early this morn-

ing, and laid a distressing charge before me. It appears that, despite all existing rules and regulations on the subject, a senior boy—perhaps even a prefect—broke bounds last evening, and paid a visit to the Green Man. That his object in going to such a disreputable place was to gamble, and perhaps to drink, I have no doubt. But the boy who transgressed last night went further. He savagely assaulted P.-c. Crump, and made his way back to the school without being detected. I want that boy, whoever he was, to step forward."

There was a grim silence. It was hardly to be supposed that the miscreant would court expulsion by betraying himself at such a moment.

"I am waiting," said Dr. Holmes patiently.

Curious looks were cast in the direction of the Sixth-Formers, but no one stirred.

"No takers!" murmured Jack Blake.

A hard, steely glitter suddenly came into the eyes of Knox the prefect. He saw before him an excellent prospect of landing Mason into trouble—of bringing about his expulsion from the school. If he succeeded, what was more probable than that Kildare would give him the vacant place in the First Eleven? It was too good a chance to be missed.

Knox stepped out from his place, and there was an interested stir in Big Hall as he approached the dais.

"Well, Knox, what do you know about this matter?" rapped out the Head.

The school hung on the prefect's reply. Most of the fellows knew of Knox's little excursions into Rylcombe. Was it possible that he was about to play the part of confessor?

"I feel it my duty, sir," said Knox piously, "to acquaint you of a circumstance which may throw some light on this affair. It pains me to have to incriminate a fellow-prefect, but I feel that I ought to speak out, in the interests of justice."

"Quite so!" said Dr. Holmes. "Your conduct is quite in order, Knox. In fact, I should not allow you to conceal anything which might assist in bringing the offence home to the culprit."

"Well, it's like this, sir," said Knox desperately. "Hearing a strange sound shortly before midnight, I left my room and went to investigate. To my unbounded surprise, I saw a senior clamber through the box-room window and stealthily enter the School House."

"You astonish me, Knox!"

"It astonished me, too, at the time," said Knox; "but not until this moment did I connect the incident with what happened at the Green Man last night."

"And who was the senior you saw, Knox?"

Two hundred fellows waited in breathless suspense for the answer.

"Mason, sir!"

A murmur of amazement ran round the crowded Hall. "Mason of the Sixth stand forward!"

With flushed face, and feeling utterly dazed, Dick Mason obeyed the Head's command.

Tom Merry & Co. exchanged quick glances.

"He'll be bowled out now, as sure as eggs!" muttered Monty Lowther. "Fancy old Mason being a pub-haunter!"

"It beats me altogether!" murmured Tom Merry.

"Mason," said the Head, fixing his eyes on the unfortunate senior, "you have heard the statement Knox has just made. Do you deny it?"

"No, sir," said Mason quietly.

"You admit that you broke bounds last night, and came in through the box-room window?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's 'im!" declared P.-c. Crump, with emphasis. "It was a feller jest about 'is stamp. Wot I says is this 'ere—"

"You are not asked to give your views on the matter," said the Head tartly.

"Werry well, sir. But I'll swear black's white that this is the young warmint who hassaulted me."

"Did you attack Mr. Crump, Mason?"

"Certainly not, sir."

"Were you the senior he saw leaving the Green Man?"

"No, sir."

"Then pray explain your absence from the school."

"I went into Rylcombe to see my brother, who is on short leave from the front, sir," said Mason.

The Head frowned.

"I am afraid, Mason, that your tale does not carry much weight. It is inconceivable that your brother would arrange to meet you in the middle of the night under such circumstances."

Mason flushed.

"Very well, sir. If you can't take my word I can say nothing else. Unfortunately, I have destroyed the letter I got from my brother yesterday afternoon asking me to meet him."

The Head cut Mason short.

"I do not believe in the existence of any such letter," he said drily.

Kildare immediately sprang forward.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but Mason's statement is correct. The letter came while we were at cricket. I remember asking Mason if his brother was all right."

"You need not tell me this, Kildare," said Dr. Holmes. "I am not quite so obtuse as not to be able to see through this affair. A boy who will visit low-down public-houses will not scruple to cover up his tracks in every way possible. Mason evidently compiled that letter with his own hand, and took care to show it to you, so that, if trouble came, he could put forward an alibi."

"You wrong me!" shouted Mason, losing all control of himself. "I should never stoop to such a thing. Don't you know me better than that, sir? Don't you realise that this is some plot—some dastardly plot—to bring about my expulsion from the school?"

The Head made an impatient gesture.

"It is no good, Mason," he said. "You cannot conceal your guilt, try as you may. Mr. Crump here, has practically identified you, and Knox saw you come back in the stealthy manner described. No boy who had been down to the village with honourable motives would act in such an underhand way. Did any other boys see Mason come in?"

"Oh, blow!" murmured Monty Lowther. "This is where the chopper comes down!"

The Terrible Three came forward.

"We saw Mason come in through the box-room window, sir," explained Tom Merry.

The Head's brow grew stern.

"So you, too, had been breaking bounds?"

"Oh, no, sir! We were inside the building at the time."

"Then for what purpose did you leave your dormitory?"

"To play a joke on somebody, sir," said Tom.

"Ahem! You were breaking a grave breach of the rules, Merry, but I will not press you for details. Each of you will take five hundred lines, and go to his place."

"Thank you, sir!"

The Terrible Three resumed their places with the feeling that they had got off very lightly.

"As for you, Mason, I may say that I place no faith in this story of your soldier brother. The evidence against you is sufficiently powerful to justify me in expelling you. Have you anything to say?"

A chance of clearing himself came into Mason's mind at that moment, and he clutched at it as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

"Before you decide to expel me, sir," he exclaimed, "write to my brother, and he will confirm the fact that I met him in Rylcombe, and that I did not go into the Green Man."

"But—but," stammered the Head perplexedly, "if, as you aver, you are not the boy Mr. Crump has lodged a complaint about, there must have been some other senior in the village at the time of the outrage."

"I suppose so, sir," said Mason. He did not add that he had seen Knox go into the Green Man. It was not merely that Mason hated sneaking, but his assertion could not be proven. It would simply be supposed that he was trying to shift the blame of his own misdemeanour on to the shoulders of another.

"The whole matter is shrouded in mystery," said the doctor. "However, in order that there can be no miscarriage of justice, I shall write to your brother, Mason. What is his address?"

"I expect he will be starting for the front at any

minute, sir, so you'd better address him care of the British Expeditionary Force—Lieutenant Gerald Mason, of the Loomshires."

"I will do so. I know your brother well enough to be satisfied that he will tell me the true facts, and I sincerely hope, for your own sake, that you have not lied to me. Judgment will be suspended until I hear from the lieutenant. You will resume your school duties in the ordinary way, Mason."

"Thank you, sir!"

Knox gritted his teeth with vexation. He saw now how utterly his scheme had failed. It had come tumbling about his ears like a pack of cards. The match with Greyfriars was to be played on Saturday, and Mason, instead of being sent home in disgrace, would be present to play for his school. For it was certain that he had Kildare's sympathy.

Not only this, but he—Knox—had over-reached himself in his efforts to incriminate Mason, and the pit he had dugged for another he was likely to fall into himself. For Lieutenant Mason was certain to tell the Head that it was Knox, and not his brother, who had been present at the Green Man.

"Mr. Crump," said the Head, "you may rest assured that no stone will be left unturned to fathom the facts of this case. The culprit shall be brought to book, and dismissed summarily from the school. I much regret the injury you have been caused."

The police-constable was about to make a dissatisfied retort, but the Head pressed a gold coin into his hand, and, greatly mollified, the worthy Crump shuffled out of the Hall.

"Knox," the Head went on, "I highly commend you for the part you have played in this matter. Your evidence has been most useful."

The senior bowed, and went back to his place; but he felt far from happy. The net of degradation and disgrace was beginning to close round him instead of round his intended victim, and the thought was by no means comforting.

"The school will now dismiss," said Dr. Holmes.

And, with many muttered surmises on the subject of the mysterious midnight prowler, the St. Jim's fellows filed slowly out of Big Hall.

CHAPTER 6.

To Go or Not To Go?

MORNING school came in for very little attention after the dramatic scene in Big Hall. Most of the fellows were turning over in their minds the pros and cons of the affair, and by the time classes were dismissed the school had divided its opinion into three sections.

The fellows took one or other of the following views: (1) That Mason was guilty of the unwarranted assault on P.-c. Crump; (2) that Knox was the culprit; (3) that neither Mason nor Knox had perpetrated the offence, but that it existed only in the imagination of the worthy Crump.

Tom Merry & Co. held rigidly to the second theory—that Knox was the guilty party. Their knowledge of Dick Mason was very limited, but they knew him to be a white man, and a fellow who had very strict views on the subject of "pub-haunting"; whereas Knox was an old offender, so to speak. Besides, it was feasible that Mason, in his last term at St. Jim's, would be fool enough to have run such a grave risk?

Then again, Knox was "up against" Mason, and the juniors knew it. Mason had unwittingly ousted Knox from the first eleven, and the black sheep of the Sixth, with his bullying ways, was not likely to take that lying down. He would naturally be seeking an early opportunity of crossing Mason's path, and the opportunity had come about very suddenly. However "thin" Mason's story of his brother might sound to the Head, the Terrible Three were inclined to place full faith in it.

"Mason's as wight as wain!" observed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy emphatically, as he strolled round the quad before dinner with some of the School House fellows. "Knox is a wotten, wepwehensible cad, and I wish we could bring this affair home to him."

"Same here," said Tom Merry. "But we haven't an atom of proof that he knocked old Crump about, or that he went to the Green Man either, for that matter. My hat! It'll be a crying injustice if Mason has to go."

"But his brother'll write, and then everything in the garden will be lovely," said Jack Blake.

Tom Merry shook his head gravely.

"A thousand things might happen to prevent him replying at all," he said. "It's a horrid thing to have to say, but he may be killed or missing by the time the Head's letter gets out to France. And then the Head will sack poor old Mason, and Knox'll continue to run riot, and rule us with the iron hand."

"Heaven forbid!" said Manners. "I, for one, don't believe that such a cruel wrong could come about. Things are bound to pan out all right, in the long run."

"Let's hope so," said Monty Lowther. "Meanwhile, my parched throat cries out for ginger-pop. I feel I'd like to lie on my back for the rest of the day and suck that refreshing beverage through a straw."

"Weally, Lowthah! You are as lazy as Wip Van Winkle. However, I, too, have a shockin' thirst, so we'll go along to the tuckshop. My treat, deah boys!"

"Now, that's what I call really generous," observed Lowther, giving the swell of St. Jim's a tremendous pat on the back, which made him stagger.

"Ow! Yawwooh! You fivghtful chump, Lowthah!"

Monty Lowther looked grieved.

"There's gratitude for you!" he exclaimed. "Blowed if I'll trouble to exert myself again!"

The next moment Mrs. Taggles was called upon to supply the wants of a dozen thirsty juniors. There was a plenteous supply of ginger-pop, home-made and otherwise, and for a time nothing was heard but a contented gurgling sound.

Then Tom Merry uttered a sudden exclamation.

"My hat! Look!"

Marching through the quad, heading straight for the school shop, came a weird procession of juniors. Levison, Mellish, and Crooke led the way, and most of the fellows carried banners, supported by poles. Each banner bore some startling inscription, that wielded by the foremost members of the band being:

... "DOWN WITH MASON!"

The other epithets were many and various. "RALLY ROUND KNOX!" and "WE WANT FAIR PLAY!" were prominently displayed; and Tom Merry & Co., packed in the doorway of the tuckshop, gave vent to a roar of wrath.

"The cads!" exclaimed Tom. "Fancy backing up such a howling rotter as Knox!"

"This delightful pageant has been got up for our express benefit," remarked Monty Lowther, "and it's up to us to put the kybosh on it!"

The humorist of the Shell armed himself with a siphon of lemonade, which he concealed behind his back until the procession drew near the doorway of the shop. Then he suddenly brought it forth, and turned a stream of seething liquid full upon Knox's supporters.

There were three simultaneous yells from Levison and Crooke and Mellish, who caught the full force of the stream in their faces. So unexpected was the attack that all was confusion in the ranks of the banner-bearers.

Tom Merry and the others, noting that Lowther's siphon was being quickly drained, followed his energetic example, and took several siphons themselves, despite the shrill protests of Dame Taggles. Then there was a combined forward movement, and a dozen separate and distinct streams of lemonade were directed upon the confused mob of juniors without.

"Rush 'em!" roared Crooke of the Shell, wiping the liquid from his eyes. "Into the rotters, quick!"

The "processors" obeyed. They were not of the stuff of which heroes are made, but at the same time they were not averse to a scrap when they considerably outnumbered the opposition as in the present case. Into the fray they rushed, and were met with a defence like a barn door. The scene was one of the wildest description, such as the poet would have characterised as "confusion worse confounded."

"Sock it into 'em!" roared Tom Merry. "Mason for ever!"

"Hurrah! Good old Mason!"

At that moment "good old Mason" came upon the scene with Kildare of the Sixth. The captain of St. Jim's gripped Tom Merry by the collar, and swung him back.

"You young rascal! How dare you cause such a disturbance?"

"Yow! Leggo!" gasped Tom. "We—we're sticking up for Mason!"

"Then you'd better stick up for him in a more quiet manner," said Kildare grimly. "Take fifty lines!"

"Certainly, Kildare! Anything to oblige!"

Kildare then turned his attention to Levison and his cronies. The combat soon ceased, and the offensive banners lay tattered and torn in the doorway of the tuckshop.

"Who is responsible for this handiwork?" asked the Sixth-Former, indicating the remnants of the gaudy inscriptions.

"I had it done," said Levison sullenly.

"Then I'll teach you not to get up to such monkey-tricks in future. Come to my study after dinner."

And the two seniors, after Kildare had uttered a few solemn words of warning as to what would befall the juniors if hostilities broke out afresh, turned away.

"You've got young Merry and his chums on your side, anyhow, old man," said Kildare, with a laugh. "They're pretty staunch backers, anyway, if they're prepared to go through fire and water for you like that."

"Merry's a decent kid," said Mason. "But, hang it all, I've got you to stand by me, too, Kildare, and that means a lot—more than I can say. One of these days, if everything works out for the best, I'll make it my bizney to repay you for what you've done."

"Nonsense!" said Kildare cheerfully. "I am as convinced as you are that Knox was the guilty party, yet I can't see how we can bring it home to him. It's rotten!"

Mason nodded.

"Now that I'm under a cloud," he said, "I don't suppose I ought to play against Greyfriars. That is to say, unless my brother writes to reassure the Head by Saturday."

"Oh, rot! I'll go and ask the Head myself to make sure," said Kildare.

And he made tracks for Dr. Holmes's study, to return a few minutes later with a gleam in his eye.

"It's all right, old chap. If nothing crops up in the meantime which will throw any light on this business, you can play against the Friars. And you're going to play the game of your life, too!"

"I feel pretty fit," said Mason modestly.

"The Head tells me he has written to your brother, so you can expect a reply pretty shortly."

Mason's face lit up.

"If only it comes," he said, drawing a deep breath, "I shall be cleared! How ripping! If it comes before we play Greyfriars, then I shall pile up a century. Really, I shan't be able to help myself. I shall be so intoxicated with joy!"

"Here's to the happy event, then!" laughed Kildare. "Give us your fist, old man!"

And the two seniors who had, during the last few days, become such staunch chums, gripped each other warmly by the hand, and each prayed fervently in his heart for the day of deliverance, when a grave wrong would be righted, causing Dick Mason to wind up his school life at St. Jim's in a blaze of glory.

CHAPTER 7.

A Plot to Ruin All.

THINGS are getting desperate!"

Knox of the Sixth, seated in an armchair in his study, inhaling cigarette fumes, muttered the words feverishly to himself.

Two whole days had passed since the public-house scandal, and at any time now the dreaded communication from Lieutenant Mason might arrive.

If it incriminated the rascally prefect, Knox was ready

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to fight tooth and nail for his position. He would swear that the lieutenant had mistaken his identity, and get Jolliffe to come to St. Jim's and stoutly deny that Knox had been on the premises.

But that was not helping him in regard to Mason's downfall. The scheme he had mapped out for getting Mason's place in the team had failed; and to-day—to-day was the day of the match!

Something must be done, and that quickly. In the ordinary way, Knox would have taken his friend Sefton into his confidence; but even bosom friends have a habit of betraying those they profess to be thick with; so Knox decided that he would keep his own counsel.

But how could he get rid of Mason? That, as the immortal Hamlet said, was the question. True, he could stir up public opinion against his intended victim, and get fellows of Levison's kidney to give him a warm time. But Mason possessed a very powerful ally in Kildare, and the more persecuted Mason became, the more determined would the captain of St. Jim's be to include him in the team.

Knox saw that the door of his study was carefully locked, and then, going to the sideboard, secured a bottle whose contents were of a decidedly doubtful nature, and filled a tumbler. Then he drained it of the suspicious-looking liquid, in the hope that it would make his brain work more clearly. The result was quite the reverse.

The old and time-honoured method of kidnapping the eleventh member of the team occurred to him, but he dismissed it from his mind at once. Mason was not a small fag, who might easily be got out of the way. No, it wouldn't do. Knox must find some other ruse.

It did not occur to him until an hour or two later, when, having left his study, he sighted Toby, the page, carrying a letter in the Close.

The prefect stopped short, and his hands clutched convulsively. A desperate idea had occurred to him. He would fake a telegram from Mason's people, saying that they were deeply upset because Lieutenant Mason had been wounded at the front, and urging the St. Jim's senior to come home at once. Naturally enough, Mason would catch the next train from Rylcombe, and be absent all the afternoon. Knox would then take his place in the eleven.

The idea was a good one—good, that is to say, from a criminal standpoint. No fellow with a single shred of decency would have lowered himself to the extent of using the war as a means of working off a vile deception upon another. But then, Knox had no decency. He had never realised the meaning of "Play the game" in his life.

"I'll do it now!" he muttered to himself. "Nothing like striking while the iron's hot. First of all, I must bag the bouncer's home address from his study. He'll be at dinner now, so here goes!"

As he wended his steps to the Sixth-Form corridor, a serious drawback presented itself to him, militating again the success of his plot. How was the name of the village, where the Masons resided, to appear on the telegram-form?

"Confound it!" muttered the prefect savagely. "The Fates are dead against me!"

But he had spoken a moment too soon. On Mason's study table was a letter—the last the senior had received from his people, Knox reflected. And the postmark was "Rayland."

The sight of the word seemed as magic to Knox. He sprang through the doorway, and made rapid tracks for the cycle-shed.

"I'll go over to Wayland," he muttered, "and send a wire to Mason from there. It's a level chance that no one'll look to see where the thing came from, and if they take a casual glance they'll think it's Rayland. So that's all right!"

And the Sixth-Former sped off down the dusty lane in the direction of the little market town.

He left his dinner behind him, but dinner had very little attraction for the cad of the Sixth just then. He would have fasted for days had he known that by so doing he could crush Dick Mason.

The match was booked to commence in a couple of hours, and Knox realised that his cunning inspiration

had only come to his assistance just in time. Even now, it was quite on the cards that he would be too late.

He put the speed on, alarming several old-world pedestrians who were in his way, and reached Wayland in less than twenty minutes. Then, leaving his machine on the pavement outside the post-office, he took a stealthy glance along the street, and then set about his sinister designs.

The telegram was duly written out, and Knox handed it over to the guileless looking girl behind the counter. This done, he recovered his machine, and rode leisurely back to St. Jim's.

The air was tense with excitement as he turned into the old quadrangle, where most of the fellows had fore-gathered, pending the arrival of the Greyfriars team, which was to be accompanied by a host of juniors from the famous Kentish school.

The list of St. Jim's players posted upon the board had undergone no change. True, some enterprising satellite of Knox had erased Mason's name completely; but Kildare had written it in again, bolder than before, adding a warning that anyone who was seen tampering with the notice would be summarily dealt with.

The seniors were engaged in a preliminary practice at the nets when the telegraph messenger arrived, panting and breathless.

Kildare eyed the youth curiously. He wondered if Wingate, the Greyfriars skipper, had wired that something was amiss.

"For me?" he asked.

"No, sir; for Mister Mason, sir."

"There he is, then."

Dick Mason came forward eagerly. Had his brother wired him, saying that everything was all right; that he had reassured the Head, and that Mason's name was cleared?

A great feeling of hope surged up in Mason's breast, but it was only momentary.

He glanced at the wording on the wire, and his face fell. One hand went to his head, and only Kildare's strong arm prevented him from falling.

"Brace up, man!" said the captain of St. Jim's. "Bad news—what?"

"Very," said Mason, in a low, strained voice. "Read that!"

Kildare glanced at the telegram. It read:

"Gerald seriously wounded, and mother much distressed in consequence. Come home at once.—FATHER."

"Hard cheese!" said Kildare sympathetically. "You'll have to go, of course, and we shall be left in the lurch for an eleventh man." Then he paused, colouring up awkwardly. "What a selfish cad I am! I was only thinking of the match, and not of your mater. Perhaps the wound isn't serious, after all. Most parents imagine things, you know. Better get off at once, and see if you can cheer the mater up."

Mason nodded.

"I will," he said heavily. "There's a train in a quarter of an hour. Think I shall do it?"

"You'll have to run like the very dickens!" said Kildare. "Don't stop to get the Head's permish. I'll explain things to him when you've gone. Good-bye and good luck!"

And Dick Mason pulled on his cricket blazer and dashed off towards the school gates.

From the pavilion two cunning eyes gleamed out at his retreating figure, and a voice—the voice of Knox of the Sixth—exclaimed:

"Good! Now you've cleared off, I shall win the day after all, Master Meddling, Maudling Mason."

CHAPTER 8.

Three on the Trail

"IT'S queer!"

"Jolly queer!"

The Terrible Three of the Shell were sunning themselves in the old gateway of St. Jim's, awaiting the arrival of the Greyfriars eleven.

They had seen Mason, a moment earlier, go pelting out at the gates, carrying a small handbag.



Knox looked up with a guilty start, but the newcomer's first words reassured him. "Any chance of a game—what?" he asked. "Certainly, sir!" beamed the laundress. "If you're keen on nap you'll find yourself quite at home here." (See Chapter 4.)

"He's gone to catch a train," said Tom Merry.

"That's pretty obvious," grunted Monty Lowther.

"But wherefore this thushness? Why this dramatically sudden departure?"

"Give it up," said Tom. "Something serious must have happened, that's evident. Mason wouldn't cut an important cricket-match for nothing."

"There's foul play somewhere," said Manners thoughtfully. "I saw a kid taking a telegram to Big Side not long ago. Wonder if that had anything to do with it?"

"Possibly. It's to summon him home, perhaps. But it looks jolly fishy, on the verge of the Greyfriars match. Can it be a dodge on somebody's part to get Mason out of the way?"

"Oh, come off, Tommy!"

"Stranger things have happened," said Tom Merry, "and this affair looks jolly suspicious. My hat! I should like to have a squint at that telegram."

"Mason's got it with him," said Monty Lowther.

"Perhaps—perhaps not. In the excitement of the moment he may have chucked it down on the cricket-pitch. Let's come and have a look."

The chums of the Shell made their way towards Big Side, where Kildare and his merry men were still at practice. Then the search began.

It did not last long. There, at Kildare's feet, was a crumpled ball of paper, which Manners pounced upon eagerly. He unfolded the telegram, gave a brief glance at it, and then uttered a sharp exclamation.

"My hat! It's just as I thought!"

"What's wrong, kid?" asked Kildare.

"This wire came for Mason a few minutes ago," said Manners excitedly.

"Well, what of it? Mason has received an urgent summons from his people to go home at once."

"Do his people live at Wayland?"

"Of course not!"

"Then that's where this wire was despatched," said Manners, with conviction. "There's something I don't quite understand about this."

Kildare became suddenly interested.

"Hand it over," he said.

Manners obeyed, and Kildare gave a start as he noted the name of the telegraph-office.

"It's a trick!" he exclaimed, his face going stern. "Mason's people live at Rayland, in Somerset. Some cad has invented this yarn about his brother being wounded, and sent off a fake wire from Wayland. And on the verge of the match, too! Mason must be stopped."

"But how?" asked Tom Merry, in perplexity. "He'll be in the train in a jiffy."

Kildare glanced at his watch.

"Train goes in five minutes," he said briefly. "Hook it, on your bikes—quick!"

The Terrible Three did not hesitate. Mason must be stopped at all hazards. There could be no doubt now that he was the victim of a caddish deception.

A moment later, the three juniors were speeding on their machines to Rylcombe Station. It was a case of touch and go, and they knew it.

A dozen different things might have happened. Mason himself, having gone on foot, might miss the train; or he might catch it, in which case the Terrible Three could

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do nothing but wire down the line to the first stopping-place, and have the senior brought back. But the first stop was at Swindon, and Swindon was many, many miles away.

Tom Merry & Co. hoped fervently that the train would be late, and that they could intercept Mason before he boarded it.

When the station came in sight, the cyclists saw that the train was in. But before they could dismount, it puffed its way out of the station. At the last moment they saw someone, who had just rushed on to the platform from another entrance to that which they were near, run level with the train, and take a desperate leap into an empty goods van at the rear. Porters uttered warning shouts, but the passenger had successfully accomplished the risky venture.

"It's Mason!" muttered Monty Lowther, between his teeth.

"We must follow up!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "The train's only going at a snail's pace, and if we keep to the road level with the railway we may be able to call his attention. Put the spurt on!"

And the three cyclists pedalled away along the road, hoping to catch up with the west-bound train.

It was harder than they imagined. Although the train appeared to be moving very slowly, the juniors found that even the hottest pace of which they were capable would not allow them to catch it up. Presently, however, the train drew to a halt, waiting for the signals at the next station; and this was the cyclists' opportunity.

They simply flew over the intervening ground. The machines were in good condition, and served their purpose splendidly. A moment later Tom Merry hastily dismounted, scaled the fence which skirted the railway-line, and shouted frantically:

"Mason!"

The senior, who had concealed himself in the empty goods van, jumped up in alarm.

"Merry! What on earth—"

"Jump out—quick!" yelled Tom. "It's all right. Your brother's not injured, and your people don't want you. It's all spoo! Look sharp!"

Before the train continued on its way, Dick Mason, surprised and startled, sprang out of the van, and joined the captain of the Shell.

He was only just in time, for the next instant the train went on again.

"What does all this mean, Merry?" he asked breathlessly. "Do you know what you are talking about?"

"Yes. Hop over into the road, and I'll explain."

Mason looked at the junior grimly. His face was very pale, for he had been concerned for his brother and parents; and if Tom Merry were japing him, things were likely to go hard with the hero of the Shell.

"It's like this," explained Tom, as they came out into the roadway, where Manners and Lowther were waiting. "We couldn't help wondering why you had been summoned away from the school so suddenly, and concluded that it was some trick to get you out of the way, especially as you were down to play against Greyfriars. So we found the telegram which was sent to you, and saw that the address on it was Wayland. Therefore, it must have been despatched by somebody locally—somebody who's got a grudge against you."

"You're sure the name was 'Wayland,' and not 'Rayland'?" said Mason.

"Proof positive!" chimed in Manners. "I scanned it carefully, and so did Kildare."

"Then you are right. It was a cad's trick!" said Mason hotly. "If I catch the rotter who wrote that wire, I'll—"

"Cut it short, Mason, old chap," said Monty Lowther. "The match is almost due to start now. You'd better borrow my jigger, and get up to the school as quick as you can. I'll follow on Shanks's ponies."

"Thanks!" said Mason gratefully.

A tremendous weight was lifted from the senior's mind now. His brother's wound was a myth, and his parents were safe and sound. At any time now, Lieutenant Mason's expected letter or telegram would reach the Head, and the Sixth-Former's name would be cleared.

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And Dick Mason pedalled cheerfully along beside Tom Merry and Manners, while his heart beat high with hope.

The long-looked-for opportunity of distinguishing himself on the cricket-field had arrived.

CHAPTER 9.

The Match with Greyfriars.

"HERE he is!"

"Good old Mason!"

"Just in time, old scout," said Kildare.

"The Greyfriars chaps are just going to open the innings."

To judge by the reception he was accorded, one would have imagined that Dick Mason was the star player of the team, instead of being merely an eleventh man.

"These kids only just got me in time," said Mason. "Fancy anyone being cad enough to send a spoo! telegram like that! It beats the band!"

"We'll have an investigation afterwards," said Kildare. "But that needn't worry us now. We've got all our work cut out to lick Greyfriars. They've brought over one of the hottest teams imaginable."

Fortunately, Mason was still in his cricket clothes, so no change was necessary. He merely slipped off his blazer, and took the field with the rest of the team, amid a storm of cheering.

Knox, meanwhile, had been loitering by the pavilion, in the hope that Kildare would call upon him to take the place of the absentee. When he saw Mason appear, in company with Tom Merry and Manners, his face turned almost green. Had the whole of his wretched plot been exposed?

But Mason had said no word to him, so he concluded that it must be all right. Nevertheless, his scheme had failed, and failed miserably. The money spent on the bogus telegram had been spent in vain. Someone must have smelt a rat, and brought Mason back, just when Knox was beginning to congratulate himself on the success of his plot.

That Tom Merry had played no small part in the matter Knox felt convinced, and his feelings towards the Shell fellow were the reverse of amiable; but Tom himself, as he walked over to a shady spot beneath the trees to greet Harry Wharton & Co., the Greyfriars juniors, was feeling particularly light-hearted. He felt that in stopping Mason from going to his home in Somersetshire he had done a good thing, and deserved well of his country.

Harry Wharton & Co. greeted the St. Jim's junior cordially. The relationship between the rival schools was of the friendliest character. Only a fortnight previously the two junior teams had met on the cricket ground, and a magnificent match had been hopelessly and completely wrecked by Grundy of the Shell and his Volunteer Corps. Since that time, George Alfred Grundy's organisation had been wrecked also.

"Who's going to win?" asked Harry Wharton cheerfully.

"No need to ask that," responded Tom Merry. "I'm glad you came over, for you're about to witness the complete annihilation of your little school. Kildare's a regular demon on a pitch like this, and he's simply thirsting for your gore!"

"It looks like it," said Wharton ruefully; for, at that moment, Wingate, the Greyfriars skipper, was clean bowled by the first ball of the game.

"That's nothing to whine about," said Bob Cherry, forcing a laugh. "Bad beginnings often mean good endings, you know!"

"Kildare's in great form with the ball," said Manners. "That one that beat Wingate was a regular scorcher! If I'm anything of a prophet, Greyfriars will be made to sing small before many hours are over!"

It looked as if Manners' surmise was correct, for the wickets of the visiting team fell like ninepins to the excellent bowling of Kildare and Darrel. Only 30 runs were registered on the board when the fifth wicket fell.

The fielding was such as would not have disgraced a County team. Every man was eager and alert, and Dick Mason, at cover-point, had brought off a couple of spanking catches.

Courtney and Walker put up a spirited last-wicket stand for Greyfriars; but, all the same, the total of 55 was a poor one, and Kildare was likely to exceed it off his own bat.

The St. Jim's innings opened in a lively fashion. The first pair of batsmen—Baker and Webb—were inclined to take risks, and fortune favoured them. Before they were separated 30 runs were on the board, and the spectators—barring the Greyfriars contingent—smiled broadly. They anticipated a complete walk-over.

But there was a lot to be admired about the Greyfriars players. They did not lose heart, but stuck to their guns manfully, their maxim being, apparently, that a game was not lost until it was won.

After Baker's dismissal a "rot" set in, and Kildare wisely postponed his own innings. He went in at a time when things looked very black, and, by dint of careful, painstaking batting, succeeded in adding considerably to the score.

The Greyfriars total was passed when eight wickets had fallen, and ultimately St. Jim's were all out for 70.

"Only 15 to the good!" growled Darrel. "We ought to have made hay of their bowling, after the cheap way we got them out!"

"There's such a thing," said Kildare, mopping his brow, "as a second innings. In that second innings we're going to make the fur fly. As it is, we've done remarkably well, and I see no reason to grumble. You're a giddy pessimist, Darrel!"

It had been arranged that the interval for tea should be held after the first innings of each side was completed. But as the first innings of both St. Jim's and Greyfriars had occupied little over an hour and a half, it was decided that the visitors should immediately start on their second "knock."

There was a grim expression on George Wingate's face as he took Courtney in to bat with him. Greyfriars had long enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most brilliant schoolboy sides in the country, and 55 was the worst score they had scraped together throughout the season. It was "up to" the Greyfriars team to see that the second venture eclipsed the first in every way.

Wingate's first hit was in the true Jessoian style. Catching the leather fair and square with the face of the bat, he sent it soaring to the pavilion for 6.

"Hurrah!"

"Good old Wingate!"

"Pile on the agony, old man!"

The Greyfriars juniors were jubilant. If Wingate went on in the way he had begun there would evidently be something to see and wonder at.

The visiting captain scored 14 runs off the first over, thus amply atoning for the duck's-egg he had previously made. Then he and Courtney settled down in real earnest, speedily becoming masters of bowling which would have sealed the fate of any ordinary team.

"This is great!" murmured Bob Cherry, stretching his long limbs in the long grass. "Bring hither the foaming ginger-pop, that I may gurgle away merrily while old Wingate smites!"

"They look as if they're going to stay in till Doomsday," remarked Monty Lowdler, who had returned on foot from the other side of Wayland. "There's no shifting the boundaries!"

Forty, fifty, sixty runs went up on the board, and Kildare's face was a study. He had tried almost every capable bowler in the team, but with no success. Wingate and Courtney seemed equal to playing anything and everything that came their way.

At last, in desperation, the ball was tossed to Mason, who had been very busy at cover-point. Mason's bowling was an unknown quantity at St. Jim's. No one had ever seen him bowl, and few had ever wanted to. Kildare and Darrel and Rushden had been considered quite good enough.

But there are occasions in the routine of public school life when a "dark horse" rises to the occasion. Mason

rose to the occasion now. He bowled slow leg-breaks, but there was something uncanny about them which quite unsettled Courtney, who was batting.

Mason's third ball had the desired effect. It seemed a decidedly simple thing to everyone who saw it—except Courtney. The Greyfriars senior made a hap-hazard forward stroke, missed completely, and the next moment the bails descended to the ground amid a delighted roar of cheering. At last the two Greyfriars giants had been separated!

Courtney gave Mason a queer look as he turned towards the pavilion. He stopped and exchanged a word with Valence, the next man in.

"They must have been mad not to put that chap on to bowl before this! He's a regular corker!"

Valence laughed.

"Precious sort of Job's comforter, you are!" he said. "The chap seems simple enough to play."

"Good luck!" said Courtney; and he sprang lightly up the pavilion steps, the score-board greeting him with the figures:

80. 1. 33.

Whether a collapse followed or not, the score could not be a complete "wash-out," he reflected. And George Wingate was still going great guns, too!

"This is what we used to call 'pulling the game out of the fire' in my young days," said Bob Cherry languidly, as he nibbled a blade of grass. "Your skipper's off his rocker, Merry! He's only just woke up to the fact that he's got a crack bowler in his team."

"Blessed if I knew Mason was such hot stuff!" said Tom, mystified.

"Bai Jove! He's what I call an eye-opener!" said D'Arcy, with enthusiasm. "It's his last term, and his last match, and he means to astonish the natives, dear boys!"

"He's doing it, too!" said Harry Wharton glumly. "There goes Valence's wicket! Duck's-eggs are cheap to-day!"

Good though Mason was, however, his partner at the other end was off-colour, and the runs mounted up. Wingate was in fine fettle. He saw visions of scoring the coveted century, and boundaries came profusely from his bat. When, half an hour later, the 150 went up, the Greyfriars juniors hugged each other for very joy.

"Pile up the munitions!" said Bob Cherry, with vague recollections of a war poster he had seen. "Ye gods! This is great!"

But even Wingate, good player though he was, could do little against Mason. Once or twice his wicket was only kept intact by the fluke of flukes, and Kildare, at mid-wicket, watched Mason with a curious gleam in his eyes. He was waiting for one of those innocent-looking leg-breaks to take effect.

And take effect it did. Wingate's score was 93, and he had high hopes of reaching his century, when he missed the ball badly, and swung round to survey his scattered stumps with an almost comical expression of dismay on his rugged face.

"Hurrah!"

"Well bowled, sir!"

"Good old Mason!"

The cheering was loud and prolonged. Dick Mason's star was certainly in the ascendant, and Knox, watching from the window of the pavilion, ground his teeth with silent rage. This was the man whose place he had so fervently wished to usurp; whom he had tried, by a caddish and cunning device, to get out of the way; and upon whose school career he had hoped to bring irretrievable ruin.

The Greyfriars innings flickered out feebly after Wingate's departure. Mason's good work, backed up by equally good fielding, caused the side to be dismissed for a total of 214. But 214—against a score of 55 in the first innings—was yeoman work; and the faces of Tom Merry & Co. grew unusually long as they realised that their seniors would have to make exactly two hundred runs to bring about the desired end—victory.

Kildare clapped Mason on the back as the players trooped off the field.

"You deserve an Iron Cross for valour!" he said.

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"You're great! No one else could shift Wingate & Co., and if I hadn't tried you as a last resource they'd have stuck there all day."

"Glad to do my bit," answered Mason cheerfully. A great load of anxiety was off his mind now that he knew his brother was safe.

"We've a long, long way to go to pull the game out of the fire," remarked Kildare.

His companion nodded.

"I shall be glad to have another whack," he said thoughtfully. "Didn't do so well in the first innings. Meanwhile, I'm going to refresh my inner man with the daintiest viands Dame Taggles can supply. Coming?"

And the two seniors strolled off to a shady spot beneath the trees, where tea for about thirty had been prepared for the rival teams.

CHAPTER 10.
The Last Hope!

KNOX of the Sixth, his hands thrust deeply into his trousers pockets, paced moodily up and down outside the pavilion. He was feeling mad with himself, and with mankind in general.

Here was Mason, his sworn enemy, doing great deeds on the cricket-field. To look at his ruddy face, as he sat down at the refreshment table, one would never imagine that the shadow of expulsion hung over his head. The secret of it was, of course, that Dick Mason's conscience was clear. He had regained his faith and hope, and possessed an inborn feeling that right would triumph.

With Knox, however, things were different. He was being kept in an agony of suspense, for the lieutenant's long-delayed letter might arrive at any moment, and St. Jim's would lift an accusing finger upon him. It was just possible, however, that Lieutenant Mason would not state in his letter the name of the senior with whom he had played cards at the Green Man; and in this case Knox might steer clear of suspicion.

How was it all going to end? On two separate and distinct occasions, the unscrupulous prefect had plotted to get Mason out of the way. Each time he had failed at the eleventh hour!

The thought of Mason piling up a goodly number of runs, and then being hero-worshipped and idolised by his schoolfellows was more than Knox could bear. It would cause his cup of chagrin to overflow completely.

Was there no chance of thwarting him even now, on the verge of his success? Knox threw himself down on one of the seats, and resigned himself to hard thinking.

After a time he rose. There was only one way—a desperate and a dangerous one—but it was Knox's last card.

"I'll do it!" he muttered fiercely. "And if I'm bowled out, I must face it. It's a case of sink or swim this time."

The cricketers were still at tea, and the school building was likely to be deserted. At least, the Shell corridor was almost certain to be. Knox wended his way in that direction, and paused on reaching the study which Talbot shared with Gore and Skimpole.

Softly turning the handle of the door, Knox entered the room with noiseless tread. Hanging up in the cupboard was a cricket blazer belonging to Talbot. Knox gave an exclamation of satisfaction as, fumbling in the inside pocket, his fingers closed on a letter.

He drew it out and examined it. It had arrived for Talbot early that afternoon, and was from Jim Rivers, the ex-cracksman, who had discarded his tools and gone forth to Flanders to fight for a cause as honourable as his previous calling had been dishonourable. Talbot had not been in when the letter arrived, and it had, therefore, been placed, unopened, in the pocket of his blazer. By good fortune, Knox had seen Toby the page do this.

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The envelope was headed "On Active Service," and addressed to Reginald Talbot, St. James's School, Rylcombe, Sussex.

"A lucky find!" muttered Knox, his eyes gleaming. "Don't suppose he'll miss this letter— Oh, hang!"

He broke off suddenly as a footstep sounded in the corridor without. Then the door of the study was thrown open, and Levison of the Fourth looked in.

Knox gave a guilty start and thrust Talbot's letter quickly into his pocket. But he was not too quick for the cad of the Fourth. Levison noted the action, and smiled a curious smile.

But Knox recovered himself in an instant.

"Hallo, kid!" he said, affecting to be genial. "Seen anything of Gore? I've been hunting for him all over the show."

"He's watching the match," said Levison. "You'll find him under the trees with the rest of the fellows."

Knox nodded, and quitted the study. Levison glanced grimly at his retreating figure.

"He was no more looking for Gore than for the man in the moon!" he muttered to himself. "There's something fishy going on, or I'll eat my hat!"

Knox made sure that he was not being followed by the Paul Pry of the Fourth, and proceeded to his study in the Sixth-Form passage.

Arrived here, he locked the door, and took a soft eraser from his cupboard. Luckily, John Rivers, being without such useful articles as pen and ink, had been compelled to use lead-pencil wherewith to address the envelope; and it was therefore only necessary for Knox to rub out the name "Reginald Talbot." Then, by substituting Dr. Holmes's name, the prefect made it appear that the communication had come to the Head direct from the front.

Knox then lit the gas-stove in his study, and steamed open the envelope. He took out Talbot's letter, and tore it up into a hundred pieces; then he secured a clean piece of notepaper, and carefully wrote out a letter, addressing it to the Head of St. Jim's, and taking care that the handwriting matched that on the envelope.

This done, he placed the bogus letter in the envelope, and it looked, to all intents and purposes, as if it had arrived, fresh from the front, for the respected Head of St. Jim's.

"He don't know Lieutenant Mason's fist," muttered Knox, "so it ought to work. If it doesn't, I shan't whine. I'm playing my last card."

He quitted the study, and took a turn in the quadrangle, waiting till the postman came with the afternoon delivery.

He had not very long to wait. Five minutes later the antique postman came puffing in at the school gates.

"Good-afternoon!" said Knox. "Anything for me?"

"Master Knox, sir? I'm not sure. Just a minute, sir, and I'll look."

He rummaged about in his bag, and Knox made a pretence of helping him. In the prefect's hand was the fatal letter, which he contrived, when the postman's eyes were diverted, to place with the others.

"No, there's nothing," he said, in tones of disappointment. "Better luck next time, I suppose."

"P'r'aps so, sir. There's another delivery at six."

His work accomplished, Knox strolled back to the cricket-ground. No one noticed his sudden appearance. All eyes were for the game, which was progressing merrily.

Kildare and Darrel had started on the St. Jim's second innings. They meant to amass a goodly portion of the 200 runs required before they were parted. So far 12 had been obtained by diligent batting.

Dick Mason sat on a seat in front of the pavilion, buckling on his pads with a radiant expression on his face, and unaware that the venomous eyes of Knox

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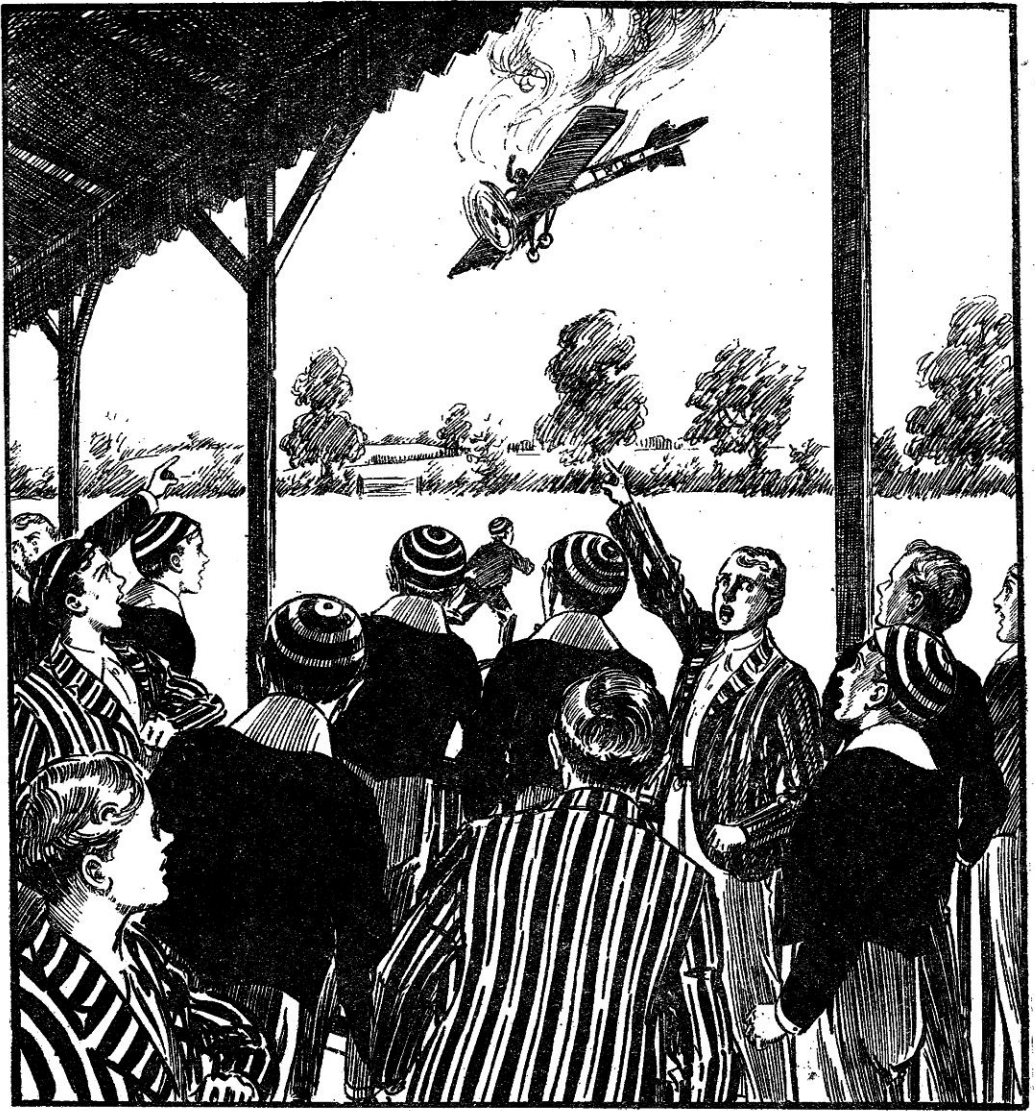
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A universal shout arose—a shout of alarm from all who gazed upon the scene. As the aeroplane descended to earth it burst suddenly into flames! "Good heavens!" panted Kildare. (See Chapter 11.)

were upon him. Kildare had ordained that he should go in at the fall of the first wicket, and Mason had a great feeling within himself that he was going to do great things. He was in form, and he knew it.

Knox turned his attention to the game. He fervently hoped that Kildare and Darrel would continue to keep their wickets intact until the Head discovered the letter he had written. It did not suit his book at all that Mason should go in and put together about 50 runs before the blow fell.

The Greyfriars bowling was brilliant, and Kildare and his partner found it hard work to stick together. However, they had scored 30 runs when Courtney, with a sharp, swift ball, dislodged Darrel's bails.

Dick Mason stood up, a handsome figure in his spotless flannels. Tom Merry & Co. accorded him a loyal shout, and he braced himself up for the innings which was to be his last at the old school.

"Play up, old man!" said Darrel cordially as he passed. "I'll do my best," rejoined Mason, with a nod.

He proceeded to the wicket, and asked the umpire to give him his guard.

"Centre!"

Mason patted the turf, and stood ready. The bowler was just beginning to run, when an imposing figure, in cap and gown, rustled on to the pitch. It was the Head!

"Stop!" commanded Dr. Holmes, in his deep, strong voice. "Mason, come here!"

CHAPTER 11.
The Shadow of Expulsion.

DICK MASON gave a start, and swung round. So sudden was the interruption that he gazed at the Head like a fellow in a dream.

"You—you want me, sir?" he stammered.
"Yes," replied the Head grimly. "You had better accompany me to my study at once. You, too, Kildare. I have no wish to cause a scene before these Greyfriars boys."

Greatly wondering, Kildare and Mason laid down their bats and walked off the pitch with the Head. Wingate of Greyfriars stepped up to them.

"Excuse me," he said, "but are you likely to be long?"
"I will not keep them a moment—Kildare, at any rate," replied Dr. Holmes.

And the trio proceeded to the Head's study.
"Well, I'm blowed!" gasped Bob Cherry. "This beats the giddy band! What on earth's happened?"

"Ask me another," said Tom Merry. "Something's very much up, that's certain."

The St. Jim's juniors had, in the excitement of the cricket match, forgotten that possibly Lieutenant Mason's expected letter had arrived. They could not understand the Head's dramatic interruption of an equally dramatic game.

Meanwhile, Dr. Holmes and the two seniors had reached the study. The Head then turned sharply upon Mason.

"I am very sorry, Mason," he said, "that you have seen fit to impose upon me to such a glaring and wicked extent."

"I, sir?" gasped Mason bewilderedly.
"Yes, yes! You need not feign ignorance on the subject. What you said to me the other day concerning a meeting with your soldier brother in Rylcombe was nothing more or less than a pack of lies!"

"Sir!"
"Denial is useless," pursued the Head. "I have here a letter from Lieutenant Mason, which proves beyond all question that you neither met nor saw him on the night in question."

Mason's face went very white. Why had Gerald made such a gross misstatement to the Head of St. Jim's? Why hadn't he told the truth, and admitted meeting his brother in the High Street of Rylcombe?

Kildare, too, was thunderstruck. He had believed in Mason from the outset. His faith in his chum had been strong, founded as upon a rock. He did not waver now, even in the face of that accusing letter, but it was strange—very strange.

"I don't understand it, sir," quavered Mason. "My brother must have been dreaming when he wrote and told you this, or else—" He paused, and a gleam came into his eyes. "May I see the letter, sir?"

"It is here," said Dr. Holmes, holding it up.
The two seniors glanced over the fatal missive. It read:

"Dear Dr. Holmes,—Your letter surprised me very much. I certainly had no appointment to meet my brother Richard in Rylcombe on the night you mention. Indeed, I have been at the front for six months without any period of leave whatsoever. I sincerely trust there is nothing amiss.—Yours respectfully,
"GERALD MASON (Lieutenant)."

Dick Mason sprang back, his hands tightly clenched. All his old spirit was revived in him now.

"That, sir," he cried hotly, "is not my brother's handwriting!"

The Head looked at him coldly.
"It is of no use, Mason, to endeavour to conceal your guilt any further. I am surprised that you should seek to brazen the matter out after such damning evidence of your guilt. You will go at once to the sanatorium, and

leave this school by the eight o'clock train this evening. I will notify your father of your expulsion at once."

"But I am innocent!" panted Mason, gazing wildly round the room. "This is some trick—some scheming, caddish trick to ruin me!"

"I have heard all this before," said the Head. "Your protests of innocence will not move me from my determination to rid the school of such a character as yourself. You may congratulate yourself on the fact that, but for the publicity such a proceeding would cause, I have not handed you over to the police. Your assault on Constable Crump was a dastardly piece of work, which merits condign punishment, to say nothing of the exhibition you made of yourself in the Green Man. Not another word! You will leave this school in disgrace!"

Dr. Holmes drew out a telegraph-form from a drawer of his desk, and proceeded to write.

"One moment, sir," put in Kildare. "This is a grave miscarriage of justice. You have been imposed upon by some scoundrel. I can't quite explain things, but I'll stake my life that Mason is innocent!"

"Thanks, old man," murmured Mason huskily.
"Kildare!" thundered the Head. "How dare you intercede for this wretched boy?"

"I know Mason is a thoroughly decent chap, sir," said Kildare stoutly.

"And I am convinced otherwise," said Dr. Holmes. "Seldom have I had to deal with such an incorrigible rascal. I shall expect an apology later on for the words you have uttered, Kildare, or you will be asked to resign your post as captain of the school."

"I can never apologise for words spoken in all sincerity, sir!" answered Kildare grimly.

"Very well. We will see about that later on. And now, Mason, you will accompany me to the sanatorium."

Realising the futility of further speech, Dick Mason submitted. Dr. Holmes and Kildare went with him to the sanatorium, where he was ordered to occupy the deserted room.

"You will remain there until the allotted time this evening," said the Head, "when I will send for you."

"Keep a stiff upper lip, Dick," whispered Kildare. "Something might turn up yet, you know. I'll tell you this much. If you're sacked, then I'm jolly well coming, too!"

"You're a brick!" said Mason gratefully. "Go and carry on with your innings. You'll whack Greyfriars without my help, I expect."

"I guess this affair'll put me off my game," said Kildare glumly. "How can a chap put his heart and soul into cricket when his chum's under a cloud, like you are?"

"Never mind me. You must do your best, old chap. Play a substitute, if they'll let you."

At that moment the Head called sharply from without, and Kildare gripped his chum's hand tightly and withdrew. Dr. Holmes carefully locked the door.

"Mason can count himself lucky that his is to be a private expulsion," he said.

Kildare did not reply. He was feeling so bitter just then that, had he spoken, his words would not have been tempered with that measure of respect which is a Headmaster's due.

The captain of St. Jim's strode out into the fresh air again, and on to the cricket ground. Knox encountered him on his way.

"What's happened to Mason?" he asked.
"I don't think you need telling," said Kildare, with a hard look.

Knox started for a moment, but soon recovered himself. "Blessed if I know why he's disappeared all of a sudden!" he said. "You'll want a substitute, I suppose? If so, I'm your man!"

Kildare looked at him grimly.
"You're a bit premature, aren't you?" he said. "Look here! This is straight from the shoulder! You're a rotten cad, and I wouldn't be found dead in any team of which you were a member!"

And, with this Partisan shot, Eric Kildare passed on, beckoning to Langton of the Sixth to go out with him and continue the innings.

ANSWERS

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CHAPTER 12.
At the Eleventh Hour.

THE sensation attendant upon Dick Mason's sudden departure from the field of play soon died down, most of the spectators concluding that the Sixth-Former had received an urgent summons from a relative, or something of that sort. The extremely interesting position in which the game stood riveted everyone's attention, and Kildare and Langton were the cynosure of all eyes as they stood at the wickets.

Wingate had generously offered Kildare the services of a substitute, but the home captain politely declined. Kildare was feeling irritated and upset. He could not help thinking of his chum who was "down," and the thought put him off his game.

The first ball after the resumption almost brought about the captain's downfall. It missed his off-stump by a hair's-breadth.

At the second ball, Kildare scooped up what would have been an easy catch had a fieldsman been in the vicinity. Fortunately, however, there wasn't.

The St. Jim's juniors, who were looking on, were not slow to voice their disapproval.

"I say, this is rotten!" grunted Manners. "Kildare's shockingly off colour!"

"And only 30 on the board, so far," added Tom Merry. "That interruption's unsettled Kildare. What did the Head want to come and put his oar in for, just when the chap was getting set?"

"It beats me altogether," said Jack Blake. "Oh, my hat! Carry me home to die, somebody!"

For, at that moment, Kildare's middle stump was uprooted by one of Courtney's fastest.

The captain of St. Jim's strode back to the pavilion, his brow as black as thunder. It was not often that Kildare allowed his equilibrium to be upset during an important cricket match, but he had done so now.

Why had all this trouble come about at so unfortunate a moment? But for the sorry plight of Mason, Kildare could have put up ten times better a show. Like the brook, he felt that he could have gone on for ever against the Greyfriars bowling.

But since the Head's interference everything had gone wrong. His usually keen, clear eye had failed him. Through a sort of mist, he had seen his chum, Dick Mason, awaiting expulsion in the sanatorium.

Courtney's third ball had settled the trick. Kildare was out with the score at 30, and two wickets were down. It was inconceivable that, with the giant of the side dismissed, the rest of the team would amass the necessary 170 runs.

"Hard cheese!" said Baker, consolingly, as Kildare dumped his bat down savagely on to the floor of the pavilion. "Don't look so down in the mouth, old man! We all have our off days!"

Kildare grunted.
"Do something, for goodness' sake!" he muttered.
Baker selected a supple-looking Willow King, and went forth with an expression on his face such as a knight of old might have envied. He meant to do something, and he did! He caused a terrific sensation by letting Courtney's next ball bowl him all over his wicket.

"Hurrah!" came in a tremendous roar from the Greyfriars multitude. "Good old Courtney! Bravo!"

Courtney grinned, and gripped the ball harder. It seemed very much as if Greyfriars was "top dog" now, and the knowledge was very comforting to the enterprising fieldsmen.

Man after man came in, padded and gloved, and looking capable of mighty things. Each took guard with a grim expression on his face; but against the deadly bowling of Courtney they did little. Most of them had the mortification of seeing their stumps spread-eagled.

Six wickets down, and only 50 runs on the board! It was a wretched predicament, and the St. Jim's spectators had long since given up hope.

Just as the next man was about to buckle on his pads, Dr. Holmes again made his appearance. He had a letter in his hand, and was looking considerably amazed.

"Kildare!"
"Sir?"

"I should like to speak with you a moment."

Kildare detached himself from the railings which skirted the ground, and advanced respectfully.

"This is a most extraordinary and bewildering affair," said the Head. "I have sentenced Mason to expulsion on the strength of the letter I received early this afternoon, and now another letter has arrived."

Kildare glanced at the envelope. It had been expressed from the military depot at Calais.

"This is from Lieutenant Mason, sir?" he exclaimed eagerly.

It is certainly signed by him, as was the previous letter," said the Head. "Kindly read it through, my boy, and give me your opinion."

Kildare took out the letter, and read it. It ran thus:

"Dear Dr. Holmes,—In reply to your letter, I certainly arranged to meet my brother in Rylcombe on the night you specified.

"Please do not attach any blame to Richard for breaking out of the school to meet me, as I earnestly entreated him to come and see me before I departed again for the front.

"As to your query concerning the Green Man, I give you my word of honour, as an officer and a gentleman, that my brother did not enter the place at all.

"Some delay was occasioned in the delivery of your letter, which I am replying to at the earliest possible moment.—Believe me, dear sir, your former affectionate scholar,

"GERALD MASON (Lieutenant)."

Kildare gave vent to a shout of unrestrained joy.

"This clinches it, sir!" he exclaimed. "No one could say Dick Mason was guilty after this! The letter's from Lieutenant Mason right enough, and the other must have been written by an impostor!"

"It is beyond my comprehension entirely," said the Head. "I hardly know how to act. The other letter came from France, too! How could an impostor work off such a cunning deception?"

Kildare ran his fingers through his brown, curly hair. "I give it up, sir," he said. "Anyway, this is the lieutenant's handwriting! I'd swear to it!"

Dr. Holmes produced the former letter, and glanced at it keenly. Then he gave a start.

"Is it possible," he exclaimed, "that there has been an erasure on this envelope?"

Kildare took the letter, and held it up to the sun. "It's more than possible, sir," he said, in tones of excitement. "It's an actual fact. Someone's name was rubbed out before yours was inserted."

The Head called to Mr. Railton, who was passing. "Railton," he said, "there is some mystery here; something I quite fail to understand."

And he proceeded to recount how he had received two letters, each purporting to come from France.

"I have the two epistles here," said Dr. Holmes. "The false and the true. Will you glance through them, and tell me which has the truest ring of sincerity in it?"

Mr. Railton, with a grave face, looked first of all at the two envelopes. One glance was sufficient.

"This," he said, indicating the letter which the Head had received first, "is the handwriting of John Rivers."

"What!"

"I am certain of the fact," pursued Mr. Railton, taking a note from his pocket. "Only yesterday I heard from him myself. We always correspond, as I have more than a passing interest in his welfare. There! Did I not tell you? The handwriting on the two envelopes is alike in every detail."

"Bless my soul! Then—then what can have happened?" stammered the Head.

A gleam of intelligence came into Mr. Railton's eyes. "It is perfectly obvious, to my mind," he said. "The letter you received early this afternoon has been wilfully forged. I have no doubt that the envelope was addressed, in the first place, to Talbot, for he also corresponds with John Rivers. Someone must have intercepted Talbot's letter, steamed it open, and substituted the bogus message, at the same time changing the name on the envelope."

The Head stared at his subordinate in amazement.

"Do you mean to tell me, Mr. Railton," he exclaimed, "that this school harbours a boy so utterly cunning and unscrupulous as to do such a thing as you suggest?"

"Undoubtedly," answered Mr. Railton gravely. "It is the only possible conclusion one can come to."

"You think, then, that Mason is innocent of the charge laid against him?"

"He is as innocent as I am. There can be no room for doubt on the matter."

"Then who can be the culprit?" asked the Head helplessly. "Some other senior boy must have gone into Rylcombe on the same night, and been responsible for the attack on P.-c. Crump; and that same boy must, I take it, be guilty of forging this letter."

"That is evident," said Mr. Railton. "With regard to the culprit's identity, I am as much in the dark as you are. The best plan would be to hold a public inquiry this evening. In the meantime, Mason, who was taking part in this match should be liberated."

"Quite so," said the Head. "How very unfortunate that I have wired the boy's father to say he is coming home! Still, I will write this evening to explain matters. Thank you, Mr. Railton, for your assistance in solving this mystery. Kildare, I must express my regret for the way I spoke to you in my study a short time ago. It seems that your faith in Mason has not been misplaced."

"That's all right, sir," said Kildare cheerfully. "I know things looked jolly black against Mason. His brother's letter has only just come in the nick of time. Can I go and tell him he is free, sir?"

"With pleasure!" said Dr. Holmes. "I hope his absence has not militated against the success of the cricket-match."

Kildare gave a wry smile. His own performance had been absolutely ruined because of Mason's absence; but the Sixth-Former did not say as much to the Head.

He raced off to the sanatorium, unlocked the door, and burst into the room, giving Mason a clap on the back which made him roar.

"Old man, you're cleared!" he exclaimed joyfully, extending his hand. "Put it there! I said you were true blue all along. Come on and have your innings. We're down for 50, and booked for a tremendous licking, but it don't matter. You're cleared. See? Hurrah!"

And Kildare, as excited as a fag in the Third, fairly waltzed Mason out of the sanatorium and towards Big Side.

CHAPTER 13. Mason's Great Game.

"HURRAH!"

"Here he comes!"

"The conquering hero, by gad!"

The St. Jim's juniors greeted Mason with a tremendous cheer. They had been talking over the matter of his mysterious disappearance, and although they did not know the true facts of the case, they could tell by Kildare's radiant face that all was well.

The game had been suspended while the Head had conversed with the St. Jim's skipper, and Wingate grinned as Kildare came up to him.

"We seem to be playing this game piecemeal," he said. "Five minutes play, and then your Head stalks on to the pitch; another five minutes, and he turns up again, like Micawber. At this rate, we sha'n't lick you at all, and shall have to put up with a mouldy draw!"

"I'll guarantee there will be no further interruptions," laughed Kildare. "So you can go ahead with the slaughtering. Mason, old man, you'd better go in next. There's only about 150 runs wanted to wipe off the arrears. Keep your wicket up, Langton, and let Mason do the slogging—if any."

It was in truth a forlorn hope. Wingate and Courtney were bowlers of no mean order; and six valuable St. Jim's wickets were down. But Dick Mason felt an almost supernatural power within him. Trouble was banished from his mind; all things were made clear;

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and the innings to which he had looked forward so eagerly for weeks was before him.

He took no risks at first, but played himself in carefully. Then, having mastered the bowling, he smote with the strength of a Samson. There were no flukes about his batting. Every hit was hard and true, and the fellows responsible for registering the score on the board were kept very busy.

Langton had gone in to bat with a careless air, indifferent as to whether he got out in five minutes or fifty. But when he saw his partner making hay of the bowling, he pulled himself together, and devoted all his attention to keeping his wicket intact.

In a little over half an hour the hundred went up, and Eric Kildare began to brighten up perceptibly. Was it possible that, despite the gigantic number of runs required to win, Mason and his partners would do the necessary?

It seemed impossible. It was the sort of thing one read in the cheaper class of story-paper, where the blushing hero went in as last man and wiped off a deficit of about 200 runs off his own bat.

But Mason was spurred on by several factors. First and foremost, he was free from the ban of wretched suspicion; secondly, this was his last term and his last match; and thirdly, the Greyfriars fellows, confident of victory, had eased off in their play, with the result that the fielding was not all that it should have been.

The score was 120 when Langton was cleverly caught in the long-field by Walker. He had scored 25—not a large score, it was true—but under the circumstances it was yeoman service. The crowd cheered Langton to the echo.

Webb went on to bat next, and, unlike Langton, he hit out vigorously. Kildare had pointed out to him that the light would give out shortly, and it was to be a case of win or lose. St. Jim's were far too sportsman-like a side to dwindle the game out to a draw.

At the fall of Webb's wicket, 165 runs had been scored, leaving the home team within 35 runs of victory. But there were only two players to bat now—Dudley of the School House and Monteith of the New House.

Kildare wisely sent in Dudley first, for he knew Monteith to be the slightly better bat of the two, though both were hardly reliable.

"Play like the very dickens!" he urged, handing Dudley his bat.

Dudley did his best. He hit out furiously, and rather indiscreetly, at Wingate's bowling, and scored two 4's and a 2 in rapid succession. But the last ball—a yorker—beat the batsman completely, and his wicket went down to the accompaniment of groans from Tom Merry & Co., and cheers from Harry Wharton & Co.

Figgins & Co., of the New House, rose as one man when Monteith, who was in last, strode out to the wicket. If Monteith failed, it would certainly not be for want of encouragement from the juniors of his House.

The New House prefect carefully blocked the remaining two balls of Wingate's over. Then Mason, fit and fresh, and still going strong, stood up to Courtney.

He timed each stroke with wonderful precision, and sent three balls of the over humming to the boundary. The remaining three were too good to hit, and Mason left them alone. They were each just away from the off-stump, and he had no wish to offer a series of simple catches to point.

Thirteen runs were wanted now, and Mason's individual score was 94. Six more runs, and his would be a feat rarely seen, in senior matches. He would have scored the coveted century!

It was a moot question whether Monteith would survive Courtney's bowling. The only thing certain about Monteith's play was its uncertainty. However, he contrived to cut the first ball to point, and Mason pelted down the pitch.

He was only just in time to avoid being run out, and the St. Jim's spectators, who had their hearts in their mouths, so to speak, breathed freely again.

The second ball of the over Mason tapped back to the bowler. At the third he squared his shoulders, and brought off a tremendous hit, the ball crashing on to the roof of the pavilion.

A wild storm of cheering burst forth. Dick Mason, going in at a time when things looked hopelessly black, had scored a century! And St. Jim's were within 6 runs of victory.

Only one person failed to join in the general applause. It was Knox of the Sixth. Humiliated beyond measure, his cunning schemes completely dashed to the ground, the mind of the wretched senior was in a torment. He had taken himself away from the crowd, and was laying at full length in the long grass at the lower boundary of the field.

And here was Mason, his rival, idolised and hero-worshipped by all—St. Jim's and Greyfriars' fellows alike! It was a bitter pill to swallow, and Knox felt utterly sick—sick with himself and with everyone else.

He realised, too, that Mason's name had been cleared. The lieutenant must have written, and his own letter had been proved a deception. True, Knox himself might not have been bowled out yet, but there was bound to be an inquiry sooner or later; and, with all his cunning, with all his powers of fabrication, the prefect felt he would not be able to fight shy of justice.

But no one had a thought for the unhappy senior at that moment. All eyes were glued on Mason, upon whose shoulders had hung the responsibility of pulling the game out of the fire.

Courtney sent down the best ball he knew, and Mason stopped it short with a grim smile. The next ball was equally difficult to play, but the next— Dick Mason was likely to remember the next for many a year to come. It was a half-volley—a perfect beauty to hit, and Mason lunged out, lifting the leather hard and high right over the railings!

The match was over. After all their troubles, all their disappointments, all their interruptions, St. Jim's had beaten Greyfriars First by one wicket!

Dick Mason was conscious that a swarm of excited fellows were closing in upon him from all sides. He heard Kildare's voice exclaim: "Ripping, old man—ripping!" and the next moment he felt himself being lifted shoulder-high, and rushed off to the pavilion in frenzied triumph.

Richard Vernon Mason had written a record on the St. Jim's scroll of honour which could never be wiped out!

CHAPTER 14.

Not All Bad.

EVERYONE shared in the proceedings of congratulating Mason—everyone, that is to say, barring Knox. The Greyfriars cricketers lent a hand in hoisting the hero up in triumph, and even the smallest rag contrived to worm his way into the thick of the procession and get in a thump on the back or a "Well played, Mason!"

And it was not by the fellows alone that Mason was applauded. Marie Rivers, who had turned out to see the conclusion of the match, insisted on shaking hands with the blushing hero.

When the excited crowd reached the pavilion, the buzzing of an aeroplane was heard in the distance.

Gradually the sound drew nearer, until the machine—one of the Sopwith type—hovered over the cricket-ground.

The fellows noticed it, but took no particular heed. It was not an uncommon sight for an aeroplane to be seen in Sussex, especially as the country was at war.

But when the machine began to descend at a rapid rate, the fellows began to be interested.

"Wonder who the Johnny is?" observed Monty Lowther. "My hat! He's coming down with a run, anyway. He's a chap with tons of nerve!"

"He's in difficulties, perhaps," said Tom Merry. Then a universal shout arose—a shout of alarm from everyone who gazed on the scene.

No sooner did the aeroplane come to earth than it burst into flames.

"Good heavens!" panted Kildare. "The pilot'll be burnt to death! Come on!"

And a crowd of white-faced fellows dashed across the cricket-ground, at the lower end of which the catastrophe had taken place.

But they knew in their hearts that they would be too late to render assistance. The pilot was probably strapped to his seat, and seemed to be literally enveloped in flames.

Then a figure sprang up, apparently from nowhere, and dashed, without hesitation, into the flaming wreck of the aeroplane.

"The fool!" hissed Kildare. "The mad fool! He'll be reduced to ashes!"

By the time the crowd reached the spot, the would-be rescuer was hard at work unstrapping the pilot, who presently came staggering out of the burning debris.

Mason of the Sixth gazed at him blankly for a moment, and then rushed forward.

"Pater!" he gasped incoherently. "Thank Heaven you're safe!"

"But the boy!" exclaimed Mr. Mason, in agitated tones. "The boy who came to my aid! Can nothing be done to save him?"

The rescuer had apparently been rendered unconscious by the fumes, for seconds passed, and he did not appear.

But, in the meantime, the Terrible Three had not been inactive. They came swiftly upon the scene with a fire-hose, and turned it full upon the wrecked machine. Spluttering and crackling, the flames died down, and Kildare and Darrel dashed into the debris, to return a second or two later, dragging with them an unconscious figure.

Gently they laid the plucky rescuer on the grass, and their faces were grave, for they feared the worst.

A sharp cry of amazement burst from the assembled throng:

"KNOX!"

It was, indeed, Knox the prefect who lay there, still as death itself. He had seen the descending aeroplane, been close at hand when its petrol-tank had caught fire, and something of his better self had prompted him to do what he could for the hapless pilot. And, apart from this, the prefect had felt so utterly reckless, owing to the desperate plight into which he had brought himself, that he would readily have faced death in a thousand forms at that moment.

The prefect's clothes and hair were singed, and several nasty burns showed on his face and on his left hand. Fortunately, however, he had not been in the thickest of the flames, or a terrible death would most assuredly have fallen to his lot.

"I fancy he's all right," said Mr. Mason, after an anxious examination. "The fumes are responsible for his present condition. Some of you had better get him along to the sanatorium at once."

Kildare and one or two others raised the unconscious prefect, and carried him from the field. Then Mr. Mason turned to his son, the rest of the fellows, knowing they wished to be alone, discreetly withdrawing.

"Dick, my boy," said Mr. Mason, "what have you done?"

For a moment the senior was bewildered.

"What do you mean, dad?" he stammered.

"Why, an hour or two ago I received a wire from Dr. Holmes, stating that you were to be expelled from the school."

Dick Mason laughed—he could afford to laugh now.

"It is all a mistake," he explained. "Some fellow had been pub-haunting, and laying out policemen, and goodness knows what; and as I was in Rylcombe on the night it happened, suspicion fell upon me. It was only late this afternoon that the true facts of the case came to light."

Mr. Mason looked greatly relieved.

"I am more glad than I can say, Dick," he remarked, "that everything is all right. The Headmaster's wire gave me a beastly shock. It would have caused me great pain to know that you had disgraced yourself during your last term here. So alarmed did I feel at the Head's message that I came along at once in my machine. You knew I possessed one, of course?"

"Yes, dad. It's for patrol work on the coast—what?"

"I'm afraid its days of patrol work are over," said Mr. Mason grimly, as he glanced at the terrible wreck. "However, I shall not be out of pocket over this calamity. The War Office will make good the damage."

"What a blessing you came through all right!" said

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Mason, with a deep breath. "Knox is a giddy, gilt-edged hero!"

"There can be no two minds about that. The poor lad came within an ace of losing his own life to save that of another. Still, he will progress favourably, I have no doubt, though the burns will be very painful." "You are hurt yourself, dad!" said the senior. "Look at your hands and wrists!"

"Pooh! That's nothing to make a song about, my boy. There are some hundreds of poor chaps out in Flanders who are in a far worse condition than this."

"God bless 'em!" said Mason solemnly. "Ay, it's a cruel war. I'm afraid there must be a tremendous sacrifice of brave souls before Germany is brought into subjection. But one fact remains, and we must be jolly thankful for it, if for nothing else. Britain will come out on top."

Mason nodded. "And now, pater, you'd better have those hands bound up. Come along to the sunny, and Miss Rivers will see to you. We can find out how Knox is getting on at the same time. By Jove! Fancy Knox doing the heroic bizny like that! You could have knocked me down with a feather!"

Mr. Mason looked at his son sharply. "Was there any reason to suppose that the boy was an unmanly coward?"

Mason looked grave. "I hate to say it," he said awkwardly, "but, as a matter of fact, Knox has never been suspected of having any virtues at all. He's been a regular black sheep. To tell you the truth, dad, it's practically certain that he was the chap concerned in the Rylcombe affair I told you about. Not only that, but he was responsible for shifting the blame on to my shoulders."

Mason's father appeared incredulous. "But why in the world should he want to do that?" he demanded. "Surely he bore you no malice?" "I was preferred to him in the school cricket team," explained Mason.

"H'm! Do you think," asked Mr. Mason thoughtfully, "that his offence in the village will be brought home to him?" "The Head's determined to lay the culprit by the heels."

"Then I shall intercede for the boy, tooth and nail," said Mr. Mason firmly. "Granted that his past record is anything but a clean one, and that he did his level best to land you into trouble, yet he has shown quite a different and nobler side of his nature this afternoon." "That's so," responded Mason. "He certainly ought to be let down lightly, after going through fire and flame like he did."

And father and son quitted the spot which had almost witnessed so terrible a tragedy, and made their way to the sanatorium.

CHAPTER 15.

The Clouds Roll By.

MR. MASON'S rescuer lay prone upon one of the beds in the sanatorium, with Marie Rivers and the local doctor in close attendance.

Knox's plight was not serious. His burns, however, were, as Mr. Mason had predicted, very painful; and not until they had received treatment at the skilled hands of Marie Rivers and the practitioner did the pain abate.

Dr. Holmes, who had been informed of the catastrophe by Kildare, was the first to visit the sanatorium. The kindly old gentleman had been deeply moved by Kildare's graphic account of Knox's bravery, and he extended his hand at once to the injured senior.

Greatly to the Head's surprise, Knox did not take it. "I'm not worth it, sir," he said, with a tremor in his voice. "I'm a cad and a rank outsider!"

"Hush! My dear boy, you do not know what you are saying!"

"I do, and I mean it!" retorted Knox. "Don't you know all about it, sir? Hasn't it all come to light?"

The Head stared at Knox in amazement. He thought THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 398.

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for the moment that the prefect was in a state of raving delirium.

"Your gallantry has come to light, if that is what you mean," he said kindly.

"No, no! I wasn't referring to that, sir. I mean, about—about Mason."

"Oh! Mason's name has been cleared, much to my satisfaction and surprise. I am assured now that he was in no way connected with that disgraceful affair the other evening."

"And you don't know who the culprit was, sir?" asked Knox.

"At present, no. But I shall leave no stone unturned to discover his identity."

"You needn't trouble, sir," said Knox bitterly. "He is here."

"Knox!" "I am the guilty party, sir," said the prefect. "I should like to tell you the whole wretched story."

Dr. Holmes motioned the doctor and nurse from the room, and took a seat by the patient's bedside.

"Go on," he said gently.

"It was I who struck Crump the other night in Rylcombe, sir. I had just come out of the Green Man, and he went for me. Fearing detection, I landed out at him, and ran back to the school as fast as my legs could carry me."

The Head listened gravely.

"But I did something far worse than that, sir," Knox went on. "It would all have come out, sooner or later, so there's nothing to be gained by hiding it from you. I was jealous—terribly jealous—because Kildare had put Mason in the team and not myself. I determined to prevent Mason from playing, somehow."

"You astonish me, Knox!"

"You will be astonished still more, sir, when I've told you everything. As you know, I tried to represent to you, at the inquiry in Big Hall, that Mason was the guilty party. My ruse almost succeeded, too, but you agreed to get information from Mason's brother before expelling him. Realising that Mason would play in the match all the same, I faked a telegram to say that his people were very distressed because the lieutenant had been wounded, and that he was to go home at once. Merry and some other juniors frustrated that scheme, however."

"Not content with the part I had played already, I wrote a bogus letter to you, in Lieutenant Mason's name, making things look more black against Mason than ever. At first I thought the game had succeeded, but when you allowed Mason to return to the match I knew there was a hitch somewhere, and imagined I had been bowled out."

Knox lay back in the bed, having made a full and complete confession of his rascality and cunning. How could he hope for pardon at the Head's hands, he thought, after behaving in such a blackguardly and unscrupulous manner? It was no use. He would have to shake the dust of St. Jim's from his feet for ever.

Dr. Holmes sat silent for some moments. To say that Knox's story had astounded him was to put it mildly. He was utterly flabbergasted.

"I hardly know what to say to you, Knox," he began at length. "I would never have believed that any boy of mine could have been guilty of such criminal conduct. Even now, it seems to me incredible."

"It's true, sir, every bit," moaned the unhappy Knox.

There was a pause. The ticking of the clock was the only sound which broke the solemn stillness of the sanatorium.

Dr. Holmes was in a most embarrassing position. Here was a fellow who had run through the long labyrinth of sin and vice, and for whose conduct expulsion seemed to be the only possible punishment. Yet, just when he was at his blackest, Knox had saved a fellow-creature from a cruel and relentless death.

The last circumstance would have moved a heart of stone. How was it possible to expel a fellow, after that?

The Head spoke at last. His voice was low but kindly.

"Far be it from me, Knox," he said, "to make light of your heroic action this afternoon. Whatever your

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faults, you are no coward. But your shameful treatment of Mason, your persistent persecution of him, demand heavy punishment. I hardly know what to do or say."

"Then let me help you out, doctor," came a voice. And Mr. Mason, with his son just behind him, stood framed in the doorway.

"Mr. Mason!" exclaimed the Head, greeting him. "How thankful I am that you are here! You have to thank Providence for a very narrow escape!"

"True," said Mr. Mason gravely. "I also have to thank that boy. But for his bravery I should undoubtedly have perished."

"I did not know you were an aeronaut," said the Head, smiling a little.

"One has to do something these days. My age and family ties militate against my going abroad on active service, but I have done the next best thing."

The speaker stepped towards the bed, and glanced gratefully at his rescuer.

"No words of mine can adequately express my gratitude to you, my boy," he said feelingly.

Knox cut him short.

"Don't!" he muttered, shrinking back upon the pillows. "I did the little I could, that's all."

"You are a fine, brave fellow, and it is futile to deny it."

"Knox has just told me a very painful story, Mr. Mason," interposed the Head. "May I communicate it to this gentleman, Knox?"

"Yes, sir. It's only right that he should know. And— and Mason, too."

Dr. Holmes then described the whole of the wretched affair. He did not spare Knox. How could he, bearing in mind the depth of degradation to which the senior had sunk?

"It is a most embarrassing position," concluded the Head. "In the face of what has happened this afternoon it ill becomes me to expel the boy."

"I should think so!" said Mr. Mason warmly. "Expel him, after what he did for me? Nine boys out of ten, brave though they were, would have shrunk from that terrible ordeal of fire and flame. No, Dr. Holmes. Don't let the lad suffer such a scene, for my sake."

"And mine!" chimed in Mason.

Dr. Holmes reflected for a moment, but only for a moment. His mind was soon made up.

"Very well; Knox shall stay," he said quietly.

The stricken senior gazed at the Head with tears in his eyes. He could hardly credit his great good fortune.

"And—and Mason?" he quavered. "Does he forgive me for the cruel wrong I did him?"

"With all my heart," said Dick Mason, stepping forward. "Cheer up, Knoxy, old fellow. We'll wipe this sorry business off the slate, and start afresh."

"You're a brick!" murmured Knox. It was all he could say, for his heart was very full just then.

"Now that everything is amicably settled I'll be going," said Mr. Mason. "A train journey isn't half so exciting as an aeroplane trip. Still, I expect I shall survive it. Good-bye, Knox, my brave lad! And see to it in future that you stick to the straight path. Honesty and uprightness are supposed to be out of date, but they pay, my boy—they pay."

"I sha'n't be such a waster again in a hurry," said Knox huskily. "Good-bye, sir, and Heaven bless you for your kindness to me!"

Marie Rivers came into the room at that moment, and the visitors withdrew. They left Knox feeling serenely happy, in spite of his wounds. The past was done with now; the future was his own, to make or mar, as he chose. And Knox reflected that he would give up playing the "giddy goat," and follow out Mr. Mason's excellent advice.

But any who knew Knox would have shaken their heads in doubt. The prefect's reform was likely to be merely a "flash in the pan." It was not in the natural order of things that he should go straight, for the evil in his nature greatly outweighed the good. The present trouble over, he was likely to be the same old Knox once more. But that remained to be seen.

St. Jim's never learned the true circumstances of the nocturnal affair at the Green Man, save that Mason had not been guilty. The Head refrained from telling them, and Mason himself was far too decent a fellow to "let on" about it.

Happily, John Rivers' letter to Talbot, which Knox had destroyed, was of little value, so nothing serious resulted from the action.

Within a few days Knox was declared fit again, and was accorded a rousing reception by his schoolfellows. And his best friend—for the few months remaining to the latter at St. Jim's, at any rate—was the senior he had wronged. A real good fellow at heart was Richard Vernon Mason, and for weeks afterwards the main topic of conversation among the juniors of both Houses was the great century which had been scored under such thrilling circumstances in Mason's Last Match!

THE END.

(Next Wednesday, "A Soldier of the King!" by Martin Clifford. Order your copy of "The Gem" Library in advance. Price 1d.)

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HANDS UP FOR "TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY"!

—A New Halfpenny Weekly Companion Paper to the "Gem" Library.

MARIE RIVERS APPEALS TO GIRL GEMITES.

I am publishing this week the overflow of the correspondence which appeared in these pages last Wednesday, knowing full well that it will be of tremendous interest to all readers of the "Gem" Library, who wish to see "Tom Merry's Weekly" added to our list of companion papers. Show these letters to all your chums, and get them to send me a postcard of approval at once!

YOUR EDITOR.

"Should you see fit to issue Merry's paper every week, then the above-named fellows will do their utmost to crush it out of existence. Then you'll have a warm time!—Yours,

PERCY MELLISH."

(I sha'n't be the only individual who will have a warm time. Three juniors, whose names it is superfluous to mention, will most assuredly receive a "bumping" when this letter is read at St. Jim's.—The Editor.)

A PLEA FOR A GIRLS' PAGE.

"Dear Editor,—I learn from Talbot that, subject to the universal approval of your readers, you are going to bring out 'Tom Merry's Weekly' as a separate halfpenny paper.

"This is a splendid idea, but I hope you are not going 'all out' for the boys. Cannot we girls have a look-in? We are just as keen, just as enthusiastic, as our sporting brothers, and I think you might give us a show. The paper, you say, will be enlarged to three times its usual size, so perhaps you would be kind enough to have just one page, or one column, for girl readers. I will cheerfully undertake the management of such a page, on which I would reply to any girl chums who cared to write to me.

"Wonderful nerve I've got, eh, Mr. Editor? But I know you are a very considerate gentleman, and am anticipating a favourable reply.

"Believe me, yours sincerely,

"MARIE RIVERS."

(I shall be most pleased to accede to Miss Rivers's eloquent request.—The Editor.)

A TAGGLES TESTIMONIAL.

"Dear Sir,—Which me and Mrs. T. considers that it ain't wot you might call a bad idea to print that there book of Master Merry's every week, and we hopes it will flourish like the sprouting trees in this here quadrangle. We hope to have many a hearty chuckle of a winter evening, when reading the new paper over a glass of — water.

"But wot I says is this here. Don't you go letting them young varmint put anythink disrespectful to me or Mrs. T. in the paper, or else I shall lay about me with my broom, I will!

"Hoping this finds you in the pink of health as it leaves me at present.—Your obedient servant,

"EPHRAIM TAGGLES."

(Bravo, Taggy! We're always willing to receive adult readers, so when you next visit the Green Man you might make that fact known.—The Editor.)

PRAISE FROM THE PREFECTS!

"The Senior Common-room,
"St. James's School,
"Rylcombe, Sussex.

"We, the undersigned, consider that the suggestion for publishing 'Tom Merry's Weekly' as a companion paper to the 'Gem' Library is an excellent one, reflecting the highest credit to all parties. Moreover, we shall be pleased to contribute to the journal when occasion requires.

"(Signed) ERIC KILDARE (Captain)
GEORGE DARREL
JAMES MONTEITH
RICHARD V. MASON
STANLEY BAKER
PHILIP RUSHDEN
HERBERT H. LANGTON."

(The approval of the mighty men of the Sixth is a decided feather in our Editorial cap. What-ho!—The Editor.)

THE MADNESS OF MELLISH!

"Sir,—I think the idea of publishing 'Tom Merry's Weekly' is, like all other ideas in connection with the 'Gem' Library, rotten!

"You may not know Merry as I do. He is a beastly, stuck-up prig, and will only use his paper as a medium for sneering at all the decent chaps at St. Jim's, such as Levison, Crooke, and myself, who claim to be real schoolboys, fond of a little flutter now and again, and not seeking to walk-in the ways of Good Little Georgie or Sinless Samuel.

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MONTY LOWTHER BLOSSOMS FORTH!

"Dear Ed,—I think the latest wheeze
Is one to which all chaps will freeze:
It's great, and cannot fail to please,
O Editor!

"My humour is hereditary.
I'll write some verses—ripping, very!
And turn 'em in to my chum Merry."
O Editor!

"We've started now on Number One
A feast of ripping, rousing fun,
For tip-top stuff 'twill take the bun,
O Editor!

"Let Gemites all unfurl their banners
And stand by Tom, myself, and Manners.
Three fellows worth their weight in tanners,
O Editor!

"And if you pay on publication
You'll be the best man in the nation:
We'll love you for a generation,
O Editor!"

"We'll boom the 'Weekly' when it comes:
And now it's time for prep—oh, crumbs!
So here's to you and all your chums,
O Editor!

(Well, Funny-cuts, you may not know it,
But you're a really rotten poet!
So think of other folks, and stow it,

O Lowther!

—The Editor.)

The First Chapters of Our Grand New Adventure Serial.

UNDER THE DRAGON.



The opening chapters of a great new story of thrilling adventure in the Far East.

BY

PETER BAYNE.

The previous instalments told how:—

NORRIS BRENT, a young Englishman, agrees to accompany his unworthy cousin, GUY MELVILLE, on an exploration tour in China for a rare plant only to be found in that part of the world. Misfortune dogs their footsteps, and a crisis is reached when the Chinese pack-carriers, who are with them, mutiny. Stranded in a wild, inhospitable land, there is nothing for it but to return to civilisation, and the cousins, together with YEN HOW, Norris Brent's faithful servant, set out on the weary journey.

The little band is overcome by thirst, and Melville, refusing to share his water with the others, pushes onward through the desert, leaving his companions to their fate. Fortunately, however, Yen How lights upon an oasis, and the danger is averted.

Norris Brent returns to England with Yen How, and Guy Melville pretends to be pleased at seeing his cousin again. He informs him that, owing to the death of an uncle, he is owner of the estate, Eagle's Cliff, and offers Brent a position thereon, which he accepts.

One day Yen How surprises his master by informing him that MING YUNG, a Chinese mandarin, and his ward, SILVER PEARL, whose acquaintance Brent had previously made in China, are staying at Eagle's Nest.

Brent discovers that Ming Yung has come to Eagle's Nest in order to experiment with an invention with which he hopes to gain world-wide power.

Guy Melville, for some sinister reason, still desires his cousin's death, and secures the assistance of a gipsy, KARL MARROK, to assist him in his foul purpose.

Brent discovers a ruby of great value in a pit on the estate. Guy Melville steals the ruby from his cousin; but is then drugged by Ming Yung, who takes possession of the valuable stone.

On regaining his senses, Melville accuses his accomplice, Marrok, of stealing the ruby. Marrok, however, denies this, and forms the conclusion that it has been recovered by Brent.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Forest Ravine—Lost Underground—Face to Face.

Norris Brent was unaware of the loss of the red ruby.

Having deposited it in what he considered to be a safe place, he thought little more about it for the time being. The thought that it was his, however, that he possessed a rare and priceless jewel that it would be difficult to match anywhere in the world, gave him a strange buoyancy and exhilaration of spirit.

A week or two after his visit to London, he and Yen How set out from Eagle's Nest one early morning to explore the hollow where they had met with so memorable an experience some time before.

The remembrance of the mysterious eyes seen in the darkness had persistently remained with Brent, who was determined to discover the secret of the hollow, though by doing so he might encounter the deadliest peril.

His Chinese comrade was in no wise anxious to investigate the mystery, but the loyalty of Yen How was such, as would

have sent him uncomplainingly into the very jaws of destruction at the bidding of his friend and master.

It was a fine, still day, and the comrades reached the entrance to the woodland ravine in good time. Each of them was provided with a lantern, in case an artificial illuminant was required, and a coil of rope and a strong knife apiece completed their equipment.

They had also brought food and water with them, sufficient to last the day, for they did not expect to be back home before night.

The thickness and quantity of the curious, moss-like growth adhering to the sides of the ravine interested Brent at once. He was now more certain than before that it was of the same identical species as that which he had often seen in the interior of China.

This particular lichen, he recollected to have heard, grew with remarkable quickness. The bare patch left where it might be torn away from the background of rock or earth, was covered again with a fresh growth in the course of a few days.

Owing to this fact, it provided the natives, who gathered and dried it in huge quantities, with an inexhaustible supply of fuel all the year round.

That it was food for prowling animals Brent had never heard, but he now had a haunting belief that it was, for the gigantic figure with the glowing eyes that he and Yen How had gazed upon, was certainly tearing away the lichen at the time.

"It's a quiet enough place down here," he remarked. "How would you like to be left alone for a day or two?"

Yen How screwed up his wrinkled, yellow face into a comical shape.

"Me no likee," he declared emphatically. "Suppose you leave me here, my head go silly vely quick. This is no place for us. Bad spirits have got this side."

"You're superstitious!" said Brent laughingly. "There are no such things to be feared by us. All the same, a fellow oughtn't to venture here by himself. The silence and strangeness of it all might get badly on his nerves."

The bed of the ravine sloped down at a steepish gradient for a considerable distance. Its walls, covered with the moss, rose straight and high to the forest above, where the branches of the great trees on either side met overhead in a gnarled and tangled network of wood and leaf.

The moist, heavy atmosphere was not stirred by a breath of wind. Not a bird nor an insect was to be seen. It seemed as if all living things avoided the deep hollow by a natural instinct of aversion common to them all.

Taking their time, the comrades moved onward. At last they reached the spot where they had encountered the unknown denizen of the hollow. It was silent and deserted now, but there was something about it that immediately attracted Brent's alert attention.

There were, here and there, bare patches of rock, indicating where the moss had been torn away, and there were depressions in the grass and hard sand caused by the movements of some unknown body.

"Our mysterious friend of the other night has been here

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quite recently," remarked Brent. "I suppose he only comes out after dark. That means a longish wait for us."

Yen How proceeded to open a large packet of sandwiches. "Then we eat and drink," he said. "That help to pass the time away."

They sat down and enjoyed a hearty meal. With such surroundings as they had it was not difficult for them to imagine that they were back in the Chinese wilderness, the only living creatures in the midst of a vast solitude.

Soon they were on the move again. The marks that had aroused his curiosity being so plainly visible, Brent resolved to follow them, but after a time they came to an end.

This was where the ravine changed into a rocky and verdureless defile, leading, for a space of some fifty or sixty yards, to the yawning mouth of a great cave. When he saw the cave Yen How came to an abrupt halt.

"You no go in there?" he inquired.
 "Why not?" Brent rejoined, his eyes twinkling. "Better do that than hang about here until it's too dark to see anything. I'm going inside, at any rate, and you can remain where you are unless you care to come with me."

Yen How looked steadily at his comrade, understood that the other was in earnest, and then parted his lips in a slow smile.

"Course my come with you," he declared. "What time my ever draw back when you lead the way? But suppose we come back my velly much surprised. That thing we saw with the big eyes is in there."

"It may be you're right," said Brent. "But, if so, its eyes will most certainly give us warning long before we're near it. To be warned is to be prepared, Yen How, so you needn't fear that you'll be running blindfolded into danger."

Lighting their lanterns, they entered the cave, Brent fearless and resolute, and Yen How dubious in mind, but with no thought of retreat now that his companion had given the word to advance.

Inside the cave the atmosphere was as damp and muggy as it was in the ravine. The moisture trickled down the walls in large drops, and the hollows in the uneven floor were full of stagnant water, in which floated the long, slender filaments of subaqueous weeds of a bright green colour.

"It strikes me that this place leads out to the sea," said Brent, after they had gone some distance. "It leads almost, straight in that direction."

This belief was strengthened not many minutes later, when the distant beat of the sea against the cliffs was faintly heard. The air, too, was not so oppressive as before. A fresh current must, therefore, it seemed, be continually passing through the cave.

There being no sign of animal life anywhere visible, Brent at last began to think that he was on a false track, and considered the advisability of retracing his steps. It was very probable that the mystery he was seeking to solve was hidden in some part of the ravine itself, and not in the cave, which was merely one of the underground passages with which the coast was honeycombed in every direction.

"I'll go on with it," he resolved at last. "Might as well see where the outlet at the far end is. There's plenty of time to do so and work back to the hollow."

It was not long before he was glad that he had decided to press onward. The cave became wider, and then became broken up into several lofty passages ramifying in every direction. But while this discovery was an interesting one, it made it extremely difficult to know which might be the right road to take.

"Better go straight on," said Brent, after a few moments of hesitation. "Then we shall be sure to reach the main outlet. If we branched off by any of these other turnings, we would be lost in no time."

They kept on in what was apparently a straight line, but did not seem to draw any nearer the point for which they were making. Pausing to listen, they could not hear the beat of the sea that not long before had sounded not a great distance away.

"We must be off the right road," Brent confessed. "But, having come so far, it would be foolish to return. With so many passages bearing off from this one, we should only bewilder ourselves, and soon be worse off than we are now."

Hoping to reach the end of their journey before long, they plodded steadily on over the rough, uneven ground. The farther they went, however, the remoter became the realisation of their desire.

The passage became involved with other passages that crossed it and branched off from it. All idea of locality and direction was now lost. It was worse than being in a maze, for the walls of rock closed in on the explorers on every side, and they had only the light of their lanterns to depend on for guidance.

Stolid and patient, Yen How trudged on by his comrade's side. He had ceased to think of danger and hardship now.

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What was to be, he reasoned, must be. There was no sense in worrying over the inevitable. It was sufficient for him to know that he was carrying out his duty.

"Seems to me," said Brent, "that we're in a nasty muddle. It's most likely that we're walking round and round in something like a circle. The plague of it is that we don't know anything for certain."

"Except that we've lost our way," added Yen How, with a comical smile. "More better we lie down and sleep."

Brent looked grave.

"There's nothing to be amused at in the situation," he remarked, "for we may never find our way out into the open. Come on," he added brusquely, unwilling to give way to gloomy imagining. "We'll push on until we drop, anyhow, if the luck has turned against us."

They walked on once more in silence, and had proceeded for some distance when Brent, who was a few paces ahead of his companion, came to a sudden halt.

A cold thrill shot through him, and for a moment he could scarcely breathe, while his heart beat to a quickened measure as he stared ahead into the darkness.

For there, watching him with a cold, passionless gaze, were the mysterious eyes that he had looked into once before.

Carried Off—Alone—Ming Yung to the Rescue.

The two eyes looked down on the comrades without moving. Directly Yen How caught sight of them he started violently, and his lantern, falling from his hand, went out as it struck the ground and rolled away out of sight.

Regaining his self-control he started forward to recover the lantern, but he had not taken half a dozen steps when Brent uttered a warning shout. Looking back, Yen How saw his comrade swinging his lighted lantern to and fro.

Then he turned his head and stared in front of him again. At what he beheld a great fear and trembling overcame him, and a choking cry came from his lips.

The eyes in the darkness were closer to him than before. They were those of a strange and monstrous beast, an animal with the body of a gigantic dog, and the long, tapering neck and narrow head of a giraffe.

The light of Brent's swinging lantern flashed over the creature as it drew nearer, showing it to be covered with thick, short hair of a pale brown colour. The long neck oscillated to and fro with increasing rapidity, and the eyes, cold and passionless but a few moments earlier, were now red with injected blood and flaming with rage.

Before Yen How could retreat so much as a step the terrible creature was upon him. With astounding ease he was lifted from the ground by a vice-like clutch on his arm, swung round, and carried away.

The cries of his comrade rang loudly in his ears. He knew that Brent was running on behind to overtake and make a desperate attempt to save him, and the knowledge fired both his strength and his courage.

Drawing his knife from his belt, he managed to open it, and, grasping the handle tightly, he struck at the creature he had fallen a victim to. Again and again he stuck, only to fail each time, until at last the upward-glancing blade got home, although with slight effect.

The wound inflicted on it drove the animal mad with fury. Hissing like a great snake, it hurled Yen How through the air like a stone from a catapult. The Chinaman described an arch in his flight through space, falling not upon the level floor of the cave, but in a deep hole at one side of the passage-way.

Fortunately for Yen How there was plenty of mud and sand at the bottom of the cavity to break the force of his fall, and, although bruised and badly shaken, he sustained no serious damage.

Lying where he had fallen, gasping for breath, he vaguely wondered whether or not he was the victim of a disordered imagination. Had he not long before abandoned the habit of opium-smoking he would have firmly believed that he was, but things being as they were with him, Yen How knew that it was no delusion that had come upon him, but a matter of actual fact.

Hearing a peculiar, hissing noise from above, he looked up to see the blazing eyes of the unknown beast staring down at him. The creature lowered its tapering neck into the hole, but it could not reach Yen How by a couple of feet or more. After making several ineffectual attempts to seize the Chinaman, it desisted from them, hissing with fury and baulked desire.

"That velly good thing for me he no can climb down," said Yen How, making his aching body as comfortable as he was able to in the circumstances. "His neck not long enough, or else he gobble me up pretty quick."

The fearsome eyes settled down to regard him with a fixed,

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"It's not here!" said Marrok suddenly. "Not there!" The cry that burst from Brent's lips startled the gipsy, who, looking up quickly from the box and its scattered contents, saw the other was pale with dismay and amazement.

unwavering stare. Whenever he moved, a loud hiss warned him that his enemy was keeping a vigilant watch over him, and that he had about as much chance of escaping from his prison as a rat from a trap.

Yen How could hear no sound of Norris Brent. He listened patiently, expecting each moment to hear a hail from his comrade, but at last he was forced to admit to himself that the other had gone away.

This did not cause him to lose heart. He knew that Brent would never leave him there to his fate so long as an effort could be made to save him. The one grave doubt in his mind was whether his comrade would be able to find a way out of the labyrinth of subterranean passages where they had lost themselves.

This Norris Brent himself doubted for some time. When his companion was seized and carried away by the strange brute that had so amazed and startled them both, he rushed forward to overtake, and if possible rescue him.

Slipping up he fell to the ground, and by the time he had regained his feet, Yen How and his captor were gone. It took him several minutes to regain possession of his lantern, which had fallen and gone out when he tumbled, and, relighting it, he started to search for his friend.

His efforts were futile. Yen How had vanished as completely as though the earth had opened and swallowed him. Without assistance, Brent reasoned, he could not hope to find his missing friend.

Troubled and anxious, he was suddenly surprised to see a pale shaft of light illuminating the shadowy interior of the cave. He hurried onward. The light grew stronger, and with an indescribable feeling of relief he saw before him the blue surface of the sea.

A minute or two later Brent was outside the cave, and standing on a slope of the cliff not far from Eagle's Nest. By a stroke of unexpected luck he had found the exit for which he and Yen How had searched so fruitlessly.

Now that he was safe, Brent thought of his comrade with redoubled anxiety. Gaining the footpath, he hurried on to the summit of the cliff and headed for Eagle's Nest at his best speed.

As he was nearing the house he caught sight of Ming Yung emerging from one of the gardens. The Chinaman was walking along with slow, measured step, his hands clasped together behind him, his head bent in thought. Directly he noticed the other, Brent made up his mind to seek his help. It did not occur to him that in all probability

Ming Yung would scornfully refuse to give him the slightest assistance. The mere sight of the Chinaman, curiously enough, inspired him with a feeling of mingled confidence and hope.

When Brent addressed him, Ming Yung took no notice of the lad for a few moments. Then he stopped, frowned, and looked at the other.

"Did you speak to me?" he inquired. "Be brief!" he added. "My time is too precious to waste."

Thus admonished, Brent told of what had happened in the cave. At first Ming Yung appeared not to be listening, but when he heard the description of the monster that had attacked Yen How a gleam of newly-awakened interest chased away the impassivity of his face.

"Strange!" he murmured. "It would be more than strange if this animal should be a solitary representative of that species which scientists have believed to be extinct for thousands of years!"

He walked on a step or two, then turned quickly and went back towards the house.

"Wait here for me," he said. "I will go with you."

In a few minutes he returned, carrying in his hand a short black rod, fitted with a spiral coil of wire, holding a circular lens. To the curious glance of his companion he paid no attention.

In silence they descended the cliff-path, and reached the entrance to the cave. Here Brent was going to light his lantern; but Ming Yung stayed the action with a wave of his hand, at the same time pressing back a spring at the base of this black rod.

Immediately a powerful beam of light darted from the lens of the instrument. The darkness of the cave was dispersed as by brilliant sunlight, and, guided by this dazzling illuminant, Brent and his companion pushed onward without hesitation.

Had it not been for one thing they might have had great difficulty in reaching the place where Yen How was being kept an unwilling prisoner. This was Brent's accidental discovery of the lantern his comrade had lost.

"We must be close to them now," said the lad eagerly. "Shall I give Yen How a call? He might hear and answer me."

It was Ming Yung who called, in the Chinese tongue, the echo of his voice sounding like the roll of a drum in those subterranean depths. The call was responded to. Faint but distinct came Yen How's answering cry.

"There he is," said Brent quickly. "Thank goodness he's not dead! Let us hurry to him!"

But Ming Yung betrayed no emotion. With the dignified calm that was characteristic of his every movement when he was not under the influence of strong excitement, he followed his companion along the wide and lofty passage-way.

Yen How continued to call, and at last his voice sounded but a yard or two away. It was then that Ming Yung lowered the light shining through the lens of his black rod until it was but the palest reflection of its former brilliance.

The animal keeping watch and guard over Yen How had turned to look at the intruders. Its grotesquely huge proportions were distinctly visible under the play of Ming Yung's portable searchlight. Its eyes, dazzled by the artificial illuminant, blinked rapidly, and it swung its head from side to side with the curious motion of a camel.

Like a man enraptured, Ming Yung gazed at the living apparition, that carried him back in thought to the days when the world was young. Eons of ages before such creatures as this one were common enough, amphibian beasts that flourished in the ocean and on land alike, and were to be found in all parts of the world.

Thousands of years past, and they became feeble in number, and gradually disappeared from man's ken. A few survived, they and their descendants ever growing scarcer, until now the skeleton of one, when disinterred from the place where it had died, was a rarity whose existence was discussed by people in every corner of the globe.

And this was no skeletonised framework, but the living animal itself. As he gazed at it Ming Yung thrilled with pride to think that he was the scientist favoured by Fate to set eyes on this surviving specimen of a long-vanished family of the brute creation.

In his eager interest he stepped nearer to the creature, which, dazed by the sudden flash of the light across its eyes, darted aside, and rushed past him and Norris Brent with a speed that was amazing in an animal of such enormous bulk.

Quick as lightning, Ming Yung swung round, and pressed a second spring fixed to the side of the black rod. It was a spring that released a current of electricity that would have been powerful enough to destroy the escaping denizen of the cave, but the sudden, hard pressure put upon it by the Chinaman in some way jammed the mechanism of the thing, which would not act.

The time, short as it was, lost by Ming Yung enabled the strange brute to escape. Pursuit with any chance of success was out of the question. A dark cloud of angry disappointment settled down on Ming Yung's face, to be gone, however, in a moment.

"It is the specimen I expected it to be," he said to Brent, becoming conscious that the other was narrowly observing him. "One day it shall be placed in my museum. But for a mischance, it would be lying dead at my feet at this moment."

Seeing the hole yawning open in the ground, he flashed his searchlight down it. There was Yen How standing on tiptoe at the bottom, with upturned face, and hands clutching at the side of his prison to effect a purchase.

"Hold hard!" said Brent, lying flat on his chest and reaching down. "Now catch hold! That's right!"

Next moment Yen How was alongside his comrade. He looked none the worse for his sojourn in the cave's rift, under the baleful, watching eyes of his curious gaoler, whose sudden flight had amazed him until he saw Norris Brent's companion.

Then he ceased to wonder. He regarded Ming Yung as a supernatural being, to whom things that other men could not achieve were easily possible, and had he seen the great brute with the glowing eyes lying dead at the feet of his famous compatriot, he would have experienced no astonishment.

With Ming Yung this time leading the way, all three returned to the open. When they reached the summit of the cliff, Brent ventured to thank Ming Yung for coming to Yen How's assistance.

Instantly a look of scornful amusement flitted across the Chinaman's face.

"It was not to save him I went there with you," he said coldly, "but to investigate the truth or otherwise of your story. His life is of no more worth in my sight than is your own!"

Turning on his heel, he walked away. "Well," said Brent, with a little laugh, "he's by no means amiably disposed towards either of us, Yen How. I don't suppose he's forgiven us for crossing his will when we were in China, and he wanted to offer us up to his gods as a sacrifice. Yet he in all probability saved your life, for you could never have found your way out of the cave alone."

"That velly sure," agreed the other. "All the same, my

rather fight that thing down there than give mortal offence to Ming Yung. What thing you say?"

"Perhaps you're right," said Brent; "and in that case I'm in a bad way, for it's certain that I've mortally offended him on more than one occasion."

In a sense, Norris Brent was correct in his surmise; but he would have been amazed had he known the thoughts concerning him that were working in Ming Yung's mind as the Chinaman walked away from him and his companion.

The loyal friendship that the white lad showed to Yen How was something that Ming Yung knew how to appreciate at its proper worth. He despised Yen How as a coolie, considered him a being of no more value than a dog, but he did not forget that the other was of the same race as himself.

Therefore, kindness shown to Yen How affected him, too, as a Chinaman, and to that fact Brent owed an immunity from danger of which he was utterly ignorant.

"The white lad is sound at heart," said Ming Yung to himself. "He is of a different breed to his cousin."

As he thought of Guy Melville a hard look shadowed his face. He regarded the master of Eagle's Nest as a tool for his own purposes, but he also despised and loathed him, counting him as an enemy, and to be treated as such when it served his object to do so.

Nearing the house, he encountered Guy Melville at a bend in the drive. The other was flushed of face, and his manner betrayed a nervousness that Ming Yung silently took notice of at once.

"Ah," said Melville, assuming a look of pleased surprise. "I was just hoping that I might meet you, and here you are! The fact of the matter is," he continued, as Ming Yung remained inconveniently silent, "I want to speak to you on a matter of the greatest importance to us both."

Ming Yung bent his head with a condescending gesture that irritated Melville almost beyond endurance.

"I am listening," he said. "What is this business of which you speak?"

"It concerns your ward, Silver Pearl," Melville answered, with a boldness that came as a surprise even to himself. "I wish to marry her. You know what my position is, and something of my future prospects, and I am sure that you will agree to entrust her to my care."

He would have said more, but the Chinaman stopped him with a peremptory wave of the hand.

"That will do," said Ming Yung. "I have heard enough. What you wish for can never be. Rather than permit Silver Pearl to marry a white man, I would kill her with my own hand. Do not speak to me on this matter again, or you will feel my resentment in a manner that you will never forget."

His voice sounded hard as steel as he spoke, and he passed on, leaving Guy Melville pale with rage and humiliation. Yet Melville also experienced an emotion that was uncommonly like terror, for there was death in the look that Ming Yung had cast upon him. "Curse his yellow face!" muttered Melville malevolently. "I'll make him eat his own words yet."

A Midnight Intruder.

Leaving the Smugglers' Tavern, the tall, slim figure of a man with a gaily-coloured silk scarf knotted round his neck, and gold earrings in his ears, took the cliff-path to Eagle's Nest. It was Karl Marrok, the gipsy, and the stealthiness of his movements betrayed the nature of his midnight errand.

It was a light night, but there was small fear of Marrok being seen by anyone, for in that quiet spot, deserted even in the daytime, there was no one else about at that hour.

Approaching the house, the gipsy paused for some moments and took a careful survey of the place. Not a window that he could see showed a light. Satisfied that he had not come too soon he went on again, crossed the drive and lightly mounted the steps leading to the terrace, round which he made his way to a certain window at the side of the house.

The catch of this window was broken, a circumstance that Marrok had made himself aware of two or three days before, and in quick time he was standing in a corridor leading direct into the hall.

Gaining the hall, he ascended the broad staircase and moved silently to the door of a bed-room, pausing to listen intently at the keyhole.

Not a sound came from within. Opening the door with a noiselessness that showed experience in such work, Marrok stepped inside, reclosed the door after him, and turned on the switch of the electric light.

On the bed near the opposite wall, Norris Brent was lying fast asleep. Crossing the room, Marrok, taking a strong cord from his pocket, bound it tightly, with a sailor's slip, round the slumbering lad's wrists.

So deftly was the work performed that Brent slept on,

but Karl Marrok awakened him roughly, and he opened his eyes to feel his arms bound together, and to see the gipsy, a revolver in his right hand, looking down into his face.

"Be quiet!" said Marrok, in a fierce whisper. "Utter a cry; and you know what to expect!"

He emphasised the meaning of his words by a shake of his revolver. Brent realised instantly that he was at the other's mercy. The thought did not make him quail. His chief wonder was concerned with the probable reason for the man who hated him with such a deadly hatred being there.

"What do you want with me?" he inquired.

"Sit up and I'll tell you," Marrok replied, the catlike stare of his gleaming eyes never leaving the other. "Now then, you just tell me where the ruby is that you found on the day when you fell down the shaft in the cliff woods, and escaping the death you ought to have met with, made your way along to the Smugglers' Tavern, and so home again."

Brent shook his head.

"I refuse to tell you," he said. "More than that, I will not admit that I found a ruby, or anything else. It's none of your business."

Marrok gave vent to a snarling laugh.

"Isn't it?" he remarked. "You'll soon see whether it is. Well," he continued, a sudden inflection of rising anger in the tone of his voice. "I've made it my business. Tell me quick what I want to know, or as sure as I'm standing here I'll put a bullet through your brain!"

The menacing attitude of the ruffian, no less than his menacing words, told Brent that his enemy was in the most deadly earnestness. Had his arms been free, he would have thrown himself at Marrok and risked being shot. As it was, he was helpless.

How the gipsy had discovered that he was in possession of the red ruby he did not know in the least. It was a mystery that puzzled him. Yet he had not the slightest intention of revealing the hiding-place of the priceless gem.

"Hurry up!" said Marrok impatiently. "Where is the ruby?"

"Find it!" Brent answered, sudden rage against the ruffian and at his own helplessness overcoming him. "I'm not going to tell you anything. I'm not frightened by your threats, for if you fire, the sound will alarm the household, and mighty little chance you'll have then of either pocketing the ruby or making your escape."

The hard truth of these words was not lost on Marrok, who ground his teeth with rage, and uttered fearful menaces.

Realising, however, that it was useless to attempt to terrify Brent by submission to his will, he started to search himself for the hidden treasure.

Having a glance along at the lad while he was turning out the contents of a chest of drawers, he saw Brent looking at a large oak box standing against the wall. Something in the expression of the other's eyes gave him an inspiration.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, with a coarse, exulting laugh. "I know where it is now. You've given the show away."

Instantly he crossed over to the box, threw open the lid, and, kneeling down, started to turn over the things inside. As he worked, Brent watched him with a feeling of gloomy despair at his heart. Now that the red ruby was about to be taken from him he was able to understand something of its real worth.

How wickedly careless he had been, he thought, not to place such a peerless prize somewhere where it would be safe, whatever happened. The opportunity of doing so would never come to him again.

"It's not here!" said Marrok suddenly.

"Not there!"

The cry that burst from Brent's lips startled the gipsy, who, looking quickly up from the box and its scattered contents, perceived that the other was pale with dismay and amazement.

"Then it was here?" he asked. "You put the red ruby in this box?"

"Of course I did!" Brent answered, attempting no further concealment now that he knew he had betrayed his secret by his looks and his cry of amazement. "It was in a small, soft leather bag, and I put it at the very bottom of the box."

Again Karl Marrok made a careful and exhaustive search. Then, his black eyes gleaming with rage and baffled desire, he rose to his feet.

"It's gone!" he said hoarsely. "Someone's stolen it from you, the same one who stole it from you before. But it shall be mine yet."

And, as though not daring to remain a moment longer lest he should give violent expression to his excited emotion, he rushed out of the room and out of the house.

(Another thrilling, long instalment of this splendid serial story next Wednesday. Order your copy early.)

REPLIES IN BRIEF

TO READERS OF

"The Gem" Library.

Doris H. (Cork).—Thank you for your loyal little letter.

"Ten Loyal Gemites" (Cheshire).—Hallo, hallo, hallo! Ten of you clamouring for a threepenny book story by Martin Clifford—eh? I shall have to do something in the matter soon, that's certain.

"XYZ" (Manchester).—Thanks very much indeed for your loyalty to the old paper. Your suggestion is receiving my consideration.

James Whiting (Shadwell, E.).—A badge for "Gem" readers? Well, it is not a new suggestion, by any means, and I am prepared to take the matter up if I can feel assured that thousands of boys and girls will readily purchase such badges.

James McGee (Dundee).—I should not be allowed to do as you suggest, Jimmy. Sorry, old man!

L. L. B. (London, E.).—Glad to hear you liked the Jewish stories. I think everybody did.

Cyril Short (Liverpool).—Very pleased to hear from you for the first time. I do not deem it advisable to alter the publishing date of "The Boys' Friend" Threepenny Library. Your remarks about "The Penny Popular" are correct. What are my views respecting football this season? Well, I am strongly for it so far as British boys are concerned, and against it from the professional standpoint. Many thanks for your other suggestions. Doubtless you have received by now the books I sent you.

"Three Girl Readers" (Crouch End).—The next "Gem" serial is "Cousin Ethel's Schooldays." See that it gets a good reception!

"A Constant Reader" (Nottingham).—It is very risky to sign yourself thus, laddie. I get so many "Constant Readers" that I sometimes have to treat their communications as anonymous, and am unable to reply to them. The better cricketer of those you name is Tom Merry. Glad to hear you gave it hot and strong to the cad who insulted you.

Douglas O'Reilly (Deal).—Very many thanks for your letter, which would make Master Malpas writhe if he could see it.

"Dora."—Hand your spare copies over the counter at any post-office, with the request that they are to be sent out to the soldiers.

W. O. L. D. Field (Manchester).—The name of the boy in question was Cedric Lay. He was more of a nine-days' wonder than a regular character.

Edith E. Jones (Liverpool).—Thanks for adding your name to the Anti-Malpas Society. My Oxford friend seems to be having a very thin time of it.

"Anonymous" (Brixton).—Thank you for your letter. It contained just the sort of criticism I like. I will try and avoid a recurrence of the matter in question. No, we do not part bad friends.

Ethel Phillips (South Woodford).—The mistake in question was, I admit, a silly one, and readers have not been slow to point it out to us. However, if the critics would only realise how much work there is in the preparation of a double number, they would curb their satire. Mulvaney minor is still at St. Jim's, and more will be heard of him in due course.

"A Hailsham Gemite."—The mistake you mention is to be regretted, but no material harm will be done. Many thanks for your letter.

"Observant" (Chatham).—You are wrong, sonny; it was not a mistake. Cannot men gain promotion from the ranks? "Gussy."—Quite correct, my chum. Jack Blake has got a brother. I was not quite certain when replying to the correspondent.

Donald W. Moore (Victoria, Australia).—Welcome to the ranks of loyal Gemites! Don't forget to recruit as many non-readers as you can in Victoria.

J. McL. (Adelaide).—Storyette not quite up to standard. Try again!

"Wallaby Land."—I will try and do as you suggest when time and space permit.

L. B. (Dover).—Your supposition is correct. C. E. N. R. (Brighton).—No, it is not necessary to do as you suggest. We adjust matters at this office.

(Continued on Page 28, Col. 2.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 398.

A Magnificent New, Long, Complete School Tale of Tom Merry & Co. By MARTIN CLIFFORD.



THIS WEEK'S CHAT



Whom to Write to —
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For Next Wednesday:

"A SOLDIER OF THE KING!"

By **Martin Clifford.**

Lovers of Talbot will fairly revel in next Wednesday's grand, long, complete tale of school life; and even those who belong to the "Too-much-Talbot" community will thoroughly enjoy a story which Martin Clifford may well be proud to have written. The tale concerns the fortunes of John Rivers, who took up a career as honourable as his previous profession was dishonourable. The ex-cracksman succeeds in covering himself with glory in Flanders; but Fate has not yet finished playing strange tricks with him, and through the agency of Crooke of the Shell he is landed in a perilously tight corner. It is no less a person than Arthur Augustus D'Arcy who succeeds most gloriously in freeing

"A SOLDIER OF THE KING"

from his terrible predicament, Gussy's splendid action forming a grand ending to a super-grand story.

GRIEVANCES AGAINST THE "GEM."

A Rude Reader's Ridiculous Remarks!

When nailing the lid on the coffin of Master Malpas—figuratively, of course—I promised to publish another but less offensive letter on my Chat Page this week. Here it is:

"London."

"Dear Editor,—I have read W. Malpas's letter, and I must say that I agree with him. The stories are simply piffle.

"Please answer the following questions:

- "(1) Why can't Martin Clifford write sensible stories, like Jules Verne does?"
- "(2) How could a boy order a brass band for a master's home-coming? It's sheer rot!"
- "(3) How could a boy spend five pounds in a day?"
- "(4) Why don't the boys advance in their ages and Forms?"
- "(5) How can every boy have the same face?"
- "(6) Why do you have those rotten serials put into the paper?"
- "(7) Why is Tom Merry such a good little boy? He doesn't smoke or swear or drink or gamble, so I think he is an utter prig."

"Please will you put this letter into the paper?"

"Yours faithfully,

"F. STEPHENS."

First of all, let me observe that I have published this letter purely out of a sense of fair play. I am always prepared to encounter the grievances of any discontented reader. Because a letter happens to be a nasty one I do not hurl it straightway into the wastepaper-basket, as many of my chums think I should be justified in doing. The "Gem" Library strives, and always has striven, to be a straightforward paper for British boys. It does not slink round corners, but confines itself to honest dealing.

Now I will attend to the requirements of Master Stephens, of London. What a complicated place, if one wished to find him!

He first of all asks, "Why can't Martin Clifford write sensible stories, like Jules Verne does?"

Like Jules Verne did, I suppose my amiable friend means. The great French writer of imagination tales has passed away, but before his death he placed in my hands the right to use any of his world-famous stories. I have them at this office—stacks of them. If my readers wish, I will take out the Tom Merry story entirely, and turn the "Gem" Library into a long, complete novel every week, hashed up from

Jules Verne's old works. But I am pretty certain my readers don't wish!

Then we get the question, "How could a boy order a brass band for a master's home-coming?" The answer is not difficult. Provided the boy has a tongue with which he can speak, and the requisite amount of cash for his brass band, the engagement of a brass band is quite a simple matter. True, such occurrences are rare in normal times, but when a master has been to the front and faced death in fifty different forms some sort of a demonstration is quite permissible.

The third question will set my readers in a roar. How could five pounds be spent in a single day? It is a sheer impossibility, is it not? But I shouldn't care to distribute a wad of fivers as an experiment!

Question No. 4 has given rise to much discussion in the past, and I have dealt with it fully in these pages. How utterly absurd it would be for Tom Merry & Co. to become grown men, when the "Gem" is a book for boys. The Terrible Three are each fifteen years of age, fresh and ripe for any sort of adventure. If my readers think they should be old jossers of seventy with the gout, then let them say the word, and I will give my friend Mr. Clifford instructions to write of them as such. But I shouldn't be very surprised to receive such a verdict from my Gemite chums.

The fifth question is quite an affront to Mr. Macdonald, whose pictures have gained world-wide popularity. According to Master Stephens, the artist draws every boy alike, which is absurd. If he did, how could we distinguish Gussie from Skimpole, or Wynn from Tom Merry? The question is so utterly ridiculous that I will waste no more time on it.

Whether the serial stories in the "Gem" are "rotten" or not is a matter of opinion. Judging from the numerous letters I have received in praise of "Under the Dragon," they are nothing of the kind.

The last question will afford my chums grim amusement. It is best answered by "A Loral Oxonian," who wrote to me recently on the same subject. He writes:

"I agree that there is not a boy who possesses all the good qualities of Tom Merry. But we can try and take him as a model, and aim higher, can't we?"

These are excellent sentiments, and so long as that is the predominant feeling with the majority of my readers Tom Merry shall remain, not a prig, but a fellow who always plays the game, recking not of the consequences. The picture of Tom Merry smoking and swearing and all the rest of it is revolting, and I hope it is not a criterion of the true character of Master F. Stephens. The latter has received polite answers to his impolite questions, and if that doesn't satisfy him, then he had better keep his paws off such a clean paper as the "Gem" Library in future.

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

(Continued from page 27.)

"Lilian" (Southsea).—I am publishing your letter in full next week.

"Captain Jack" (Hathwaite).—If you are satisfied that you live a clean, straight life, then the matter you mention need cause you no anxiety.
 J. R. R. (Clapham).—Football starts in October at St. Jim's. Mayne will not play in the junior eleven. Many thanks for getting new readers.

George H. (North End, Portsmouth).—I am exceedingly obliged to you for your suggestion, but am afraid the idea has been done to death in the past. Best luck to you and your fellow "Pompeyites."

THE EDITOR.

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Our Weekly Prize Page.

LOOK OUT FOR YOUR WINNING STORYETTE.

TRUE PATRIOTISM.

Patrick O'Neill was burning with a desire to serve his King and country, so he decided to enlist.

On applying at the recruiting-office, he was duly punched and prodded; and then came all sorts of questions, most of which he answered quite satisfactorily.

"Now," came a stern inquiry, "have you ever served a term of imprisonment?"

"No, sir," stammered Pat. "But, sure, I'd be willing to serve a short one, if it's necessary."—Sent in by S. Mickler, Heaton, Newcastle-on-Tyne.

NO NEED FOR ALARM.

Pat had got a job moving some barrels of gunpowder, and, much to the alarm of the foreman, was discovered smoking at his work.

"Gracious!" gasped the foreman. "Do you know what happened a few years back when a man started smoking on this job? There was an explosion which blew up a dozen men!"

"Well, that couldn't happen here," replied Pat calmly.

"Why not?" asked the foreman.

"Because there's only you and I hereabouts," said Pat.—Sent in by Alfred Coutts, Peckham, S.E.

ACCORDING TO INSTRUCTIONS.

Mistress: "Jane, you must not address me in the rude, abrupt way you do. You must learn to speak properly. You must say, 'If you please, madam,' and sometimes 'Mam,' or for the most part 'Mum.' And when speaking to the master, you must address him as 'Sir.'"

Jane, a few days later, went to her mistress in a great hurry.

"If you please, madam, and sometimes mam, and for the most part mum," she blurted, "sir's fell down in a fit!"—Sent in by R. White, Abram, near Wigan, Lancs.

HE "CLEAN" SCORED AGAINST THE SERGEANT.

It was a kit inspection, and the various companies were drawn up in lines, their kits displayed in front of them. The sergeant-major's eagle eye at once spotted the absence of soap in the outfit of Private O'Grady, and he asked the reason of this.

"Please, sir, it's all used up," replied O'Grady frankly.

"Used up!" roared the non-com. angrily. "And you've not been in the ranks two months yet? Why, my man, my first cake of soap lasted me twelve months!"

Private O'Grady's face was quite straight, but his eyes twinkled as he replied:

"You see, sir, we wash every day now."—Sent in by Martie Quinter, Stoke Newington, N.

VICTIMISED.

Newsboy (as he runs wildly through the street): "Great mystery! 'Undred victims! Piper!"

Old Gent (excitedly): "Here you are, boy—quick!"

The customer hastily scanned the newspaper, and then hurried towards the boy, who had stopped to serve another purchaser.

"Hi, boy!" he exclaimed. "What is the mystery you're shouting about? There's no thing about it here."

Newsboy (edging away): "That's just the mystery, sir. I can't find it myself. You're the 'undred and first victim!"—Sent in by E. W. James, Southsea.

OVERHEARD AT A LEVEL CROSSING.

"Are there no more trains this evening on the line?"

"No, mum."

"And no more trains on the down-line?"

"No, mum."

"Is there no special train?"

"No, mum."

"Nor an excursion train?"

"No, mum. The gates are closed for the night."

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes, mum."

"Then I think it will be safe for me to cross the line."—Sent in by C. Logan, Aberlady.

THE MONARCH OF MIRTH.

The class were having a lesson on English history, and King Charles had been the subject. Wishing to see how his pupils were progressing, the teacher put the following question:

"Can anyone tell me who was the monarch who had long, black, curly hair?" But the query brought forth no response.

"Come, children!" prompted the teacher. "His name begins with a C."

Immediately a small voice answered:

"I know, sir. It's Charlie Chaplin!"—Sent in by A. Krause, Camberwell.

A MISTAKE WHICH CAUSED MUCH "FOAMING."

A lady walked into a grocer's shop with her shoes turned up to her elbows and a fighting spirit in her eyes.

"This 'ere," she observed, "foaming with rage," is the soap what does the washing itself, the soap what makes every washing-day a sort of glorified breakfast, the soap what gets all the linen as white as snow and as sweet as a hazel-nut by dinner-time, and lets the happy housewife spend the rest of the day playing 'hunt the slipper' with the children. Yet here have I been scrubbing for three solid hours with this lump, and ain't got so much lather out of it as I could get from a brickbat!"

"I beg your pardon, madam," remarked the grocer apologetically. "That isn't the soap! Your boy came here yesterday for one pound of both cheese and soap. That's the cheese!"

"Not the soap—the cheese!" gasped the lady. "Then that accounts for everything!"

"Everything?" queried the astonished grocer.

"Yes. My husband had Welsh rarebit for supper last night, and he's been foaming at the mouth ever since."—Sent in by A. Mitchell, Holme Bridge, Near Huddersfield.

A "HUMPTY" STORY.

Out on the desert, where the Egyptian Territorials were encamped. The captain of the company was all that a captain should not be. He was short and stout and round of shoulder. Needless to state, among his men he was known as Humpty.

One night when the captain entered the camp the sentry allowed the captain to pass unchallenged, and so treated the officer's military wrath.

"What the Blue Alps mountains do you mean by letting me pass into camp without the password?" he demanded angrily.

"P-p-please, sir," stammered the sentry, "I thought you were a c-c-camel!"—Sent in by Alex. Haggart, Kinross.

As the "GEM" Storyette Competition has proved so popular, it has been decided to run this novel feature in conjunction with our new Companion Paper,

THE BOYS' FRIEND, 1d.,

Published every Monday,

in order to give more of our readers a chance of winning one of our useful Money Prizes.

If you know a really funny joke, or a short, interesting paragraph, send it along (on a post-card) before you forget it, and address it to: The Editor, THE BOYS' FRIEND and GEM, Gough House, Gough Square, Fleet Street, E.C.

Look out for YOUR Prize Storyette in next week's GEM or BOYS' FRIEND.