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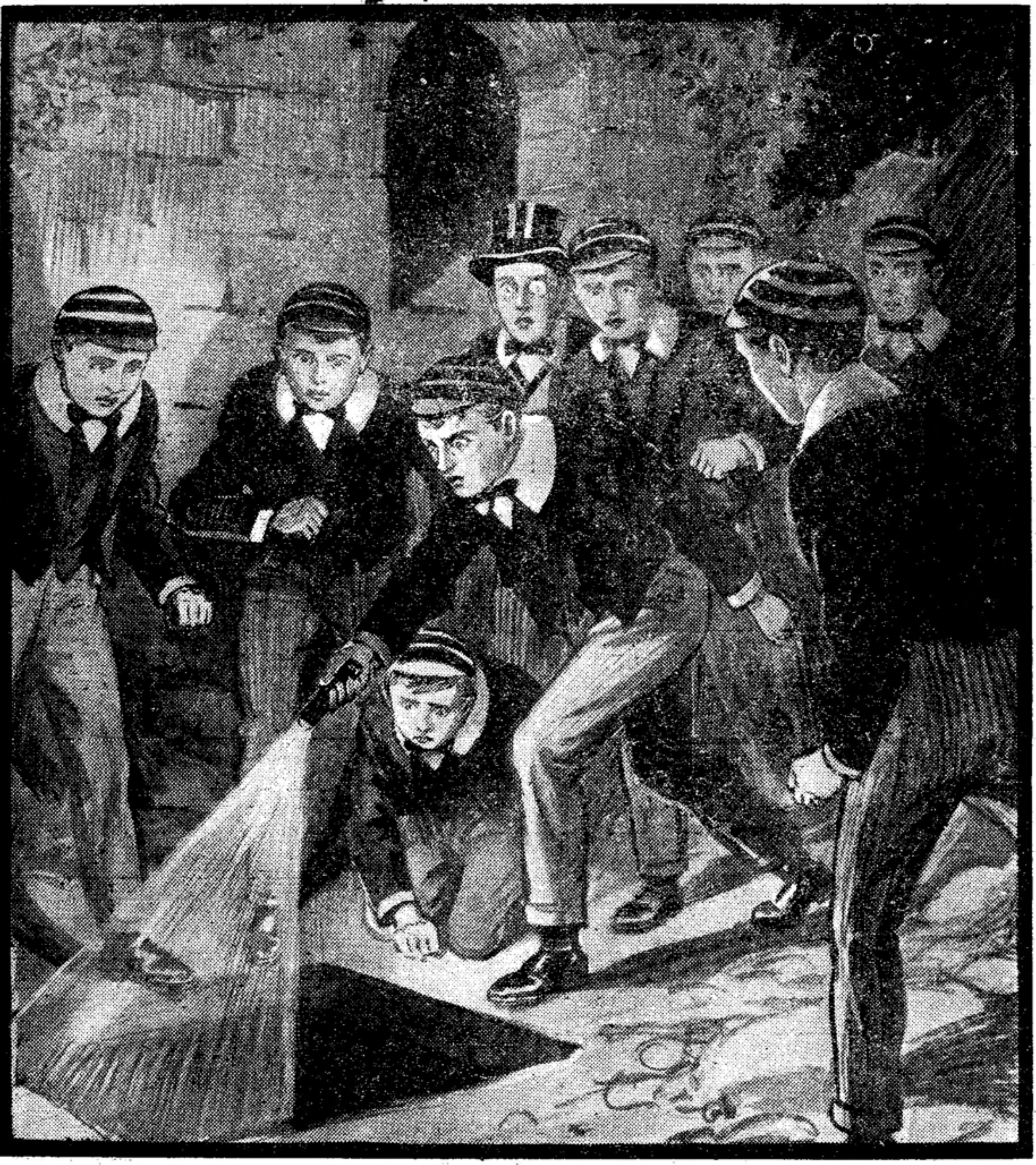


WILDRAKE TO THE RESCUE!

Don't Miss This Splendid Long Complete Tale of St. Jim's Inside.

WILDRAKE to the RESCUE!

A Grand Long Complete Story of the Chums of St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 1.
No Supporters.

"YOU fellows goin' out?"

D'Arcy of the Fourth raised his eyebrows as he asked that question. His manner was reproving.

"Yes, old top!" answered Tom Merry. "Coming?"

"Undah the circs, Tom Mewwy——"

"Jolly afternoon for a scout run," said Tom; "and for once it's not going to rain! Run and change your clobber, Gussy! We'll give you a minute and a half!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Half a dozen juniors had come out of the School House of St. Jim's, looking very sturdy and fit in scout garb. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell, and Blake, Herries, and Digby of the Fourth, were going on a "scout" run that afternoon; but Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the seventh member of the Curlew Patrol, was evidently not going to join them.

Arthur Augustus was dressed to kill, as Monty Lowther expressed it. He was sporting his handsomest waistcoat, his shiniest topper, and his trousers with the most beautiful crease. In that gorgeous clobber, Arthur Augustus would not have been much use for scouting.

"Weally, you fellows——" he began.

"We'll give you two minutes to change," said Tom Merry generously. "We're waiting for Wildrake, anyhow."

"Is Wildwake goin' out with you?"

"He is—he are!"

"Undah the circs——"

"What circs?" demanded Jack Blake. "Why the thump shouldn't we go for a scout run on a fine afternoon?"

"Pewwaps you fellows have forgotten what is happenin' this aftahnoon!" said Arthur Augustus, with stately reproval.

Tom Merry rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

He was not an absent-minded or forgetful youth; but for the life of him he could not recall anything special that was going to happen that Wednesday afternoon.

"There's no footer-match on," he said.

"Wats!"

"Well, what the dickens is going to happen?" demanded Tom Merry. "I wasn't aware of anything."

"You are awah that Monsieur Morny, our Fwench mastah, has left to pay a visit to his welations in Fwance, Tom Mewwy."

"What on earth about it?" queried Tom.

"You are also awah that anothah man is comin' to St. Jim's to take his place duwin' his absence?"

"Yes, ass!"

"If the Head had asked my advice," remarked Monty Lowther, "he wouldn't have troubled about getting in a substitute for Mossoo. We could have done without French lessons quite well for a couple of weeks. I know I could."

"Yaas, wathah; pewwaps it was a little thoughtless of the Head," said Arthur Augustus innocently. "We could have done without the beastly Fwench lessons, and saved the Head expense at the same time. Howevah, as the mattah stands, the new master is comin' this aftahnoon, to take Monsieur Morny's place while he is away."

"Let him come," said Tom. "Nothing for us to worry about, is there?"

"He is a wathah distinguished Fwench gentleman, named Labarre," said Arthur Augustus. "He fought against the Huns in the war, and was wounded, and has sevewal militawy cwosses and things."

"Good man!" said Tom Merry. "But what on earth has Monsieur Labarre to do with our scouting this afternoon?"

"I had an ideah——"

"You had an idea!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"Yaas!"

"O day worthy to be marked with a white stone!" exclaimed Lowther. "Gather round, my children, and lend your ears! Gussy has had an idea!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"The question now arises," continued Lowther, "whose idea was it?"

"My own, you uttah ass!"

"Oh!" Lowther looked disappointed. "In that case, it can't be a thing worth mentioning. Go and bury it!"

"Where's that ass Wildrake?" asked Blake, looking in at the doorway of the School House. "He's keeping us waiting."

"Give him time to change," said Tom Merry. "We only thought of asking him to join us at the last moment."

"Pway give me your attention, you fellows. I wepeat that I had an ideah. Monsieur Labarre is a vewy distinguished chap, and my ideah was that a select partay of St. Jim's chaps should meet him when he awwives and give him a little weception."

"Oh!"

"He is no end pluckay," argued Arthur Augustus. "He killed a lot of Huns, you know, and they nearly killed him. My ideah is that St. Jim's should show its appweciation of pluck by givin' him a weception. Moreovah, he is a foweign gentleman, and it would make him feel more at home if he made our acquaintance in a fwiendly way to begin with."

"Hear, hear!" said Tom Merry heartily. "Hallo! Here's Wildrake!"

Kit Wildrake came out of the School House in scout garb, his handsome, sun-browned face looking very cheerful. The junior from British Columbia was always glad to be out of doors; and he had joined the St. Jim's Boy Scouts with enthusiasm.

"I guess I'm ready," he said cheerily. "It hasn't taken me long to change; not so long as it would have taken Gussy, I reckon."

"Ha, ha! No!"

"Pway don't buzz off while I am talkin' to you!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus warmly. "I am, of course, vewy glad to see you youngstahs keen on scoutin'——"

"Why, you cheeky ass——"

"But I want you to wally wound me and give Monsieur Labarre a wousin' weception."

Tom Merry & Co. exchanged humorous glances.

They had the very kindest feelings possible towards Monsieur Labarre, that learned gentleman who, during the war, had abandoned conjugations and irregular verbs for bomb and bayonet, and had gallantly helped in downing the unspeakable Hun. But they felt that giving up the scout run for the afternoon would confer no special benefit upon the gallant Frenchman. And they hadn't the slightest intention of giving it up. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was the only Chesterfield at St. Jim's!

"It's no end of a ripping idea!" said Tom Merry. "Simply tip-top, in fact! You fellows will all agree that Gussy is the man to give Mossoo a handsome reception?"

"Hear, hear!"

"And we'll leave it to you, Gussy!" continued Tom Merry. "You can do it ever so much better than we can. Put in a word for me, you know——"

"And another for me!" said Monty Lowther.

"We can safely leave it in your hands, Gussy!" said Blake. "Now, then, you fellows, we've wasted too much time already."

"March!" said Tom Merry.

"Weally, you fellows——"

But the Boy Scouts were marching. Arthur Augustus gazed after them, with the aid of his celebrated eyeglass, in a perfectly withering manner. Heedless, and quite unwithered, Tom Merry & Co. turned out at the gates of St. Jim's, and disappeared from Gussy's indignant view.

CHAPTER 2.
Wildrake's Discovery.

TOM MERRY & CO. chuckled as they swung cheerily down the lane, heading for Wayland Woods. Kind as they felt towards Monsieur Labarre, they took no special interest in that gentleman, and his forthcoming arrival at St. Jim's did not excite them. It was only Gussy who ever thought of such polite stunts, and the cheery juniors were quite ready to leave Arthur Augustus to carry out the rousing reception all by himself. The sun was shining down in the lane, and a soft wind blew: the weather had brightened up after the late rains, and the juniors were feeling in the very best of spirits. Wildrake especially was looking happy and bright; the open air and the "wind on the heath" always elated the youth from the Boot Leg Ranch.

The winding lane the juniors were following led them into the Wayland Road, at a short distance from the market town, where the railway junction was. They sauntered along at an easy pace, chatting cheerily. Tom Merry explained to Wildrake as they went the scheme of the run.

"We start on the Wayland side of the wood, so that the run will take us home," he explained. "One chap is picked out to go ahead, and the patrol have to pick up his trail and run him down. He's given ten minutes' start to get clear. Of course, he's got to cover up his trail, and leave as little 'sign' as he can manage. There's a penalty attached—if he's caught, he has to stand a spread to the patrol. If he gets clear, the patrol stand him a spread. That's a rule of our own, not found in Baden-Powell's book," added Tom, laughing.

Wildrake laughed.

"I guess it's a jolly good rule," he said. "But with ten minutes' start, he ought to be able to make it a walk-over."

"No, that's another rule. Ten minutes' start to get clear—but he must stop for ten minutes during the second half-hour. That's left to his own sense of honour. Among pals the rule works all right."

"I guess I see."

"Blake's the hare this afternoon," said Tom. "That means he stands a spread in Study No. 6 to little us——"

"It jolly well doesn't!" grunted Jack Blake. "It means that you entertain me in Study No. 10."

"We shall see," said Tom Merry. "Remember, you'll have a giddy Wild Westerner on your trail—a chap who's tracked the merry bison on the Rocky Mountains——"

"I guess I haven't done that," said Kit Wildrake, laughing. "But I've done a good bit of trailing at home. I guess I could follow a horse, a steer, or a moose for fifty miles. This is no end of a good stunt!"

"Here's where we start," said Tom Merry, halting at the stile which opened on the woodland footpath from the Wayland High Road.

"Now, then, Blake——"

Jack Blake swung himself over the stile. "I'm off!" he said.

The Fourth-Former trotted down the path for a little distance, turned into the trees, and disappeared from sight.

Tom Merry, watch in hand, stood waiting and timing.

The juniors sat on the stile and the fence, to wait for the ten minutes to elapse.

The faint rustling made by Blake in the underwoods had died away, and all was still around them, save for a twittering of the birds in the wood.

"Time!" said Tom Merry at last.

And the Curlews swung themselves over the stile and started.

As soon as they were in the wood the juniors scattered to look for the "sign"; the curlew call was to be the signal for gathering if sign was found by any of the party.

Manners and Lowther, Digby and Herries, disappeared into the wood; but Kit Wildrake remained on the footpath at some distance from the stile, scanning the ground curiously. Tom Merry lingered to call to him.

"Come on, Wildrake!"

"Come and look at this," answered the Canadian junior.

Tom Merry came up a little impatiently. The rest were already getting on through the wood, and he did not want to lose time.

"My dear chap," he said, "there'll be no sign of Blake on the footpath. He's bound to be in the woods."

"I guess that's so. But there's some sign here that's pesky queer, and I guess it strikes me," answered Wildrake, with a puzzled and thoughtful look. "Let the other galoots get after Blake for a bit, old scout. Just look at this."

"I don't see——"

"Is this path much used?" asked Wildrake.

"Lots, in fine weather. It's a short cut through from Wayland to Rylcombe. It's rather too muddy in wet weather for people to use if they can help it. Why?"

"Somebody's been along it a short time ago," said Wildrake, his eyes still seeking the muddy, grassy path. "About an hour ago, I reckon."

"Very likely," said Tom. "What does it matter?"

"I guess it may matter a lot," said Wildrake seriously. "Have there ever been any hoboes—I mean, tramps—around these parts, who knock galoots on the head for what they've got in their sack?"

Tom Merry stared.

"Such things have happened, especially since the war," he said. "I suppose they've happened in every part of the country. What on earth are you getting at, Wildrake?"

"I'm getting at this—that some galoot, I believe, has been knocked on the head on this spot about an hour since," said Wildrake quietly.

"Phew!"

The chase was winding away through the woods now, and Blake and his pursuers were already distant. From somewhere in the depths of the wood came the echoing curlew call. It was answered by others from different directions. But neither Tom Merry nor Wildrake heeded it.

The scout run had brought them there, but it looked now—if Wildrake was right—as if a little more serious scouting had fallen their way. Tom Merry was on his knees now examining the sign that the quick-eyed junior from Canada had discovered.

"Right from the stile to this place there's the track of two men walking side by side," said Wildrake. "You noticed that?"

"Not specially," said Tom. "I just noticed there were some marks."

"There were two men," said Wildrake. "One, I reckon, a rather fat man—a good deal heavier than the other, anyhow."

"You mean his tracks were more deeply marked?"

"Yep. And the man walked with a limp."

Tom Merry opened his eyes.

"Look back a few yards," said Wildrake. "Pick out the tracks, and you'll see that the right foot is planted fair and square, and the left drags."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Baden Powell would be pleased with you, old chap," he said, with a smile.

"That much is simple enough, I guess," said Wildrake. "Now, the tracks end at this spot—that's what struck me."

"There's a track turning in under the trees——"

"A single track," said the Canadian quietly.

"By Jove, yes!"

"One man left the path and went into the wood," said Wildrake. "What became of the other? The ground's still soft, and would take any track, but there's none to be seen, either going on or going back, or going into the wood. The second man didn't vanish into thin air, I reckon."

"N-n-no!"

"And, look here—just under this tree, where the grass is crushed——"

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"Someone has lain down there," he said.

"Or fallen down."

"Ye-e-es!"

"Now look at the track going into the trees," continued the Canadian. "It's deeply marked—deeper than either on the footpath——"

"It must be the heavier man's, then."

Wildrake shook his head.

"There no sign of the limp," he said, "and it was the fatter man that limped."

"True," said Tom. "But—but this beats me! Why should the lighter man's tracks, after turning into the wood, be deeper than the heavier man's on the footpath?"

"Because he was carrying something—something durned heavy!" said the Canadian.

Tom jumped.

"Good heavens, Wildrake! You—you mean he was carrying the other man?"

"Sure!"

Tom Merry felt his heart throb strangely. Was it a tragedy that the St. Jim's scouts had happened upon that afternoon in the shadows of Wayland Wood?

So far as a trail could tell a story, that was the story it told. Two men had reached that shadowy, lonely spot—and one had vanished without leaving a sign. And the tracks of the other, winding away into the wood, showed that he had been carrying a heavy burden. And the marks on the soil where a body had lain——

Tom shuddered. Had a felon blow been struck in that very spot only an hour or two before the schoolboy scouts came on the scene? Was it a stunned man or a murdered man that had been borne away into the desolate depths of the wood on the shoulders of the wretch who had struck him down?

The two juniors looked at one another.

"Good heavens!" muttered Tom. "Never mind the scout run now. We're following this up, Wildrake."

"I guess that's what I was thinking," said the Canadian junior quietly. "It was a good hour ago. The man, whoever he is, may have been gone from this quarter a long time. On the other hand, he mayn't. You understand, old scout? If we follow this trail, we may be running on either a thief or a—a——"

"Or a murderer!" said Tom Merry.

"Sure!"

"I'm game," said Tom resolutely. "We've got our staves, and there are two of us. Come on!"

"Good man!" said Wildrake.

There was no sound of the curlew call now. The rest of the scouts were too far away, in the direction of the school. But Tom Merry and Wildrake had given up all thought of the scout run they had started upon. The terrible thought was in their minds that the body of a murdered man might be hidden in the wood, or a man injured and helpless from the blow he had received, and it was their duty to discover the truth, and give immediate information to the police. And with steady nerves, though their hearts were beating, the two juniors grasped their staves, and plunged into the deep shadows of the wood.

CHAPTER 3.

The Reception That Did Not Come Off!

"WOTTEN!" said Arthur Augustus.

From the point of view of the swell of St. Jim's, the state of affairs was exceedingly "rotten."

After the departure of the Curlew Patrol, Arthur Augustus had by no means given up his idea of a "rousing reception" for the distinguished Monsieur Labarre.

Tom Merry & Co. were gone, but there were others.

So the noble Gussy proceeded to make a round of the Lower School, seeking support for his nobby ideas.

He was surprised and exasperated to find that nobody but himself was keen on it at all. Chesterfieldian politeness seemed to be at a discount in the Lower School of St. Jim's.

Talbot of the Shell would have been pleased—at least, he said so—but he was going out with Miss Marie. Kangaroo was going home with Bernard Glyn that afternoon. Study No. 5—Julian, Kerruish, Reilly, and Hammond—were keen on football practice. Levison, Clive, and Cardew, of Study No. 9, were also at footer, Cardew especially being quite keen on the game. His enthusiasms were short-lived, but quite keen while they lasted. Gore had lines to do. Skimpole was deep in abstruse literature. Grundy, Wilkins, and Gunn had gone out. Racke and Crooke, to whom Arthur Augustus applied on the verge of despair, laughed at the idea quite rudely, and Arthur Augustus very nearly came to blows with them.

Then the swell of St. Jim's crossed over to the New House. But there he found the same plentiful lack of enthusiasm.

Figgins & Co. hadn't any use for rousing receptions. Redfern, Owen, and Lawrence told him to go and eat coke. Pratt had a fight on with Chowle, and so wasn't able to oblige.

And Arthur Augustus blew out into the quadrangle again, and announced to the desert air that it was "wotten."

It really looked as if Arthur Augustus—if he wanted the distinguished French gentleman to have a rousing reception at all—would have to mange the affair "on his lonely own."

A reception by one person, however important and elegant, could hardly be described as rousing. But Arthur Augustus considered that it was better than nothing, on the principle that half a loaf was better than no bread. So he meandered into Mr. Railton's study to inquire the exact time when the French gentleman was arriving.

The School House master regarded him curiously.

"You see, sir, I should like to meet the gentleman at the station," explained Arthur Augustus. "I undahstand that he was vewy distinguished in the war, and he would pwobably be gwatified by a little polite attention fwom his future pupils."

Mr. Railton smiled.

"There is no objection to your meeting Monsieur Labarre at the station, D'Arcy, if you wish," he said. "I believe he arrives at Wayland Junction at two-thirty."

"Bai Jove! It's past that now," said Arthur Augustus.

"Whether he will take the local train to Rylcombe, or walk through the woods. I do not know," said Mr. Railton. "Probably he will take the train, as he is quite a stranger here, and doubtless would not know his way without a guide."

"All wight, then," said Arthur Augustus. "I shall be able to catch him at Wylcombe, sir. It's an awf'ly slow twain fwom Wayland. Would you mind tellin' me what he is like, sir, as there may be othah Fwenchmen wunnin' about."

Mr. Railton shook his head with a smile.

"I really do not know, D'Arcy. Monsieur Labarre is a stranger here—and, indeed, in England. He has only recently come over from Paris, and was engaged through the Head's usual agents in London. I am afraid I cannot help you."

"Then I will twust to luck, sir," said Arthur Augustus.

Mr. Railton glanced after him, and smiled again, as he left the study. The Housemaster had often been entertained by the Grandisonian youth.

Arthur Augustus stayed only to give his silk hat a final polish, and then started for Rylcombe.

He walked unusually fast, for him. It was no time for cultivating the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

It seemed pretty certain that Monsieur Gaston Lebarre would take the local train from the junction, and in that case Arthur Augustus had just about time to meet it at the village station.

He was quite warm with exercise when he walked into the little country station of Rylcombe at last.

"Twain in fwom Wayland?" he called out.

"Jest in, sir," answered old Trumble.

"Thank you!"

Arthur Augustus ran on to the platform.

The train was disgorging its passengers. Arthur Augustus jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and scanned them as they moved towards the exit.

There were a dozen passengers, but not one of them that could possibly have been a Frenchman.

"Wotten!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I suppose he's lost the twain, bein' a sillay foweignah, and is comin' on by the next. He wouldn't walk fwom Wayland unless somebody met him there and showed him the way. Besides, Fwenchmen are not fond of walkin'. I'd bettah wait for the next twain."

The next train from the junction was not due for an hour.

Arthur Augustus walked up and down the platform, and wondered, perhaps, whether Grandisonian politeness was a game quite worth the candle. But the noble Gussy was a sticker, and he waited heroically through the hour.

Again the local train rolled in from Wayland.

Again Arthur Augustus scanned the passengers eagerly.

And again he was disappointed. Every passenger that alighted was most indubitably British to the backbone.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. "This is what I call weally, distinctly wotten! The uttah ass must have lost the twain again! Or—or pewwaps he took a taxi fwom Wayland!"

The dismaying thought came rather late.

The run from Wayland in a taxi was a long one, and a French tutor was probably not wealthy enough to pay excessive fares, as a rule. But as a stranger in the locality, unguided, it was possible that Monsieur Lebarre had incurred the expense for once.

"Weally," murmured Arthur Augustus, as he headed for the station exit, "I wegard this as an uttahly wotten and unpwofitable aftahnoon. I weally might as well have gone scoutin', especially as those chaps will pwobably get into some

"Come and look at this," shouted Wildrake. Tom Merry came up a little impatiently and examined the sign that the quick-eyed junior from Canada had discovered. (See page 4).

twouble without me to look aftah them. I have a vewy gweat wespect for Monsieur Labarre, but I must say that I wegard him as a wathah exaspewatin' ass!"

And Arthur Augustus started home to St. Jim's, his noble countenance expressing much less than its usual urbanity.

Three fags of the Third were disputing near the gates when he came in—D'Arcy minor, Reggie Manners, and Frank Levison. Arthur Augustus called to his minor.

"Wally, deah boy!"

"Hallo, cocky!" answered D'Arcy minor.

"Do you know whethah the new Fwench mastah has awwived, Wally?" asked Arthur Augustus, for once leaving his minor's disrespectful mode of address unrebuked.

"Chap with a nose and a moustache?" asked Wally.

"I pwesume he has a nose, and vewy pwobably he has a moustache, Wally."

"Looks rather a beast," said Manners minor.

"Weally, Weggie——"

"He's come, Gussy," said Levison minor, laughing. "Walked in about half an hour ago. I showed him to the Head."

"Bai Jove! He did not come in a taxi aftah all, then?"

"Walked in, old bean."

"Then he must have walked fwom Wayland. That is weally wathah odd for a complete stwangah heah. Of course, he didn't know I was waitin' for him at Wylcombe!" said Arthur Augustus ruefully.

"What the merry thump were you waiting for him at Rylcombe for?" demanded Wally. "You don't know the covey, do you?"

"Pway do not use such a word as covey, Wally! It is howwid. No, I do not know the gentleman," said Arthur Augustus. "I was goin' to give him a polite weception because he is a wathah distinguished foweigner——"

"Same old Gussy!" chuckled D'Arcy minor. "Always playing the goat, and always getting left."

"Weally, Wally——"

"Poor old Froggy's had a narrow escape!" remarked Reggie Manners. "Fancy Gussy dawning all at once on a foreigner! The poor chap would have thought he'd dropped into the Zoo by mistake."

"You cheeky young wascal, Weggie——"

Wally shook a rather grubby forefinger at his indignant major.

"With your face, Gussy," he said, "you should be careful how you do these things. With your features——"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus walked on loftily, with his noble nose high in the air. He left the three fags chuckling.

The swell of St. Jim's entered the School House. If Monsieur Labarre had arrived half an hour ago, doubtless his interview with the Head was well over, and he would be ensconced in his quarters—the study belonging to Monsieur Morny before the latter gentleman left. And to Monsieur Morny's study Arthur Augustus wended his way. He had not been able to give the distinguished French gentleman a reception. But he felt that it was up to him to mention to Monsieur Labarre that he had intended to give him a reception. And with that intention in his mind Gussy tapped at the door of the French master's study. He started a little as a hard, unpleasant voice rapped out:

"Entrez donc!"

"Bai Jove! His voice isn't very agweeable!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Howevah, he is pwobably a vewy nice man."

And he entered the study.

CHAPTER 4.
Two on the Trail!

Kit Wildrake led the way into the wood, his eyes keenly open for "sign," and Tom Merry followed him. Tom was patrol leader, but he was still very willing to give the lead now to the Canadian junior. The boy from the Boot Leg Ranch had had experience, such as, of course, had never fallen to the lot of a schoolboy scout in a quiet English countryside. And Wildrake's skill in woodcraft was evident from the start. With scarcely a pause he led the way, winding through gnarled trees and pushing through briar and bramble. When he did pause it was only for a moment or two. He found "sign" again at once.

He stopped at last and held up his hand to Tom. In the midst of a thicket he pointed with his stave to deep marks in the soft ground, softened by the recent rains. Tom Merry examined them keenly. A man had lain down—or a body had lain—at full length, and near at hand was the plain trace where another man had sat in the grassy thicket, and close by was a cigarette-end and a burnt match.

To the keen scout the traces told their own tale.

The man whose track they were following had set down his burden there in the thicket, and sat down to rest. Doubtless he had found the burden heavy, for the burden was a man, whether living or dead, heavier than himself. He had sat for a time and rested, and smoked a cigarette while he did so. The two juniors looked carefully for further traces, and Wildrake picked up the end of a second cigarette.

"He smoked two, then!" said Tom.

Wildrake nodded.

"They're the same brand," he said—"fat Turkish cigarettes, rather an expensive luxury, I believe, in these days. And this match is a wax vesta—nothing to identify it, but every trifle counts. We'll keep these for future reference."

"Yes, rather."

Wildrake carefully placed the cigarette-ends and the burnt match, wrapped in a leaf torn from his pocket-book, in his wallet.

Then he examined the further track.

"The trail goes on deeper into the wood," he said. "We've covered about three hundred yards so far. No wonder the galoot was tired, with a heavy man on his back!"

"But he smoked cigarettes while he rested!" said Tom. "Could a man be wretch enough, could he have nerve enough, to sit and smoke by the body of a man he had—had——" He broke off.

"I guess there are plenty of galoots with nerve enough for that," said Wildrake. "But unless I'm out in my reckoning, the man he carried wasn't dead."

"Stunned, then, or he would not have gone quietly," said Tom.

"Stunned or tied up, after being knocked down on the footpath."

"I—I'm glad you think it was not a murder," said Tom, with a shiver. "But how do you work it out, Wildrake?"

"There was no trace of blood where the man fell on the footpath, there's no trace of blood here while the other man rested. He could scarcely have been killed by a blow that did not draw blood," said the Canadian quietly. "Of course, it's possible; but I guess it's not likely."

"That's so. You're sure——"

"I've spotted every inch of ground and grass. There's not a speck of blood. And if he bled there would be a drop at least, I guess. Even if he was bandaged I guess there would be a trace of it, all the way from the footpath to here, and where he was laid down. But there isn't. And there's galoots who could sit and smoke by a body, but not a crowd of such fire-bugs, I reckon. I guess the man who was carried was alive."

Tom Merry nodded and drew a deep breath of relief.

But he was perplexed.

"I think you're right," he said, "but that only makes it deeper—too deep for me to see through. A man might carry a body into the wood to hide. Why should he carry a living man?"

"That beats me for the present."

"If he had robbed the man he might shove him out of sight behind the trees, stunned, but he wouldn't carry him this distance. He would have no object," said Tom. "He would just shove him out of sight and bolt with his plunder."

"Correct!"

"Then why——"

Wildrake shook his head.

"I guess you're asking me too much," he said. "We'll find out more farther on the trail, perhaps. Let's push on."

He led the way again.

The trail was even easier to follow now, for it led into almost the thickest part of the wood.

There were torn brambles where the unknown man had pushed through, as well as the "sign" in the soil.

So easy was the trail now that the two eager juniors pushed on side by side, keeping their eyes well about them, and their staves ready for use.

"The man was no stranger in this section, I guess," Wildrake remarked in a low voice.

"How do you make that out, Wildrake?"

"He's come almost in a direct line from the footpath here. And there's no path and no indication of any kind for him to have followed. He's heading for some spot he knows."

"It looks like it," assented Tom.

"Hallo, there's water ahead!"

The glimmer of water could be seen through the bushes, reflecting back the rays of the sun that filtered through the tree-tops overhead.

"That's the feeder," said Tom. "It flows through the wood, and joins the river a mile or two from here."

They came out of the trees on the bank of the little stream.

Here the ground was more open, and there was a stony tract along the rivulet where they stood. Wildrake was some time hunting for "sign" now, but he nodded in a satisfied way at last.

"He came right down to the water," he said, "and entered it. There's no sign of wet where he might have come out again. I guess he followed the water for some distance. It's shallow. An old Indian dodge in the West to avoid leaving a trail."

"Do you think he suspected his trail might be followed?"

"Nope. I don't reckon that seemed possible to him; he couldn't know some scouts from St. Jim's were going to happen along this afternoon." Wildrake smiled. "But caution is second nature to a crook. He had to cross the stream, I guess, to get to his destination, wherever that is, and he would naturally walk along in the water for some distance, not because he thought anybody would be trailing him, but to make assurance doubly sure. I guess if we want his trail now we shall have to go up and down the stream and examine the bank on the other side."

"The stream's fordable all the way," said Tom. "I know this ground well, of course. We can get across where we like, wading to the waist."

Wildrake looked thoughtful.

"Of course, you'd know this wood like your book," he said. "I guess you've done a lot of scouting around here."

"Lots!" said Tom, with a smile.

"Then you might be able to guess what he's heading for," said Wildrake.

Tom thought it out.

"He's heading direct for something, that's clear," continued the Canadian. "He's carrying that man to some particular spot he's got in his mind. Whatever his object is, the open wood won't suit him, or he'd have stopped before this. He knows the ground, and he's looking for a special place. Is there any sort of building in this wood?"

"Yes, rather!"

"Good!" Wildrake's eyes gleamed. "Where—and what?"

"There's the old monk's cell, the other side of this stream, some distance on," said Tom. "It's quite a ruin, but there's an underground passage from it to the ruined castle at Wayland. We've been through it—a chap was lost there once—Cardew of the Fourth. If a man was looking for a place to hide, and knew the ground, that's a good place——"

"I guess we needn't worry about picking up a sign for a bit, then," said Wildrake. "Let's head for the monk's cell."

"Come on!"

The two scouts waded across the stream in the shallowest spot, and tramped up the bank on the other side.

Leaving the rivulet behind, they plunged into the wood, and now Tom Merry was leading the way.

For half a mile or so they threaded their way through the thick woods, almost untrodden by human foot; for to that remote and dense section of the wood few ever penetrated.

Wildrake uttered a sudden low exclamation.

"We're right, old scout! Look here!"

He tapped the ground with his stave. The deeply-marked track of the man who was carrying a burden had suddenly appeared again. Close by the hermit's cell, the juniors came on it—proof positive that the ancient penitent's abode was the destination of the unknown.

"I—I wonder if we're far behind him!" breathed Tom.

"A good hour, I reckon!"

"Come on!"

The most direct path to the ruined cell was that marked by the deep tracks of the man with the burden. With wary eyes, the two juniors came up to the little dismantled building, half-buried in creepers and moss. Of the cell which had sheltered the hermit in ancient days only part of the walls remained—the roof and the upper walls had long fallen in. The interior was a mass of ruins and moss and creepers and brambles.

"There's a flat stone here that opens on the underground passage," said Tom Merry. "Chaps explore the place sometimes—not often. It's a rotten, dark creepy place. But a lot of lumber seems to have fallen on the slab now. It's covered up."

Wildrake examined the interior of the hermit's cell keenly. Amid the broken masonry the track of the man with the burden was lost. No trace of the man or his burden was to be seen.

"He can't have taken to the underground passage," said Tom. "You can see the slab has half a ton of rubbish piled on it. He couldn't have done that after going down."

Wildrake nodded.

"I guess I'm rather beat!" he said. "The man knew this place, and came here for some reason—that's a sure cinch. But did he go away again? Let's take a look round."

They left the cell, and made an examination of the vicinity. The light was failing in the woods now, and the growing dusk rendered their task more difficult.

But Wildrake called to his comrade at last:

"This way!"

Tom hurried to join him.

"Here's the man's track," said Wildrake, pointing it out with his stave. "You can see it's the same track. After coming here, he struck off in this direction — goodness knows why. Let's follow!"

The task grew harder as the dusk deepened, but Wildrake seemed to have the eyes of a hawk.

He paused many times, and once or twice he seemed at a loss, but always he came on again, with renewed determination. The last glimmer of daylight was going when the juniors emerged into a beaten footpath.

"You know this path?" asked Wildrake.

"Yes—it branches off the main footpath—the one we started on. This leads from the main footpath into Rylcombe Lane, half a mile from St. Jim's."

"He followed it," said Wildrake. He was examining the ground carefully with the aid of a flash-lamp now. "I guess I can't be mistaken. His tracks are a bit dim here on the path; but their direction as they come out of the wood showed that he turned this way. It's also our way home, which is all to the good."

The juniors, greatly surprised now, followed the footpath till they came to a stile giving access to Rylcombe Lane. They clambered over into the road, and there they stopped.

In the dusk they looked at one another curiously.

"This beats me!" said Tom Merry. "It's dark now, but if the man was an hour ahead of us—much more than that, considering the time we've spent picking up the trail—he must have come out here in broad daylight."

"Sure!"

"He couldn't do that, carrying a stunned man on his back, without being spotted at once by somebody."

"Sure!" said Wildrake again.

"No chance of picking up a trail on this road," said Tom. "We'd better get on to St. Jim's, Wildrake. We're late for locking-up already."

Wildrake nodded, and the two juniors tramped along towards the school. Both were in deep thought.

That some scene of violence had occurred in the wood—that an unknown man had borne his victim away on his shoulders there—they were assured. But the strange ending of the trail baffled them. They were thinking whether they should report the affair to the police. But such vague and baffling information would scarcely be listened to. All they could say depended on what their knowledge of scoutcraft had derived from tracks in the wood—and that was scarcely tangible enough for the police. Something more definite had to be learned first. But that was not all that Wildrake was thinking of. He was puzzled, perplexed, exasperated by the strange and unforeseen ending of the trail. He wrinkled his brows over the problem. The juniors reached the gates of the school, and found them, as they expected, locked.

"You report yerselves to Mr. Railton!" grumbled Taggles, as he let them in.

"Has Blake come in?" asked Tom Merry.

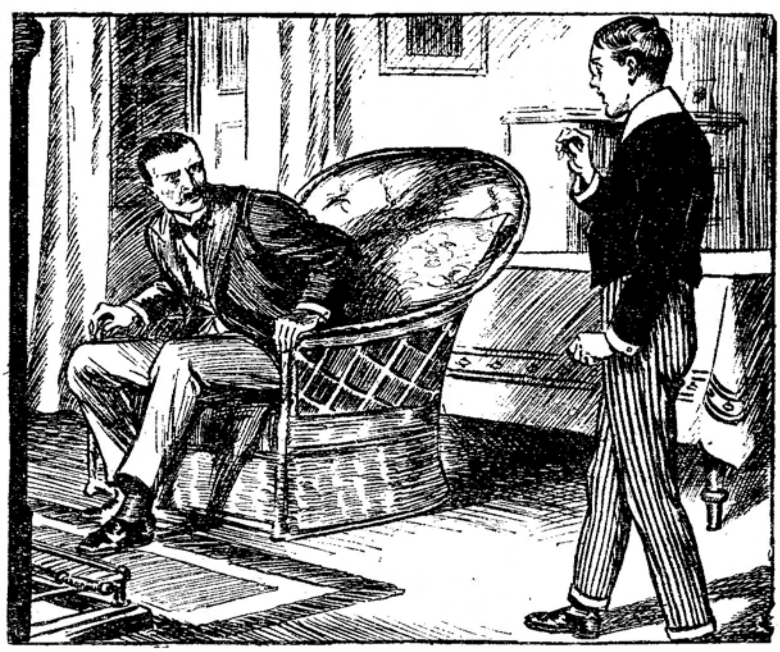
"Yes, Master Merry."

Tom and Wildrake crossed the dusky quad to the School House. Wildrake uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Fool!"

"Hallo!" ejaculated Tom. "Is that for me?"

"No—little me!" said Wildrake ruefully. "I ought to have guessed—of course, it's as clear as daylight!"



"I really do not understand you!" snapped Monsieur Labarre. "I had no difficulty whatever in getting here, as I took the local train to Rylcombe." Arthur Augustus jumped. The amazement was so evident in his face that Monsieur Labarre gave him a stare of enquiry. (See page 8.)

"What is?" asked Tom, mystified.

"You remember after we left the old cell the track was more difficult to follow and——"

"Yes; it was getting dark——"

"Not only that—the track was not so deep. And the man came right on, out into the Rylcombe road, where, of course, he couldn't have carried his burden without being seen. Fool that I was not to see! He left the man he was carrying in the wood——"

"But we should have found——"

"At the monk's cell," said Wildrake. "Don't you see? We found a lot of rubbish piled on the slab! He piled it there, after raising the slab and putting the stunned man in the underground place——"

"Good heavens, Wildrake——"

"That's the only way of fixing up the bizney," said Wildrake, with conviction. "Alive or dead, the fat man was put out of sight under the old cell—and the trail we followed to the road was the trail of the man leaving the place after disposing of the body."

Tom Merry stopped, and blinked at the Canadian in the dusk. Wildrake's eyes were glittering with excitement.

"I—I suppose you're right," said Tom at last. "That makes it all clear. But —but——" He faltered. "In that case, it—it was a body that the villain was hiding——"

"Not necessarily—it might be a prisoner. Heaven only knows who the man was, or what his game was. But the man he carried, alive or dead, is hidden under the hermit's cell at this very moment!" exclaimed Wildrake, with conviction.

"It—it looks like it!"

"Not a word now," said Wildrake hurriedly, in a low voice. "We've got to see into this—we've got to find out the facts and bring the police on the scene. But we've got to get the facts first."

"That's so. But——"

"Let's get in now," said Wildrake. "We've got to get back to the old cell and search—— But we'd better take some of the other fellows with us. We've got a desperate man to deal with, and if he should be there—— Let's get in now, and have a pow-wow with the other fellows about it before we decide what to do."

"Right!" said Tom.

And the juniors went into the School House in a deeply-thoughtful mood, their hearts beating unusually fast.

CHAPTER 5.
D'Arcy is Not Quite Pleased!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY entered the French master's study after the rather rasping voice within had pronounced the words: "Entrez donc!" Arthur Augustus had worked up his best smile, but it faded a little as he saw the French gentleman seated in the armchair that had belonged to Monsieur Morny.

Monsieur Labarre, the temporary French master, was not a prepossessing-looking gentleman.

He had a very dark face, a large hooked nose, and very black eyebrows and moustache, and his eyes were black and very shiny. His glance fixed on Arthur Augustus in a penetrating way that made the swell of St. Jim's feel a little uncomfortable. Monsieur Labarre was dressed in a black frock-coat which fitted him perfectly, his linen was of the whitest, and there was a handsome ring on his hand and a very handsome pin in his tie. Arthur Augustus generally found his heart warm towards any fellow who had a really good tailor. But, in spite of Monsieur Labarre's quite elegant get-up, Arthur Augustus did not like his looks. The most casual glance would have discerned that the French master was a hard man to deal with.

"Pway excuse me, sir," began Arthur Augustus gracefully.

"Allons donc!" said the French master. "I have been in the school less than an hour. I am fatigued from my journey. I have no duties that must be done to-day. I shall meet my pupils to-morrow."

"Bai Jove! I have not called upon you in connection with lessons, my deah sir!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, seeing that there was a misapprehension.

"What do you desire, then?"

"Pewwaps you will allow me to explain, sir," said D'Arcy. "You see, sir, we know all about you——"

"Quoi?"

The Frenchman half rose. He sat down again at once.

"What do you mean?" he snapped.

"I mean that you are vewy well known heah alweady, sir," said Arthur Augustus. "We know all about you killin' the Huns, sir, and all that, and we are vewy pwoud to welcome a hewo of the Fwench Army to St. Jim's."

"Oh!" said Monsieur Labarre. "Is that all?"

Arthur Augustus felt discouraged.

"I feah, sir, that you had a wathah twoublesome walk heah fwom Wayland," he said. "As a stwangah——"

"I really do not understand you," snapped Monsieur Labarre. "I had no difficulty whatever in getting here, as I took the local train to Rylcombe."

Arthur Augustus jumped.

His amazement was so evident in his face that Monsieur Labarre gave him a stare of inquiry.

"What is the matter?" he demanded. "Why are you staring at me like that, boy?"

"Bai Jove! You—you took the local twain to Wylcombe fwom Wayland Junction, sir?" babbled Arthur Augustus.

The Frenchman eyed him steadily.

"Why should that surprise you, mon garcon?" he asked, in a rather more conciliatory manner.

"I weally do not know how I could have missed you, you see," said Arthur Augustus. "I waited for both twains——"

"You—you waited for the trains?"

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"Mais pourquoi? Why did you wait for the trains?"

"I was goin' to meet you at the station, you see, sir—I wegarded that as the pwopah thing to do, undah the circs," explained Arthur Augustus. "My ideah was a wousin' weception, but the fellows did not play up. So I came along to the station on my own, you see."

"I—I see."

"It is weally extwaordinawy how I could have missed you, when I was waitin' on the platform all the time, isn't it, sir?" said Arthur Augustus innocently.

"Not at all extraordinary," answered Monsieur Labarre, "as it happens that I did not get out of the train in time, but went on to the next station by accident."

"Oh, that explains it!" said Arthur Augustus. "You went on to Woodale instead of gettin' out at Wylcombe?"

"Precisely."

"Then you had a wathah long walk to the school?"

"Mais oui, and I am very tired," said Monsieur Labarre. "It was foolish of me; but, as a complete stranger in the district——"

"Yaas, wathah, such things do happen," said Arthur Augustus sagely. "I have sometimes got out at the w'ong station myself. I am vewy sowwy, sir, and I twust you had a vewy agweeable walk fwom Woodale."

"Quite agreeable, thank you, but very fatiguing," said Monsieur Labarre. "My —my old wound troubles me a little if I over-exert myself. I am very much obliged to you, mon garcon, for your intended kindness. I regret that you waited at the station for nothing."

Monsieur Labarre made a gesture which showed that the interview was over.

Arthur Augustus retired from the study.

He was feeling rather disappointed in the new French master.

"I weally might just as well have gone out with the scouts!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "Monsieur Labarre looks wathah a bit of a boundah—not at all a decent chap, like old Morny. I feel wathah glad that he is only goin' to be heah for a fortnight. Bai Jove! Is that you, Blake, deah boy?"

Jack Blake came in, smiling and serene.

"Beaten them hollow!" he remarked.

"Whom have you beaten, deah boy?"

"Those asses who call themselves scouts!" answered Blake. "Blessed if I know where they are! I sat down and read the 'Boys' Herald' for a good quarter of an hour in the wood, and they never came near. That chap Wildrake isn't such a corker at following a trail as he guesses!"

"Congwatulations, old chap!" said Arthur Augustus cordially. "Wathah luckay for you I didn't go with the scouts!"

"Why?" demanded Blake.

"You would have been wun down, you know."

"Fathead!" was Blake's polite reply. And he tramped away to change out of his scout garb.

Herries and Digby, Manners and Lowther came in soon afterwards, and they found Arthur Augustus lounging elegantly in the doorway.

"Blake in?" they all demanded at once.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"He gave us the slip somehow," said Manners. "I suppose Tom Merry and Wildrake are still hunting for him. Oh, I'm tired!"

And the scouts went in.

They gathered to tea in Study No. 6 in the Fourth, but Tom Merry and Wildrake had not put in an appearance.

"Those youngstahs have lost themselves, or somethin'," Arthur Augustus remarked. "I was afwaid somethin' would go w'ong if I did not go with you. It is weally vewy unfortunate."

"Bow-wow!" said Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"It's jolly queer they don't come in, though," remarked Blake. "They can't be hunting for me in the wood all this time."

"Wathah not. I weally wish I had come now," said D'Arcy. "I am wathah disappointed in Monsieur Labarre, and I feel that I have wathah wasted my aftahnoon on an undeservin' object."

Monty Lowther grinned.

"How did the reception come off?" he asked.

"It did not come off at all, Lowthah, and there is nothin' whatevah to gwin at! While I was waitin' for the silly ass at Wylcombe, he went on as fah as Woodale, thwough a mistake in not gettin' out of the twain."

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

"There is nothin' whatevah to cackle at, you fellows! It was wathah wotten for me to be walkin' up and down the station, while that uttah ass was goin' on by mistake!"

"Jolly queer mistake for him to

make," said Manners. "The name of the station is up plain enough, and the train stops two or three minutes. Must be a howling ass to have gone on in it!"

"Yaas, wathah! And he did not seem weally pleased about my ideah of givin' him a weception."

"Probably thought you were a silly ass!" suggested Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies——"

"Why the thump doesn't Tom come in?" said Manners. "It will be call-over soon. I think I'll cut down to the gates."

Manners and Lowther went down to the gates to look out for their chum. They stayed there till Taggles came out to lock up. They returned to the School House, rather perplexed by the continued absence of the Canadian junior and Tom Merry. The two juniors were marked absent at call-over. After that Manners and Lowther waited at the door of the School House for them, wondering what might possibly have happened. Baggy Trimble came along, and cheerfully suggested that perhaps Wildrake had taken Tom Merry with him "on the razzle," a suggestion for which Baggy was rewarded by a kick. He did not remain to make any more suggestions.

"Where the merry dickens have they got to?" growled Lowther. "I shall begin to think that something has happened soon."

"Not turned up yet, deah boys?" Arthur Augustus joined them in the hall.

"No," grunted Manners. "It's jolly queer."

"Vewy unfortunate, indeed. But I had a feelin' that somethin' would go w'ong if I wasn't there——"

"Ass!"

"Weally, Mannahs——"

"Fathead!"

"Mr. Wailton and the new French mastah can heah your oppwobwious wemarks, Lowthah!" said Arthur Augustus, with chilly dignity.

"Oh!" ejaculated Lowther.

Mr. Railton was coming along, in company with Monsieur Labarre. Manners and Lowther glanced rather curiously at the Frenchman. It was the first time they had seen Monsieur Morny's substitute. The two masters did not glance at the juniors. They were chatting in French, a language Mr. Railton knew well, having improved his knowledge of it considerably during his term of service in Flanders. The Housemaster and Monsieur Labarre went into the former's study, evidently for a smoke and a chat. Monty Lowther grinned faintly.

"Railton's going to fight old battles over again with Mossoo!" he remarked. "If you ask me, the delight is all on our merry Housemaster's side. That Froggy had a shifty look, to my eye. He's afraid Railton is going to bore him."

"Probably he is," yawned Manners. "Where the merry thump is that silly ass Tom and that howling duffer Wildrake?"

It was a quarter of an hour later that two shadowy forms loomed up in the quadrangle.

"Oh, here they are!" said Manners, in relief.

Tom Merry and Wildrake came in. Both of them looked rather tired and dusty and unusually serious.

"Lost yourselves?" asked Manners.

"I guess not."

"Then where the thump have you been all this time?"

"I'll tell you after we've seen Railton," said Tom. "We've got to report. You fellows get something to eat in the study. I suppose you've had tea——"

"What do you think?" said Lowther, with emphasis.

"Well, get something for us, there's a good chap, while we jaw with Railton," said Tom. "And get Study No. 6 along. We've got something to tell the lot of you."

"Bai Jove! Has anythin' happened?" inquired Arthur Augustus.

"Yes."

"I knew somethin' would happen if I wasn't there!" said Arthur Augustus, with a nod. "I am not at all surpwised."

Tom Merry laughed.

"Buck up with some tea for us!" he said. "We sha'n't be a few minutes with Railton. But we've got to report our giddy arrival. Come on, Wildrake!"

"But what——" began Manners.

"We'll tell you in the study."

"Oh, all right!"

Manners and Lowther went up to No 10 in the Shell to get "something to eat" ready for the late-comers in a rather puzzled frame of mind. Tom Merry and Wildrake proceeded towards Mr. Railton's study.

"Wailton isn't alone, you chaps," said Arthur Augustus. "He's got the new Fwench mastah, Monsieur Labarre——"

"All the better. He won't keep us long," said Tom.

"I am wathah disappointed in Labarre," said Gussy. "He seems to be wathah a sillay ass, you know, missin' a chap who was waitin' for him at the station——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! If you cackle like tha othah asses, you know——" began Arthur Augustus warmly.

But the two scouts walked on, unheeding, and Arthur Augustus turned to the stairs, to go up to No. 6, and call his chums to the meeting in Tom Merry's study. Meanwhile, Tom Merry tapped at the Housemaster's door, and in response to Mr. Railton's deep-toned "Come in!" the two juniors entered, looking as meek and contrite as they could at short notice.

CHAPTER 6.
Wildrake Receives a Shock!

MR. RAILTON'S study looked very cosy and comfortable. There was a bright fire blazing, and on either side of it an arm-chair was drawn up. In one deep chair sat the Housemaster, with his pipe in his hand; in the other, the new French master, who was smoking a cigarette. Both of them glanced at the juniors as the latter came in.

Mr. Railton smiled slightly.

He was rather a stickler for discipline and punctuality, but he could make allowances for enthusiastic Boy Scouts who overstayed their time.

"Ah, you have returned!" he said.

"Yes, sir," said Tom Merry. "We have——"

"You have been scouting, I see."

"Yes, we had a scout run this afternoon, sir," said Tom Merry meekly. "We're awfully sorry to be late for call-over."

"I guess we couldn't really help it, sir," said Wildrake.

"Well—well, you must not let it occur again," said Mr. Railton good-humouredly. "You must remember that rules are made to be kept, and a Boy Scout should have a sense of discipline. You may go now. But one moment!" The Housemaster turned to his guest with a smile. "These are two of your pupils, Monsieur Labarre—Merry of the Shell, and Wildrake of the Fourth Form. My boys, this is your new French master, Monsieur Labarre, who has taken Monsieur Morny's place for a few weeks."

Monsieur Labarre rose to his feet, and made a bow to the two juniors.

"I have pleasure to make your acquaintance, my young friends," he said, his manner far more cordial than it had been when Arthur Augustus had surprised him in his room. "I hope we shall be ze good friends, hein?"

And he shook hands with the two juniors, taking his cigarette in his left hand to do so.

Tom Merry noticed a momentary change come over Wildrake's face.

The Canadian junior's eyes were riveted, for the moment, on the cigarette in Monsieur Labarre's rather thick, strong fingers.

"We shall do our best to please you, sir," said Tom Merry dutifully. "We were all very fond of Monsieur Morny."

Monsieur Labarre smiled again expansively, and sat down. He replaced the cigarette in his mouth, and strangely enough Wildrake's glance followed it there.

Mr. Railton made the juniors a sign to retire, and they left the study. Outside in the passage Wildrake drew a long, deep breath.

Tom Merry glanced at him in surprise.

"Come on!" he said.

"Wait a minute!"

"What for?"

"I've had a shock!" said Wildrake, in a low voice. "There may be nothing in it, but I guess it hit me."

"Blessed if I understand you!" said Tom. "But what are we waiting for?"

"Wait a minute or two!" answered Wildrake, in a subdued whisper. "That French chap is nearly through his cigarette. He will be lighting another soon."

Tom Merry fairly jumped.

Unless Wildrake was wandering in his mind, he could think of no explanation of that astounding remark.

"Wildrake, are you pulling my leg, or are you potty?"

"Think of an excuse for going back into the study," whispered Wildrake.

"Wha-a-at for?"

"I want to see that man light his next cigarette."

"But—but——" stammered Tom.

"Hush!"

Wildrake stood close to the closed door. Faintly from within came the sound of a scratching match.

To Tom's blank amazement, Wildrake hastily tapped at the door and opened it. His eyes fixed on Monsieur Labarre.

That gentleman was lighting a fresh cigarette with a wax vesta. Mr. Railton glanced in surprise at the junior.

"Wildrake! What—what——"

"D-d-did you call, sir?" stammered Wildrake.

"Certainly not."

"Oh! Sorry, sir."

Kit Wildrake hastily withdrew, and closed the door again. He was breathing very quickly.

Tom Merry laid a hand on his arm. He was really beginning to fear that the Canadian junior was out of his senses.

"Come on, Wildrake," said the captain of the Shell abruptly.

Wildrake made no further demur; his strange interest in the proceedings of Monsieur Labarre seemed at an end.

He followed Tom Merry without a word.

Tom noted that his sunburnt face was a little pale, and he had every appearance of a fellow who had received a sudden, startling shock.

But what shock he could have received in Mr. Railton's study was a deep mystery to Tom.

In the Shell passage, the door of Study No. 10 was open, and a cheery light came from within, with a scent of freshly-made tea and toast.

"Buck up, kid," said Tom. "I'm jolly hungry. What on earth is the matter with you, Wildrake?"

"I guess I've had the shock of my life," muttered Wildrake. "Hold on a minute, old chap—it wants getting used to."

"But what on earth's happened?" demanded the mystified Shell fellow.

"That man—Labarre——"

"What about him? He's the new French master."

"Did you notice the cigarette he was smoking?"

"My only hat! No."

"It was a fat Turkish cigarette," muttered Wildrake.

"Well?"

"The 'Alkoran' brand—an expensive kind. Not one smoker in a dozen smokes that cigarette."

"Well?" repeated Tom.

"Can't you see? The cigarette-ends we picked up in the wood were of that brand."

"Wha-a-at?"

"I've got them in my wallet now—two ends of 'Alkoran' Turkish cigarettes," said Wildrake.

Tom Merry stared at him.

"Wildrake!"

"The man in the wood—the man with the burden—used wax vestas," said the Canadian junior. "Now you know why I wanted to see Labarre light his next cigarette. He lighted it with a wax vesta!"

"Wildrake!"

The two juniors looked at one another. For a full minute, both were silent, strange thoughts thronging through their minds.

It was Tom Merry who broke the silence.

"It—it's impossible!" he said, at last. "It's a dream—a fancy. For goodness' sake get it out of your head, Wildrake. Lots of people smoke that brand of cigarettes; thousands use wax vestas, and——"

"I know! But it's a queer coincidence."

"Yes, it's a very queer coincidence," admitted Tom Merry.

"I don't say there's anything in it," said Wildrake soberly, "but—but coincidences like that don't often happen. After all, the man's unknown here—a stranger——"

"The Head must know all about him. He wouldn't come here as a master without full investigation of every kind," said Tom.

Wildrake nodded.

"I know—I know! Perhaps it's only a coincidence; perhaps it must be. But it gave me a shock. If he walked from Wayland this afternoon, he came through the wood; and he smokes the same cigarettes, uses the same matches——"

"But did he walk from Wayland?" said Tom.

"Gussy said that he missed him at the station."

"My dear chap, it's only a coincidence—it can only be that——"

"You fellows coming in?" shouted Monty Lowther from the doorway of Study No. 10. "There's such a thing as prep this evening, though you seem to have forgotten it."

"Yaas, wathah!" came Arthur Augustus' dulcet tones from the study.

Tom Merry and Wildrake entered Study No. 10. A late tea was ready now; and Blake & Co. were all there, considerably mystified by their summons to the study. Tom Merry and Wildrake sat down to tea; they were very hungry, and the first important step was to dispose of the tea and toast and poached eggs.

"I suppose you chaps know that I got home without being caught," remarked Jack Blake. "I think I mentioned to you, at the start, Tom Merry, that I was going to do it. You fellows owe me a spread to-morrow."

"Blessed if I quite know how you got away," said Herries thoughtfully.

"Best scout in No. 6!" explained Blake.

"Oh, that's all rot, you know. You were lucky!" said Herries. "These things happen at times. Properly speaking, I should have caught you——"

"I can explain it, deah boys," said Arthur Augustus gently. "Blake would have been caught all wight, if I had been able to come——"

"Next time Study No. 6 is in funds," said Monty Lowther, "I suggest buying Gussy a muzzle."

"Weally, Lowthah——"

"How did you come to miss Monsieur Labarre at the station, Gussy?" asked Wildrake, with his mouth full. "Tell us that, and then we'll spin our yarn."

Arthur Augustus explained.

The Canadian junior listened very attentively, and raised his eyebrows when Gussy had finished.

"Jolly odd that he should pass the station, I guess," he said. "Is there any proof that he went on to Woodale and got out there?"

"Yaas."

"What is it?"

"He said so," answered Arthur Augustus innocently.

"What the thump reason is there for doubting his statement?" asked Manners, with a stare. "Why should he say so if it wasn't so?"

"Nobody saw him; and a chap was waiting for him at Rylcombe, and missed him," said Wildrake. "That's another coincidence for you, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry nodded, and started on his second egg.

"It must be only a coincidence," he said. "Anything else is simply unthinkable."

"I guess there's too many coincidences in connection with that galoot to please me," said Wildrake, shrugging his shoulders.

"What on earth are you fellows driving at?" demanded Blake. "We've come here to hear some news, Gussy said. Suppose you get on and tell us? Time is money."

"Yaas, wathah."

"Listen, then!" said Wildrake.

And he told the story of the afternoon's scouting, the juniors in the study listening in amazed silence.

CHAPTER 7.
To The Rescue!

"BAI Jove!"

That was D'Arcy's comment on the strange story.

"My only hat!" murmured Blake.

Wildrake glanced round at the juniors. There was keen interest in every face, and surprise—and a touch of incredulity.

"Sure you didn't let your imagination help you with the trails?" asked Monty Lowther. "It—it's rather thick, you know——"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Suppose it was some chap carrying another chap pickaback!" suggested Herries; "that would account for a lot of the story."

"Fathead!" was Wildrake's rejoinder to that.

"Well, look here——" began Herries warmly.

"Unless I'm right off the mark," said the Canadian quietly, "a man was carried into the wood——"

"A fat man with a limp!" said Monty Lowther. "Don't leave out the details, Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

"A fat man with a limp!" assented Wildrake calmly. "He was either stunned or tied up, or he would have resisted. He was taken to the old hermit's cell—by a man who must have known the locality—and left there, hidden—alive or dead. The man who carried him then left, and came along—not to Wayland, where he plainly started from, but to a road that runs past the gates of St. Jim's. So much, I guess, is clear."

"H'm!" murmured Manners.

"The man smoked two Alkoran cigarettes, lighting them with a wax vesta, while he rested in the wood," continued Wildrake. "I get back here, and find a newcomer—Monsieur Labarre—smoking Alkoran cigarettes, which he lights with a wax vesta."

"Bai Jove!"

"Tom Merry thinks it's a coincidence. I admit that anything else would be rather staggering——"

"Just a few!" murmured Digby.

"If Gussy had met the man at the station, as he intended, that would have let Labarre out, of course. But along with these coincidences, there happens another coincidence—Labarre passes his station and misses Gussy. If he's the man, of course, that is only his yarn, made up on the spot when he discovered that Gussy had waited for him at Rylcombe."

"But——" began Blake.

"Draw it mild," said Herries. "You're practically accusing this French master, Labarre, of having stunned a man in Wayland Woods, and hidden him in the old hermit's cell. French masters don't do these things. Besides, why should he?"

"I guess you can't expect me to answer that, Herries."

"There's a little weakness in your theory, if I may be allowed to point it out," said Monty Lowther, in his silkiest tones.

"Go ahead!"

"Your man in the wood must have known the locality well——"

"Quite well."

"And Monsieur Labarre is a total stranger here, unknown by sight to anybody at St. Jim's, and only recently over from Paris."

Tom Merry looked at Wildrake. That point was well taken, and it certainly seemed to knock Wildrake's astounding suspicion fairly on the head.

The Canadian nodded slowly.

"I guess I've thought of that already," he answered. "It puzzles me; and I can only say that I don't follow up the whole affair in my mind. It would be rather a cinch if I could! I suspect Labarre; but there's weak links in the chain, and I know it. Maybe he knows the district well, and doesn't let on. But about Labarre, that's only been in my thoughts since I saw him in Mr. Railton's study. Labarre may or may not be mixed up in the affair. But some man—Labarre or not—carried a stunned man to the monk's cell and left him there, and he's there now."

The juniors were silent.

That part of Wildrake's story seemed fairly well established, at all events, and Tom Merry fully agreed with his Canadian chum.

"He's there," continued Wildrake, "and he's got to be got out. If he's dead, his body must be found; if he's alive, he's got to be saved. I'm going to the hermit's cell to save him, and Tom Merry's coming. Will you fellows come along in case there's trouble?"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus instantly.

"It means breaking bounds, and missing prep," said Manners slowly; "and—and if we're spotted getting out——"

Wildrake rose from the table.

"I'm going," he said. "I guess I'll go alone if necessary. But you fellows ought to come."

"Oh, we'll come!" said Lowther. "You think so, Tommy?"

"Yes, rather!" said Tom Merry.

"Then it's a go!" said Blake. "If it turns out to be moonshine, we'll give Wildrake a jolly good bumping. We'd better dodge out into the quad one at a time, or the prefects will spot us; we'll meet at the slanting oak by the wall."

"I'm on!" said Herries, and Digby nodded. The schoolboy scouts were quite ready for the adventure.

It did not take Tom Merry & Co. long to get ready. Some of them slipped rulers or corkscrews into their pockets, to be used as weapons if necessary; and Arthur Augustus suggested raiding Mr. Railton's revolver, and was promptly suppressed.

Quietly, and one at a time, the juniors "dodged" into the dusky quadrangle, and they met again under the slanting oak.

A few minutes later they were outside the walls of St. Jim's.

The evening was still early, but it was very dark. Only a few stars glimmered in the heavens overhead.

The scouts lost no time.

Very soon they were treading the footpath through the wood, and when they turned from it Tom Merry led the way through bush and briar to the old hermit's cell.

It was a good hour's tramp from St. Jim's, especially as threading the way through the wood in the dark was not the easiest of tasks. But the juniors knew the woods pretty well, and they came out near the hermit's cell at last without a fault.

The spot was shadowy and lonely; there was no sign of life about the place as they approached.

Wildrake's face was very grave and determined; and Tom Merry was in a serious mood; but the other fellows probably only half-believed that there was "anything in it." But they felt a little thrill as they crowded into the ruined stone cell, upon which the stars glimmered faintly.

"Here's the slab," said Tom Merry, in rather a hushed voice. "Get this rubbish cleared off it!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The juniors set quietly to work. The bare possibility that the body of a murdered man lay below was enough to subdue them; even Monty Lowther had lost his humorous mood. In a very short time, by the dim light of the stars, the great slab of stone was bared, and the iron ring embedded in it was revealed.

"Lay hold!"

Three or four of the juniors got a grip on the ring, and, with a heave, the slab came out of its place.

It was tilted back, disclosing a black orifice in the stone floor of the hermitage.

The juniors stared down into it.

In spite of themselves, they shuddered as they looked into that gloomy, threatening depth of blackness.

Wildrake turned on his flash-lamp, and a bar of light shot into the opening. It disclosed the ancient stone steps that led downward.

"Hark!" breathed Tom, clutching the Canadian's arm.

A sound came from the gloomy depths.

It was a faint, low groan!

The juniors stared at one another, with startled face.

"Good heavens!" breathed Blake. He was white now.

Tom Merry pulled himself together, throwing off the chill horror that was creeping over him. He bent over the opening and shouted:

"Who is there?"

From the black depths a faint voice answered:

"A moi! A moi! Au secours! Au secours!"

CHAPTER 8.

An Astounding Discovery!

"AU secours!"

It was a cry for help—in French!

It was a Frenchman, then, who lay there in the darkness, evidently hurt and helpless to move.

Wildrake, flash-lamp in hand, stepped resolutely into the opening, and led the way down the steps. The others followed him, with bated breath.

At the bottom of the steps was the flooring of cracked and broken flags, in a narrow passage, which led away into the darkness. Within a few feet of the steps lay a man.

Wildrake turned the light on him, and several other flash-lamps burst out and illuminated the noisome recesses.

The man was a fat, portly figure; though now his plump face was white as chalk, his eyes looked sunken, his moustache was limp. He was evidently a Frenchman. His hands were tied down to his sides with strong cord, and his ankles were shackled together. Over his forehead, which was bald, showed a hideous, black bruise.

His eyes turned wildly upon the juniors. At the sight of the schoolboy faces, he gave a cry of joy.

"Amis! Amis! Des amis!" he exclaimed. "Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!"

"Can you speak English?" asked Wildrake.

"Mais oui! I am teacher—French master. Certainly I speak the English. But I am so confuse, I forgot I am in Angleterre!" gasped the unfortunate man. "When I hear you, I fear it is zat villain who come back. Now I cry viz joy! Mes garcons, help me—help me! You vill let me loose, yes—untie me! Mon Dieu!"

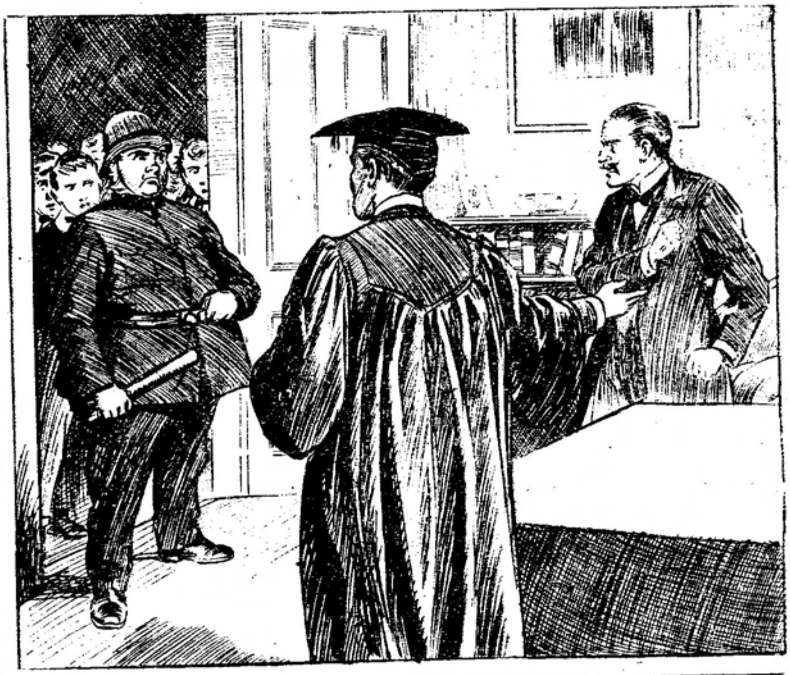
Tom Merry was already at work on the cords with his pocket-knife. He sawed through them rapidly.

With the help of the sympathetic juniors, the Frenchman was raised to his feet. He was shaking as though with the ague, and utterly unable to stand alone.

"Let's get out of this," said Wildrake. "If that villain should be lurking about, it would be no joke to have the stone closed down on us!"

"There's another way out," said Tom. "But let's get back to the cell, all the same."

"Yaas, wathah!"



"There is your prisoner, Mr. Crump!" said Mr. Railton. P'-c. Crump of Rylcombe, with his drawn truncheon in his hand, advanced on the rascally Frenchman. It was too late for Black Louis to take any risks, the truncheon was ready to fell him. *(See page 12.)*

The Frenchman was helped up the steps. Who he was, and what he was, the juniors could not even guess; but their hearts melted with compassion for the hapless man, evidently the victim of a fearful outrage. In the hermitage, he was seated on a mass of stone, to rest, and the juniors closed down the slab.

Then they gathered round the Frenchman.

"We're here to help you, sir," said Tom Merry. "Where do you want to go?"

"You know ze school?"

"The school?" repeated Tom.

"Saint James, his school," said the Frenchman.

"You were going to St. Jim's!" ejaculated Tom.

"Mais oui! Doctair Holmes he will be alarm," said the Frenchman. "He expect me zis day."

"Good heavens!" muttered Wildrake. "I guess I see it now!"

A glimmering of the truth was in his mind.

"Laissez moi un peu—I sould say, leave me to rest a little," said the Frenchman. "I cannot valk so yet. I have—what you call ze cramp in zose bones. I am tie up so long. Oh, ce coquin—ce scelerat!"

"If you feel able to speak, sir, would you mind telling us how you came here?" asked Tom.

The Frenchman nodded, and then clasped his hand to his bruised head with an exclamation of pain.

"Oh, la tete—la tete!" he gasped. "I am hard knock. I will tell you. Two weeks ago I leave Paris. I am stranger in Angleterre. But in London I have des amis—friends, you call. I am engage—I shall be some time—temporary master at a school while French master he go en vacance—one holiday. I take my ticket in Londres viz ze light heart."

The juniors listened in silence.

The hapless Frenchman groaned again, and, after a brief pause, resumed:

"In ze train zere get in zat scoundrel—ce scelerat. I know him not. He talk to me in my own tongue—he is one Frenchman, like me. I am so please to talk viz him of la belle France, and of la guerre—for je suis soldat, mes garcons—I have soldat been. I talk to him and tell him all. He find out vere I go—everyzing. We get out at Wayland, ze best friends in ze world. He tell me he know Doctair Holmes. He walk wiz me to ze school—he show me short cut dans le bois. I walk off tres gaiement—mais helas!" The Frenchman groaned again. "I zink he is one madman, and he is one tief! On ze footpath, while I speak gaily, he sudden hit me on ze head viz somezing verree hard."

Wildrake glanced at Tom Merry.

Tom nodded.

What the Frenchman was telling them now was what the keen-eyed Canadian junior had read in the trail.

"Affair zat, I know nozzings!" resumed the Frenchman. "When I wake up I am in zis place. Zat slab is open, and I am tie up viz hand and viz foot. My pockets zey are all turn out; my money, my pocket-book, my papairs—all zat I have—zey are all take. My passport—all is take. Zose zings are no use to a tief, but he take zem. I speak to him—I demand what he intend. He say not vun vord, but he left me and take me down zose steps." He shuddered. "Zere he leave me in ze dark, and close zat great stone. I zink I am left tie up to die of famine. Helas! How I suffair in ze zoughts!"

"The hound!" muttered Blake.

"I call to him. I say if he leave me to die, he put bullet zrough my head! I am soldat. I do not fear to die! But to die of famine in zat awful darkness—zat is too terrible! He answer not one vord. He leave me. I zink zat is many days——"

"It was this afternoon," said Tom Merry, with deep compassion.

He could understand how it seemed like many days to the suffering man, bound and helpless in the blackness.

"Zis afternoon! Mon Dieu! Ah, when I sall be well vunce more, I hope I meet zat man! He is Frenchman, but he is worse zan ze Huns zat I have killed in ze trenches! I zink now zat he watch me get in train, and come after me. He have some vicked plan for vat he vish to take my papers——"

"It's pretty clear now," muttered Lowther.

"You haven't told us your name, sir," said Wildrake.

He knew the name before the Frenchman uttered it.

"Je suis Gaston Labarre."

"Labarre!" repeated Blake. "I thought that was coming. And that man at St. Jim's——"

Wildrake's eyes glistened. He was very far from being given to "swank," but he could not help feeling elated at this complete vindication of his theory. He had saved this unhappy victim of a scoundrel—and more than that. For the same thought was in the minds of all the juniors—what was the object of the rascal in worming himself into the Frenchman's confidence, kidnapping him in the wood, and going on to St. Jim's with his papers and in his name?

Evidently he could not hope that the imposture would last long. Indeed, it was scarcely credible that he had intended to allow the genuine Labarre to perish miserably in the underground recess.

Evidently the man was a practised criminal, and his design was to rob the school—probably that very night—and on the morrow nothing would be seen at St. Jim's of the "new French master."

The Frenchman looked up at the juniors.

"You know zat name?" he asked.

"Yaas, wathah, sir!"

"A Frenchman, calling himself Gaston Labarre, came to St. Jim's this afternoon," said Tom Merry.

"Mon dieu! Zen zat was it."

"That was it," said Wildrake quietly. "And he's still there, and hasn't the faintest idea you have been found. You fellows, we've got to go to the police station before we go back to the school, and take a policeman along with us to St. Jim's."

"Yes, rather!"

But the unfortunate Monsieur Labarre was not able to walk yet. His terrible experiences had told upon him heavily. For some time longer he rested in the hermit's cell, and in answer to his eager inquiries, Wildrake explained how he had been tracked out and found. Monsieur Labarre listened to the explanation in amazement.

When he had heard all, he rose with an effort and embraced the Canadian junior with effusion, and kissed him on both cheeks! Wildrake wriggled uncomfortably, while the other juniors grinned.

"I zink I valks now, if you shall hold me ze arms," said the Frenchman. "We goes for policeman, and we catches ce scelerat—zat rascal—on ze—ze what you call ze hop! Mais oui! Marchons!"

And with the assistance of the juniors the Frenchman started, and the scouts of St. Jim's wound their way through the wood again with the rescued man.

CHAPTER 9.
'Twixt Cup and Lip!

"CA va!"

The man who, at St. Jim's, was known as Monsieur Labarre, the new French master, leaned back in his chair and stretched his feet luxuriously to the blazing fire in his study.

He lighted a cigarette—a fat Turkish cigarette—and watched the blue rings of smoke ascend towards the ceiling in lazy ease.

His dark face was smiling.

"Ca va, je crois!"

Evidently the rascal was in a satisfied mood.

With the Frenchman's papers he had found no difficulty in his interview with Dr. Holmes. With the boys he had come into little contact, and on the morrow they would not see him. His talk with Mr. Railton had been his chief difficulty. The Housemaster had naturally wanted to talk over old battles with a man who, as he supposed, had distinguished himself in the French army during the war. But from that ordeal the impostor had emerged successfully, though leaving Mr. Railton a little puzzled and a little in doubt as to Monsieur Labarre's actual military performances.

He was safe in his own study now—safe from further ordeals. When he went to his room, it would not be to sleep. While all the rest of St. Jim's was sleeping, there was nothing to bar his way in carrying out the scheme for which he had obtained entrance to the school.

The dark hours after midnight would see him safely on his way, with the contents of the Head's safe in his possession, and all the other valuables he could lay his hands on. The easiest job the French cracksman had ever handled!

He smiled as he thought of it.

In his retreat he would waste an hour in going out of his way to release the prisoner under the hermitage, leaving him to crawl through the wood as best he could. Not from motives of mercy—the rascal's nature was not merciful—but simply because he did not want to turn the affair into a "hanging job." His regard for his worthless neck was very tender.

His plans were cut and dried. There was nothing to step into the way of complete success. For a week the rascal had been scouting in the neighbourhood, picking up information for his intended "job." In various disguises he had learned his way about the district, and he had explored the old hermitage as a possible hiding-place in case of pursuit. And then the French master had fallen into his way, and offered him the easiest of easy methods of effecting his object. Poor Monsieur Labarre's confidential chatter to his compatriot in the train had told him all he wanted to know—that Monsieur Labarre was a complete stranger at St. Jim's; that he had, naturally, his credentials on his person. The cracksman grinned as he thought of the unfortunate gentleman's confidences. Louis le Noir in Paris—Black Louis in London—had made both those capitals too hot for him for a time, and he was extending the sphere of his activities to the country, beginning with the easiest job of his long and rascally career.

His reflections, as he blew out rings of smoke, were very pleasant ones.

"Ca va!" he repeated, smiling genially at the fire.

There was a step in the corridor outside.

The Frenchman frowned.

Was it someone coming for a chat—some fresh ordeal for him to pass through! That detestable Housemaster, for instance, with his talk about the Somme and the Aisne——

Tap!

"Entrez!"

The door opened. It was the "detestable Housemaster" who appeared in the doorway.

The Frenchman rose to his feet, suppressing his bitter annoyance, and screwing up his dark face into a smile of welcome.

"Entrez, monsieur!" he said cordially. "This is a pleasure. You will smoke a pipe with me before we go to bed—yes?"

"I think not, sir," said Mr. Railton.

He strode into the study, and Black Louis backed a step, his breath coming more quickly.

Something was wrong; he could not guess what, but he was on his guard at once, watchful as a cat.

"Monsieur——" he began, and his teeth came hard together.

"Come in, Mr. Crump!"

The Frenchman's eyes dilated as a burly uniformed and helmeted figure filled the doorway. His hand groped under his coat. In an instant Mr. Railton's hand came up, and his old Army revolver glimmered in it.

"Touch a weapon, sir, and I will shoot you where you stand!" said Mr. Railton coldly. "I am ready for that, you scoundrel!"

The Frenchman panted.

"I—I—I je ne comprends pas. Of what do you accuse? Why this conduct? What——"

"There is your prisoner, Mr. Crump!"

P.-c. Crump of Rylcombe, with a grin on his fat face, and his drawn truncheon in his hand, advanced on the Frenchman. If the rascal had thought of risking the Housemaster's revolver, it was too late now. The truncheon was ready to fell him, and Mr. Crump was quite ready to use it. With a bitter smile, Black Louis held out his hands for the handcuffs.

"You shall answer for this!" he said, with a desperate hope that bluff might yet carry him through. "This outrage——"

Click!

The "bracelets" fastened on the rascal's wrists, and Black Louis was a prisoner. Then Mr. Railton put away his revolver, and called to the passage:

"You may come in!"

The Frenchman started, and gave a hissing breath, as a faltering figure was helped into the study by Tom Merry and Kit Wildrake. Monsieur Labarre—the genuine owner of that name—fixed his sunken eyes on the amazed scoundrel.

"C'est vous!" he panted.

The cracksman stared at him blankly. The sudden appearance of his victim, whom he had believed to be still bound, a prisoner, in the murky recess under the hermitage, threw him quite off his balance. It was not suspicion, then; it was a certainty. His guilt was known, and it was but one step from the school to prison! The handcuffs clinked on the rascal's wrists as he staggered back.

"That is the man who attacked you in the wood, Monsieur Labarre?" asked Mr. Railton.

"Mais oui! Yes, yes, yes!" gasped the French master. "Ce scelerat—ce coquin! Vorse zan zousand Boches!"

"I reckon he'll be known at headquarters, sir," said Mr. Crump. "Can't say I know his phiz; but they'll have his picture at Scotland Yard, I fancy. You'll come alonger me, you beauty!"

And the handcuffed rascal, with bitter fury in his heart, was marched away to a prison cell.

. . . .

Kit Wildrake was the hero of the hour at St. Jim's, especially when more was known about the arrested man. As Mr. Crump had sagely opined, the Frenchman was well known at police headquarters, and Scotland Yard was very glad indeed to get hold of Black Louis. Evidently Wildrake's discovery, and the rescue of the French master that had followed, had saved the Head from a robbery the design of which had not even been suspected, and which would certainly, but for the Canadian junior's intervention, have been a complete success.

Wildrake was publicly thanked by the Head, and he bore his blushing honours thick upon him with a great modesty. Tom Merry & Co.'s action in breaking school bounds to rescue the prisoner of the hermitage was passed over without comment.

And the affair ended satisfactorily all round, excepting for Black Louis, who went to break stones for a term of years, and could not be expected to be satisfied. Monsieur Labarre was too ill, after his terrible adventure, to take his class. His time at St. Jim's was spent in the school hospital, from which he did not emerge before the return of Monsieur Morny. And in the interval there were no French lessons at St. Jim's, which, from the point of view of the juniors, was a consummation devoutly to be wished. Monty Lowther, in the junior Common-room, proposed a vote of thanks to the youth from the Boot Leg Ranch, which was carried unanimously, and amid great enthusiasm.

Only Black Louis—breaking stones—failed to rejoice over the Canadian's capture.

THE END.

(Another grand, long story of Tom Merry & Co. next week, entitled: "CARDEW MAKES AMENDS!" By Martin Clifford. Make sure you order your copy EARLY.)

DON'T FORGET

that

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CHAT ABOUT St. JIM'S AND GREYFRIARS.

In all probability Mr. Horace Ratcliffe, M.A., will go to the South of France to spend his next "vac"; it's warmer. Many of the juniors have expressed their opinions that he should go to a like place.

. . . .

One should not forget to note that next Friday is the worthy Ephraim Taggles' wedding-day. We sincerely trust that he will be favoured with more fortunate luck this time.

. . . .

We hear indirectly that a new play is shortly to make its appearance at St. Jim's, entitled: "When 'nights' are cold." Gerald Knox has been selected to play the chief part.

. . . .

Everybody seems to be demanding higher salaries just now. Yes. Even the circulations of the GEM LIBRARY and the "Boys' Herald" have had rises this week!

. . . .

An anxious correspondent writes and asks me how to make a fanlight. Put a match to it, is all I can suggest!

. . . .

Baggy Trimble has made a promise never to listen again at anybody's keyhole. His friends state that as no other symptoms have shown themselves, medical advice is unlikely to be sought for.

. . . .

Readers of this column are requested to take note that a special art plate of one of the favourites at St. Jim's will appear each week on the back cover of the GEM LIBRARY. Fatty Wynn will also be included if room can be found.

. . . .

That complaints are being made wholesale about the "watery" milk now being delivered at the school. People seem to forget that, with weather like the present, cows constantly get "soaked through."

. . . .

We have no faith in the statement that Hurree Jamset Ram Singh turned "white" at the thought of a thrashing from William George Bunter.

. . . .

Information to hand states that George Herries has again started practising on his cornet. We were of the impression that peace was signed some considerable time back.

. . . .

We have recently learned that the junior who was seen hurrying along the corridor last week was William George Bunter, making his way to the bathroom. We cannot confirm it.

. . . .

Overhearing a conversation between Percy Mellish and Baggy Trimble, the latter's words struck me. "All is a secret between us!" he emphasised to the former. Don't think Baggy would need much moving, do you?

. . . .

An enthusiastic reader informs me that Gerald Knox is not worthy of his position as prefect. A "prefect" shame, I call it!

JOHN SHARPE.

The INVISIBLE HAND

This wonderful story has also been filmed by the popular VITAGRAPH Film Company, and readers of the "GEM" should make a point of seeing the picture week by week at their favourite cinemas.

IRON HAND.

NEW READERS START HERE.

John Sharpe, the great analytical detective, is engaged by Chief Burnett, of the Secret Service of Chicago, to track down the band of organised criminals operating in the West under the guidance of Iron Hand. Black, Burnett's assistant, overhears the plans and informs Iron Hand in the latter's lair in San Francisco. Black is discovered by Sharpe, who disguises as a telegraph operator, and he is traced to the home of his sister, Marna Black, one of the band of crooks. Marna is captured. Burnett induces Anne Crawford, a woman agent of the Secret Service, to assume Marna's identity and get into the confidences of Iron Hand. She is not known to Sharpe.

The mountain den, Eagle's Nest, is run by Potsdam, Iron Hand's lieutenant. Anne meets Iron Hand, presents her credentials, and is taken into the gang. She is sent to Potsdam, and is in the den when a signal warns that someone is approaching. As Sharpe rides along the road to the den, a trap falls, precipitating him and his horse into a deep pit. He is captured.

Sharpe escapes from Eagle's Nest on a horse he seized from Potsdam and his gang. Potsdam explodes various bombs along the road. The first two miss Sharpe, and the third explodes under his horse. Sharpe, however, has sensed the danger, and slipped from the animal. He rolls down the cliff to a ledge, quickly arranges a dummy of himself, and hides in the tunnel of an abandoned mine. The gang rushes out, looks down and sees the dummy, believing Sharpe killed. Sharpe follows the tunnel, and comes up into the cellar of Eagle's Nest. He overhears Anne, who poses as Marna Black, talking to Potsdam. The latter tells her to go to the ranch and use a motor to get back to the headquarters of Iron Hand. Sharpe makes his way to the ranch, overpowers the chauffeur, and, disguised, takes the latter's place, and drives Anne back to the city. Anne reaches the headquarters. Sharpe follows. He discovers that the gang possess a submarine, and they plot to blow up the Oriental mail steamer. Sharpe sends word for the steamer not to sail, and communicates with a border patrol to have a bombing aeroplane ready for instant use. At Eagle's Nest Sharpe is again made prisoner.

While Sharpe is held up, Iron Hand and the rest of his band watch the destruction of their submarine by a bomb from the aeroplane. With their attention distracted, Sharpe leaps into the observatory-house and slams the door. As the band seek to force their way in, Sharpe kicks a way through the rear. He has a parachute, and leaps from the cliff towards the sea. Iron Hand and Potsdam fire at him. He keeps under water, coming up under the floating parachute, hidden from the band.

Later, Iron Hand outlines plans for the capture of a gold shipment on a freight train. Anne telegraphs information to the Secret Service about the planned robbery, and also warns Sharpe, who has been picked up by a patrol boat, to meet the train on which Iron Hand is travelling.

Now read on.

Iron Hand's Next Move.

ARRIVING at the station, Iron Hand and Anne halt their mounts, and the girl stepped into the motor-car, which was awaiting her, while the chief entered the station to meet the train which would take him south towards Los Angeles.

Bullow was ready to admit the girl on reaching headquarters. She explained her mission, but this was really unnecessary, for the man had received instructions in advance.

The accomplice went to a secret drawer, and took out a document. He consulted it for a moment, and then spoke again to Anne.

"The gold is concealed in a compartment numbered 37554 in the centre of the Southern Pacific through goods train. It should arrive at Eagle's Nest about four o'clock to-day."

Anne took a note of the information, and withdrew. Her next intention was to go to a small hotel, where messages from Burnett were addressed to her.

There was one telegram, and she guessed that it was in answer to her request for permission to reveal her real identity to Sharpe.

She opened it eagerly, and read the following:

"Congratulations on your success. Things are going very well as they are. Don't tell Sharpe unless unavoidable.—Burnett."

Anne tore the telegram up, and placed the pieces in the fire. She was a trifle disappointed with the message, for she wanted very much to tell the great detective that she was not really the crook that he believed her, and that in reality she was working for the same good cause as he was. But duty must be done, and she must still pose as Marna Black, the girl criminal!

At Eagle's Nest, Potsdam had also received a wire. His gang crowded around as he tore open the envelope. As usual, the message was in code, but he quickly translated it.

"It is from Marna Black," he announced. "Our clever comrade states that the gold is in compartment number 37554 on the Southern Pacific goods train. Hans, you must take half a dozen men, and stop the train just as it leaves the station. It will be the easiest job we have yet tackled. We can't help getting that gold!"

The Train Hold-Up.

HANS and his selected men were not long in getting to work.

They first of all cut down a tree and placed the trunk across the line a short distance away from the station. The country was so desolate here that there was no danger of their movements being observed, and it would be a simple matter for them to overpower the officials on the train.

Hidden in a clump of trees were the gang, and they were busily adjusting masks in order to hide their features, and getting their revolvers ready in case the necessity to use them arose.

They eagerly watched down the track, as they could already tell that the train was approaching. As it drew near them they could hear the driver putting on the breaks, and he peered anxiously from the engine as he caught sight of the obstruction on the line.

The train was slowing down rapidly now, and it came to a halt a few yards before the tree. A minute later the driver and fireman got down on to the track. This was the opportunity the crooks wanted.

Hans and his men, masked, and with their revolvers levelled, rushed into the scene. One of them remained to hold up the driver and the fireman, and another rushed towards the end of the train in order to prevent any action on the part of the guard. None of the officials could offer any resistance.

They were unarmed, and had been quite taken by surprise. The other members of the band hurried to the centre of the train, and they halted when they came to the compartment numbered 37554.

Everything turned out according to their information, and they at once started to break open the locked door. Aided by their tools they soon accomplished their object, and then hurried into the compartment. Their eyes sparkled greedily when they saw the boxes which were plainly labelled "Gold Bullion from Customs Office, Los Angeles."

Without hesitation they dragged the first case toward the door. But they halted suddenly, and looked at one another with great alarm. What was the meaning of the significant noise which they heard?

The men glanced toward the rear of the compartment, and then the fact that they had been trapped became plainly evident to them. Their faces twitched with alarm.

Six Secret Service men rose up from various hiding-places in the car and confronted the astonished crooks. Some of them made an effort to escape, but the police rushed at them, and quickly overpowered them. They were speedily disarmed; and while two of the officials remained on guard, the rest of them jumped out of the compartment.

Two rushed towards the engine, and the remainder made off to the rear of the train.

The crook who had been left in charge of the engineer was not yet aware of what was taking place; but his colleague had caught a glimpse of the unwelcome visitors, and fired his revolver off at almost point-blank range. The police, however, were first, and their bullets went home, bringing the man to the ground. His shot just missed its mark.

The other crook, seeing the men's attention occupied, endeavoured to escape, but it was a hopeless proposition for him, and the engine-driver and fireman had no difficulty in catching him. Before he had time to aim they leaped on him. He put up a bit of a struggle until the police directed their efforts towards him, and he was easily subdued. The two prisoners were taken towards the centre car, safely handcuffed, and the engine-driver, very elated, proceeded to remove the obstruction from the line. The other members of the gang were easily overcome, and also made prisoners.

Their enterprise had been stopped in a way they did not in the least expect, and as the train moved off again they wondered who had informed the Secret Service of their plans.

Potsdam, at Eagle's Nest, waited anxiously, and, as it later proved, in vain, for the return of Hans with the coveted gold.

In Los Angeles.

STANDING in an inconspicuous position at the exterior of Los Angeles Station was John Sharpe, the world-famous detective. A short distance away from him a luxurious motor-car drew up to the kerb, and close behind there was a taxi-cab.

Sharpe began to look more interested in things.

Soon a man with large motor-goggles over his eyes, a hat pulled well down, and coat-collar turned up, emerged from the station and walked hurriedly towards the motor-car.

A smartly-uniformed chauffeur held open the door.

The man, whom Sharpe knew to be Iron Hand, gave the driver a few hurried instructions, and then sat down.

The detective waited a moment until the car had started, and then he sprang energetically into his taxi. The chauffeur had no need for instructions. He already knew that it was his duty to follow the car.

As the car hastened on Iron Hand rapidly divested himself of his hat, coat, and goggles. Then he opened the door and walked along the running board, and took a seat beside the driver.

Iron Hand took the wheel of the car, and the chauffeur commenced to remove his hat and coat, which the criminal chief hastily put on.

When this peculiar operation was finished the chauffeur climbed back to the interior of the car, and in turn donned Iron Hand's disguise.

John Sharpe deemed it wise to keep his taxi a safe distance in the rear of Iron Hand's car, and he was thus in ignorance of the change of clothing which had just taken place.

Presently the motor-car stopped opposite a large building, and the chauffeur, disguised as Iron Hand, emerged. He stopped and talked to the leader in front of the car for a moment or two.

John Sharpe ordered his taxi-driver to stop a little distance behind, and when the goggled figure entered the doorway, the detective followed suit. He waited his opportunity, as he thought, when the chauffeur's attention was engaged elsewhere and his head was turned in the opposite direction.

But Sharpe had made an error in his calculations this time. The chauffeur, who was in reality Iron Hand, had seen him enter the building. He grinned broadly, and, starting up the car again, drove rapidly off.

The detective soon realised his mistake. One close view of the man revealed the fact that it was not the criminal chief he was following, and Sharpe knew that he had been cleverly fooled. Immediately he saw through the man's disguise he dashed out of the building again, and ran for his taxi.

"Which way did the motor-car go?" he asked the driver.

The man pointed to the direction it had taken, and Sharpe jumped into the vehicle, and ordered him to follow as rapidly as he could. Sharpe soon caught sight of the car again, and he found himself in a street of fairly large houses. The scene reminded him somewhat of the buildings in San Francisco, underneath which was the underground headquarters of the gang.

The motor-car containing Iron Hand pulled up at one of the houses, and the chief alighted and went to the door. It was soon opened by a man, who took the chauffeur's seat in the car and drove off. Meanwhile, Iron Hand entered the building.

All this time the detective had kept his taxi in hiding at the end of the street. When Iron Hand had disappeared, Sharpe instructed the chauffeur to wait, and handed him a cigar. The man settled himself down, and made himself comfortable in preparation for a long stay.

The interior of the house, which was always known to the gang as Nest 2, was richly furnished. The walls throughout were covered with heavily draped curtains. It was quite dark as Iron Hand entered the secret room.

The ray of light which penetrated through an opening in one of the curtains showed that he was still in the guise of a chauffeur, with hat and goggles on. He pulled one of the curtains aside to give a little more light, and prepared to rid himself of his unaccustomed clothes.

Then he donned his curious mask, and switched on the lights. Not even the members of the gang were allowed to gaze upon the features of this curious man until he was masked.

Iron Hand was feeling more at home now, and he pressed a button hidden in the wall of the room. A servant appeared from behind the curtains, and bowed.

"Have you received any news from Potsdam about the gold yet?" he asked.

The man replied that nothing had come yet, and Iron Hand's brow wrinkled a little.

"It is past the time!" he muttered, glancing at his watch.

After the entrance of Iron Hand, John Sharpe paused in order to consider how he could also get into Nest 2 of the gang, and his thoughts went to the rear of the house. To get in by the back way, if possible, seemed the only way out of the difficulty. He would try it.

The detective discovered that the houses were enclosed in high board fences. It took him but a minute to reach the top of the one behind Nest 2.

Before descending on the other side, he peered over, and to his dismay saw that there was a big, somewhat savage-looking dog sleeping beside his kennel.

This was the first blow to his enterprise.

He would not be beaten, however, and decided to take the risk. Lowering himself as silently as he could, John Sharpe looked warily at the massive and ferocious-looking animal.

The beast began to waken, and the detective stood waiting for his next movement. He was not kept in suspense very long. The animal was well trained and evidently knew his duty. That John Sharpe was an undesirable visitor to the grounds he knew instinctively.

The dog walked towards him, putting on a most dangerous-looking air. But Sharpe was not going to let the brute have all his own way, and he advanced to meet the big dog.

For good or ill, the animal was more business-like than noisy, and he refrained from barking. As the dog sprang, the detective grabbed him by the throat, and the two strange adversaries were locked in a terrific struggle. Sharpe kept a firm grip on his throat.

But there was soon to be other actors in this strange drama!

Inside the house, Iron Hand and an accomplice had heard the noise in the yard.

The man rose from his chair, and signified that he would go and investigate.

But Iron Hand stayed him.

"Stop!"

His challenging voice rang out.

The master-criminal manipulated a lever near his desk. This schemer had a device always ready at hand. When trouble came he was very rarely unprepared to meet it.

A portion of his desk commenced to move, and a framed square of round glass came into view on top of it.

The next minute a light appeared in position, and Iron Hand and his accomplice peered into the glass.

This cunning device was a camera obscura, and by its aid he was able to see all that was taking place in the back garden.

Iron Hand started as he saw what was happening, but he soon recovered his composure.

He was able to see perfectly the detective at grips with the giant watch-dog.

The criminal leader cast a meaning glance at his colleague, and they continued to watch. To see the hated Sharpe struggling for his life was a pleasing sight for his wicked eyes.

His expression soon changed, however, when presently he saw that Sharpe was the master, and that he had succeeded in flinging the dog to one side, where the brute fell in an exhausted and dazed condition.

The next minute the detective vanished from the eye of the camera obscura, and Iron Hand guessed that he was preparing to enter the house.

As Sharpe entered the back door he little knew how his movements had been watched. He paused and listened in the hall for a moment. There was no sound to warn him of his danger.

Stealthily he crept along the passage.

Iron Hand gave the man orders to hide

himself behind one the curtains, to be ready for instant action.

The leader could now make use of his clever device again, and as he manipulated the lever he was able to get a complete view of Sharpe in it as he crept forward.

He clearly saw the detective move along, and then pause again and listen. A few more steps, and Iron Hand knew that his enemy was just outside the room. He drew his revolver, and pressed a button, extinguishing all the lights.

Slowly the door opened!

Iron Hand smiled.

Sharpe saw that all was dark within.

The detective felt in his pocket, and withdrew his flashlight. Then he ventured further into the room. The place had an uncanny air about it, but he was quite satisfied that he was alone. There was not a movement in the heavily-curtained room to warn him, and the silence was oppressive.

He flashed the light across the room, and next pushed one of the heavy curtains aside.

His heart almost stood still. That instant he realised into what a trap he had walked. The light fell full on the evil face of Iron Hand, who stood motionless and silent, with his revolver levelled.

Sharpe was hypnotised for the moment, and could not move a muscle, even if he had wished to. There was something unnatural in the criminal-chief's hideous face as the electric light revealed it.

Iron Hand's face changed to a cruel leer.

Then, pressing a button, he flooded the room with light again.

"Hallo, my friend!"

Sharpe realised the terrible predicament he was in. But there was nothing he could do. He blamed himself for being so foolhardy. But it was his way. While there was a job to be done no thought of his own personal risk worried him.

The detective was ordered to throw his revolver on to the floor, and he had no option but to obey the chief's order. Iron Hand then instructed him to come further into the room, at the same time muttering sardonically:

"I thought I had seen the last of you at Barclay's Point."

Sharpe had now recovered some of his coolness.

"It takes more than a dip in the sea to kill me," he replied.

Iron Hand nodded.

"How did you track me here?" he asked.

Curiosity was one of his great weaknesses. He could not help respecting Sharpe's cleverness, and he was interested when he came up against a man who was smarter than he was.

The detective laughed contemptuously. He still had some pluck left.

"Next time you select a double, see that his hair is the same colour as yours!" he added, with a touch of quiet sarcasm.

Iron Hand realised his carelessness in this small detail, which had not escaped the eagle eye of Sharpe.

He was not altogether pleased at the criticism of his shrewdness.

"You are worthy of your great reputation, Mr. Sharpe," he replied with dignity. "It is a pleasure to fight you. You are an ornament to your service, I am sure."

Sharpe bowed in pretended gratitude at the leader's good opinion of his capabilities.

Iron Hand glanced at his watch, and, in order to rub it into the detective, remarked:

"I'm going over to my rooms at the Alexandria Hotel to take over a shipment of gold which my men have seized. I regret to leave you here——"

As he spoke the curtain at the back of Sharpe moved, and the other man stepped silently out unnoticed by the detective. Iron Hand had seen him, however, and put his revolver down on the table in an absent-minded sort of way.

John Sharpe immediately leapt towards the weapon. He was quick to seize an opportunity.

But before he could reach it the man behind grasped him tightly, and Iron Hand picked up the pistol again.

Once more he covered Sharpe, who was helpless in the grip of the other.

Again the jeering voice rang out:

"I thought you'd fall for that, Mr. Sharpe. You're so good at getting out of any difficulties. How do you think you will get out of this corner? Why don't you try your hand at it?"

He pulled aside some of the curtains, and there was disclosed a steel wardrobe set in the wall. Pulling back some bolts, he was able to open the door, and a space just deep enough to hold a man was revealed.

With his revolver levelled, Iron Hand ordered John Sharpe to step inside, and the detective calmly obeyed.

Iron Hand closed the door and bolted it.

"He'll be safe there until we release him," he muttered to the other man, as he prepared to leave the room. "You come with me!"

The lights were extinguished, and the two men left the room.

Before emerging from the house, Iron Hand removed his mask, and put his goggles on again. Then he and Hartmann, who accompanied him, made their exit into the street.

John Sharpe did not intend to remain a captive in his narrow prison very long in order to satisfy the convenience of the leader of the Crime Trust. He unbuttoned his coat, and disclosed beneath a patent waistcoat. On this was a flap, beneath which were concealed a number of small but very strong tools.

The detective always carried these about with him in case of emergencies.

He quickly produced a tiny but highly-tempered steel jack, and, fitting the sections together, he placed the butt against the back of the vault, and the head of the instrument against the door. Then he commenced to work it.

John Sharpe was so engrossed in his work that he did not hear the knock on the door of the house. One of the gang heard the signal, and, after asking for the password, opened the door to admit the newcomer. It was Anne Crawford!

The girl groped her way along the dark hall, and, coming to the main room, switched on the lights. Looking around the room, her attention was suddenly attracted by the curtains in front of the cupboard swaying to and fro. She quietly pulled them aside, and saw, to her consternation, that the door was being forced open.

Anne quickly dropped the curtains again, and sought concealment further back in the room.

Suddenly the door of the cupboard burst open through the pressure brought to bear upon it. Anne Crawford drew her revolver, ready to defend herself, but when she caught sight of the intruder she replaced the weapon again. From her place of concealment she continued to watch the detective's movements. She saw him make for the rear door of the house, and hastily climb over the fence at the back.

Anne's admiration for the detective increased every time she saw him, and as he disappeared she could not help murmuring the words, "Wonderful man!" She longed for the time to come when she need no longer pose as a crook, and was able to reveal the truth about herself.

After giving the detective sufficient time to make himself scarce, Anne went to the member of the gang who was left in the house, and inquired where Iron Hand was.

The Gas-Chamber.

When the first opportunity came his way, John Sharpe rang up Captain West, the officer who had admirably carried out his instructions in regard to bombing the submarine.

"It's all right," said the officer, in reply to the detective's inquiry. "We caught the train-robbers red-handed. They are all prisoners, and the gold bullion came through safely!"

Sharpe was very pleased to hear the news, but he was still a little perplexed over the affair.

"More mysterious help," he muttered. "I wonder if it can be that woman?" Then, speaking again to Captain West, he said: "Iron Hand is at the Milton. I'm going there, and if you don't hear from me by nine o'clock, come after me!"

Captain West gave a reassuring reply, and the detective hung up the receiver and departed.

Iron Hand had one of the most luxurious suites of rooms in the Milton Hotel, and the chief of the gang was engaged in an important conversation with Hartmann and his valet.

The leader believed in having a large number of assistants. It was safer, and paid him better not to entrust any of his men with too many secrets. He was also artful enough to have several meeting-places, where he could plan his business. This not only assisted him in keeping the Secret Service off his track, but it aided him in keeping his jealous assistants separated.

He knew that if they were all together it was possible that they would in time plot against his authority. It is true most of them feared Iron Hand too much to attempt anything of this nature, but it was a point he kept in mind. He was not the kind to take unnecessary risks.

In the midst of the conversation between the three there came a tap at the door. But there was no need for alarm or uneasiness on their part. Iron Hand was expecting a visitor—one he always looked forward to seeing.

Hartmann opened the door, and the next minute Anne Crawford—known to the gang as Marna Black—stepped into the room.

"Well, did we get the gold?" asked Anne, with apparent eagerness, after the leader had greeted her.

Iron Hand's face clouded, and he shook his head with gloomy rage.

"There is a leak somewhere!" he growled. "It hasn't come yet. I suppose Sharpe has interfered again. Fortunately, we've got him secure at last!"

The leader's thoughts went back to the cupboard at Nest 2, and he explained to Anne how he had caught and imprisoned the detective.

Soon after the arrival of Anne, John Sharpe had also arrived in the vicinity of Milton Hotel. Going over to a clerk in the lounge, he said:

"I am seeking a man with a gloved hand."

The clerk recognised the description at once. He had, in fact, taken particular notice of the rather curious newcomer to the hotel.

"That's Mr. Mansfield," he interrupted.

Sharpe nodded.

"Can I see him?" he inquired.

For answer the clerk called a page-boy to him.

"Take this gentleman's card to Room 303, third floor."

The next moment the boy had departed on his errand.

In answer to his knock, the valet opened the door. He took the card from the page, and, telling him to wait a moment, closed the door again.

The valet handed the card to his chief.

As Iron Hand read it his face expressed dumbfounded amazement and rage.

"Sharpe has got out," he thundered, "and has the amazing cheek to come here!"

The others were equally surprised at the news. Even Anne could not help wondering why he should follow the leader here.

Iron Hand went over to the telephone, and called up the clerk below. He concluded that the best thing he could do would be to get Sharpe upstairs, and deal with him there.

"Is Mr. Sharpe alone?" questioned Iron Hand cautiously.

"Yes, sir—quite alone," answered the clerk.

"Very well, send him up." He replaced the receiver, and turned to Hartmann and the valet.

"Quick—get the gas-machine ready!" he said, in a very agitated manner.

The two crooks understood their business, and they went into the next room.

Iron Hand arranged a chair so that it faced away from the door. Then, catching sight of Anne, he said:

"He mustn't see you. Go into the next room!"

Anne obeyed.

Hartmann and the valet were already at work when she entered. They were busy at a gas generator, which had a peculiar bag arrangement connected with it.

Anne looked at the queer machine, which she imagined was being prepared for the benefit of the plucky young detective.

Hartmann commenced to turn a knob in order to generate the gas, while the valet was devoting his energies to fixing up the bag. When he had arranged it to his satisfaction, he climbed upon a table and opened the window at the top of the wall, which acted as a ventilator between the two rooms. Through the window he intended to pass the bag of the gas-machine when the signal came.

By this time Sharpe had reached the third floor, and he dismissed the page-boy. Before knocking at the door, the detective unbuttoned his waistcoat and withdrew two articles from his useful little secret pocket. He concealed these in the breast-pocket of his coat. The detective then knocked at the door.

Iron Hand rose, and after a glance around the room to see if all was in readiness, he prepared to let Sharpe in. He held a revolver in one hand.

The leader of the gang opened the door slightly and stepped back into the room.

"Come in!" he said.

John Sharpe, calm and self-possessed, walked in.

"Put up your gun," he remarked, with a smile. "You know you dare not shoot me here. It would make too much noise."

Iron Hand quite appreciated the situation. He knew he had the upper hand of the detective. But Sharpe was by no means asleep. It was not like him to walk into the lion's den unprepared for danger. No; he had quietly reasoned matters out, and he pretty well knew what means his enemy would take to put him out of business.

It might be thought that Sharpe took an unnecessary risk in following Iron Hand here, but he was anxious to collect all the information he possibly could. He wanted to do the job properly, and when the time came, he would be able to capture all the many members of the gang. It would be worse than useless to catch a few and let the others escape, for they would then be in a position to start their scheming all over again. Far better for him to wait a little longer, and get them all into his net. Already he knew of at least two dozen of the gang, although all the crooks themselves were not aware of this fact.

Iron Hand, with mock politeness, asked John Sharpe to be seated, at the same time indicating the chair, which had the back turned to the open ventilation window. In order that there should be no mistake, he commandeered the one nearest the door for his own use.

Sharpe looked at the careful way in which the two chairs had been placed, and his detective instinct told him that they had been so arranged for a definite purpose.

"To what am I indebted for this call?" asked Iron Hand, still speaking with undue politeness. His object was to draw the detective into a conversation, in order to keep his attention occupied.

Sharpe casually glanced down towards the floor—at least, this is what Iron Hand imagined. In reality, however, the detective was looking at a tiny mirror which he had concealed in his right hand.

Had the criminal chief not been so interested in watching the gas-bag being thrust through the window behind Sharpe, he might have noticed this interesting fact. He saw with keen satisfaction that it was almost in position above Sharpe's head.

Iron Hand looked at the detective again.

"You are the first detective I have met who could amuse or entertain me," he remarked. "If I did not hate you so, I could almost admire you. You make life very exciting for me, and you certainly do not lack pluck!"

The detective smiled at this flattery.

Again he looked into his mirror, and he saw the gas-bag right above his head. No doubt, he reflected, Iron Hand would soon give the necessary signal for the men to release it.

In the next room poor Anne Crawford was almost distracted. She saw the two evil men waiting anxiously for the signal from Iron Hand, in order to complete their ghastly work. One of them was looking through the keyhole in order to warn the other.

She half took out her revolver, but, thinking better of it, replaced the weapon. If only she could give the brave man some warning!

Sharpe, curiously enough, was not a bit dismayed at what was evidently in store for him. With a smile on his face, he said to Iron Hand:

"I have some news for you. The gold you were after is safe at the Customs House. And your men——"

"What has happened to the men?" demanded Iron Hand angrily.

"Captured!" replied Sharpe briefly. It pleased him to see the look of rage on Iron Hand's face

The leader of the gang tapped unconcernedly on the table. It was the first signal to his assistants.

Slowly the gas-bag commenced to descend until it was about three feet above the head of the apparently unaware detective.

Sharpe glanced down again to his mirror.

"Now!"

The order was fairly shouted out by Iron Hand, who was scarcely able to contain his excitement and rage.

The bag descended again rapidly, and it completely covered the head and shoulders of the detective. Sharpe began to struggle desperately, and Iron Hand grinned. He knew that the detective would soon be overcome by the fumes of the gas, and unable to struggle.

Hartmann, next door, continued to pump gas vigorously, while Anne Crawford, completely horrified, hurriedly entered the room which contained Iron Hand and Sharpe.

Her thoughts were with the gallant detective, and she looked at him immediately. He was struggling less vigorously now, and presently became quite motionless.

Iron Hand's face was alight with evil satisfaction. At last he had "the Needle" in his power!

Anne wanted to shoot the villain there and then. His ghastly laugh, as he looked at the helpless Sharpe, enraged her beyond measure. She felt for her revolver, but again restrained herself. It would be better for her to go on a little longer, until Iron Hand and his villainous gang were entirely trapped.

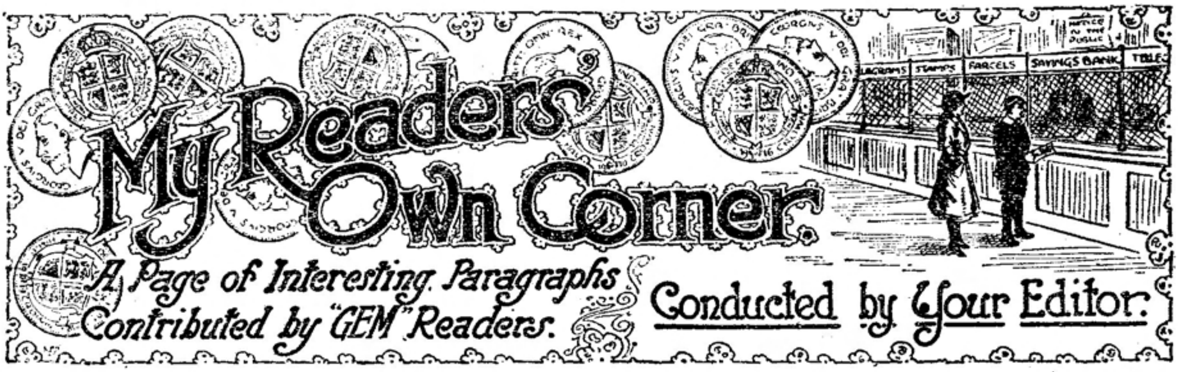
The chief of the crooks walked towards the other room, and Anne cast one more longing look in the direction of Sharpe. Her heart beat a little faster when she saw a slight movement of the detective's hands beneath the cloth which enveloped him.

"Could it be possible that he had again outwitted Iron Hand, and that he was not really unconscious?" she wondered. With great difficulty the girl stopped herself from springing to his assistance.

Hartmann and Iron Hand entered the room, carrying between them a big wooden chest.

"He'll never get out of this!" growled Iron Hand, as he walked over towards the still form of the detective.

(This amazing story, which has pleased you all so much, will be continued in next week's "Gem." Order your copy early, there will be a big demand.)



Half-a-crown is paid for every contribution printed on this page.

A TRIFLE DEAF.

A farmer dropped into London for a short visit, and decided to see one of "them pictures" of which he had read. The house was full, and he was seated in the back row. He leaned forward with an intent air for five minutes, and then he shouted impatiently: "Speak a little louder, please. I can't hear a word back here!"—Roy Trudgeon, 91, Market Jew Street, Penzance.

A GOOD EXCUSE.

Manager (to assistant clerk, who has come to work half an hour late): "Now, my man, this won't do, coming in here at this time! What excuse have you got?"

Late clerk: "Well, sir, it was like this. Last night I dreamt I was at a Cuptie, and at the close of the game neither team had scored, so it was decided to play an extra half-hour, and I simply had to stay and watch the finish."—S. Boyd, 1, Spruce Street, Hulme, Manchester.

HEAVY WEIGHTS!

A farmer's wife made some cakes, and, because no one would eat them, she flung them to her ducks. Just afterwards some children came running in, and exclaimed: "Hi, missus, your ducks is sunk!"—A. B. Clutterbuck, Hillsbro', Stroud Road, Gloucester.

THE OWL.

An owl at night, hooting in Tooting,
Heard a motor in Tooting toot-tooting.
So he hooted a hoot, to out-shoot the toot-toot
Of that toot-tooting motor of Tooting.—C. L. Lawrence, 19, Westfields, Higham Ferrers, Northants.

ALL JOKING ASIDE.

"Football guide, sir?" said the street vendor to the burly man who was hurrying to the match.

"No," replied the burly man.

"All the news, photos of players, and the——"

"No, I tell you!"

"Past records, fixtures, and——"

"Get out!"

"Information worth a——"

Out shot the big man's foot, and the next moment the youth was sitting in the gutter. Slowly he rose, smiled sadly, held up a football guide, and continued:

"No, but puttin' all jokes aside, mister, do you want a football guide?"—H. W. Collett, 34, Trafalgar Road W., Gorleston-on-Sea, Great Yarmouth.

TOM MERRY.

I like all the Companion Papers, but, in my opinion, the GEM is the best of the lot. Talbot and Tom Merry are my favourite characters. The "Greyfriars Herald" has proved immensely popular, and I believe that if "Tom Merry's Weekly" appeared on the market, it would be as much sought after as the "G. H." Will you ask your readers what they think about it? I think most of them will agree with me.—F. Bradbury, the New House, Church Road, Pakefield, Lowestoft.

NOT TO BE SNEEZED AT!

When you do not want your presence to be known, a sneeze often betrays you. To suppress a sneeze, all you have to do is to press hard upon the flesh just under the nose. You will thus withhold the sneeze.—C. Rabinowitz, 275, Long Street, Cape Town, South Africa.

JUST SO!

The train had been crawling along, and at last came to a standstill at a sleepy little station. Instantly a lady put her head out of the window, and said to the guard:

"I say, guard, can't you go any faster than this?"

"Yes," came the reply, "but I have to stay with the train!"—F. Martin, 16, Ravenswood Road, Balham, S.W. 12.

A QUESTION OF TIME.

"Yus," said Convict No. 129, "they say it took nearly the whole of John Bunyan's lifetime to write 'The Pilgrim's Progress.'"

"Why," said Ditto 202, "that's nothing! It's taking me ten years to finish one sentence!"—J. Underhill, 70, Urmson Road, Liscard, Wallasey, Cheshire.

SPADES WERE TRUMPS.

He was an elderly son of the soil, and he had all the farmer's savage hatred of rates and taxes of every kind and description. To add insult to injury, a perky little Jack-in-office of a rate-collector called on him one day for taxes he had already paid. Unfortunately, the farmer could not find the receipt. "I explained this to him," he explained to a friend of his later, "and, would you believe it, Bill, the feller began to abuse me?" "Did he?" said Bill. "And what did you do?" "Do? Well, I remonstrated with him." "You did? To what effect?" "I dunno exactly; but the shovel got broke!"—Jack Gaskell junior, Lyndale House, Mayfield Avenue, Halifax.

A GEMITE IN GEM CITY.

The City of Gems is Kimberley. It is the largest diamond mining centre in the world. The De Beers Company employs nearly three thousand Europeans at Kimberley, and sixteen thousand natives. Kimberley is the second largest town in Cape Province, and is famed for athletics as well as jewels. B. Rudd, the South African athlete, was a Kimberley lad. Kimberley's Rugger team, the Griquas, are well-known in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand.—B. Newman, 15, Spencer Lane, Kimberley, South Africa.

AMATEUR JOURNALISM.

I wonder how many readers of the GEM have thought at some time or another that they would like to edit a paper! My advice is—don't! I know for a fact that nine out of every ten enter the amateur journalism world with the idea of making money, and, in the end, running a magazine like the GEM. You can only learn these things by experience. Don't expect to make money. You are likely to lose a bit. But, if you are prepared to lose a little, set to work in the right way. During the last two years I have edited, printed, and published a magazine of my own, and the amateur editor could do worse than take the following advice: Be original. Do not borrow ideas from the Companion Papers. You may write a school story of your own, and think it is your own. It is not. Martin Clifford & Co. have used every possible theme. Concentrate on some other subject, and choose one of which you know something. Never run a serial. Short, snappy bits always take, as do newsy bits of gossip. Running a magazine enables you to speak your mind, but there is no money in it.—J. W. Mayer, The Alka Press, 562, Oldham Road, Bardsley, near Manchester.

The writer of the above offers copies of the "Amateurs' Gazette."

POLITENESS!

The tram was crowded. Nevertheless, a large foreigner and his wife squeezed in. A gentleman—a relic of a fast-disappearing civilisation—rose to give the lady his seat. The foreigner promptly flopped into it, to the amazement of all who saw. "See here, sir!" said the individual who had jumped up. "I gave up my place to the lady, not to you!" "Ach, that is all right. She is my wife." was the placid response. The alien remained where he was.—H. J. Darvill, 7, Brearcliffe Street, Buttershaw, Bradford.

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Dear Editor,—I know you get plenty of letters asking for details about the characters. I understand how it is exactly. Being a girl, I naturally should know. We girls do understand, you know. I get pestered with questions by friends to whom I lend the GEM, such as whether Cardew has parents? Well, anybody who reads the splendid yarns knows he was brought up by that grand old nobleman, Lord Reckness, Ralph's grandfather. I often think I want to meet Lord Reckness. I like the way he talks to Ralph. Does not say a lot, but what he says he means. Just a real man, strong, and reserved. I can see him walking into his Pall Mall club, his monocle in his eye, and a look about him which is stern and tender at once.

Monty Lowther is just topping. I hate to hear his puns abused. It shows a nice, generous, amusing nature to crack jokes. If you scatter cheery jokes round as you walk through the world, you are sowing smile crops. Of course, some scratchy people will not smile. They can't for nuts! Their facial machinery is out of gear, and their hearts don't work.

I should, though, like to hear something more about everybody. It cannot be done, I know; but if it could! We should have scrumptious stories about Baggy at home, and what his people think of him, and how Gussy behaves when he is far away from St. Jim's. When characters are real they are interesting all the time, and it would be jolly to have a "Daily GEM," with all the adventures of the Shell and Fourth, when the members of those Forms are living just ordinary lives.

Personally, I am interested in the cowards and the mean-minded fellows, though there are not many of these. Being a girl, I realise that they cannot help being like that. There are boys with A1 minds, and others with C3 temperaments, and the last-named would only just like to move up. Probably they intend to get to the higher place, but find it too stiff a job.

Cardew simply doesn't care. It comes naturally to him to be brave. He is the sort of fellow who would stop and be chatty with a mad bull so as allow the girl with whom he was walking time to slip over the gate. Cardew has things all his own way. He is first-class. D'Arcy is much the same, only he speaks so slow he would most likely let the mad bull get in the first word. But it would not be through lack of courage. D'Arcy would even want to hurry home and change into some old clothes before he grabbed the bull's horns. I have been interested in Cardew ever since he came to the Fourth. It was in that fine tale published more than two years since, the one where he tackled the bully Cutts. It was a ripping introduction, just like the arrival of D'Artagnan in "The Three Musketeers."

Doubtless, Cardew would have been the same wherever he turned up. Supposing, for instance, he had been a boy on a farm instead of a young nobleman. You can picture him making friends with the horses and cows, and being sarcastic to the pigs. Not that they would mind!

I am desperately fond of horses. No wonder folks talk about "horse-sense." When I lived in Queensland with uncle I rode every day and all day. I had a brown horse, named Redstar. What the dear thing did not know—well, it would not amount to much. The look in its eye showed you. I must tell you more about my life in Australia another time. I shall go back there some day, though I am quite satisfied with London for the present—that is, even if it is a trifle "stuffy." The place is bonza.

My uncle goes to the City every day, and trades in sheep and rabbits. He says there is hardly room to breathe in the Underground Railway. Sometimes of an evening, when he is enjoying his cigar, I read him a funny story out of the GEM, and he always says it is real good, and laughs.

I like "The Invisible Hand" very much, and I love to think I am playing plucky Anne Crawford's part in the story.

Now, I shall not ask you to reform all the bad characters. If they mean to reform they will do the work themselves. Besides which, there must be variety, or else it would not be life. If Talbot did not turn bitter now and then I should not admire him half as much. In fact, entre nous, I should like Tom Merry a bit more if he made a mess of things once in a while.—Your chirpy chum,

JOY.

(More from Joy next week.)

EDITORIAL AND ANSWERS TO READERS.

My Dear Chums,—

By this time you will all have seen our special art portrait of Jack Blake, and I hope you like it. I have received a great many letters asking for portraits of this description, and my readers will be interested to know that I have made arrangements to publish a series of these delightful studies of the chums of St. Jim's. In my opinion they are so good that they are well worth keeping and making a collection of. You may take it that each one is a faithful likeness of the original. Next week the place of honour will be filled by the world-famous Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of the Fourth. I anticipate a record demand for the "Gem" next week, and to avoid disappointment, all readers must get their copy of the "Gem" early. Remember, the "Gem" is the only paper which will present these interesting pictures. Next week our special long complete story will be entitled, "Cardew Makes Amends!" and it is undoubtedly one of the finest we have yet published.

YOUR EDITOR.

"Joice" (Manchester).—I am glad you like the GEM so much, and can assure you it is going to be even better. So you like "The Invisible Hand." Your New Year resolutions are interesting, and I hope you achieve your ambition and win the gymnasium cup. Yes, there are some splendid Martin Clifford stories coming along.

An interesting letter reaches me from A. S. (Bermondsey). My correspondent says: "I like all the boys in the GEM very much, except the rotters, such as Racke & Co. I shall always go on reading the GEM, for it is excellent. I am pleased to see that Antonio Moreno is in "The Invisible Hand," as he is my favourite film actor. Pearl White is my favourite actress. Although this may seem funny, Monty Lowther is my favourite character, because of his jokes and puns, which, I think, are very good. I hope you will have some more mystery stories in the GEM."

TOM MERRY & CO.

Charles Wesley, Maltravers Road, Ivanhoe, writes: "Being of a literary turn of mind, I keep a book for ideas, and it seemed to me this is a good one: Tom Merry & Co. should issue a challenge to any public school to meet four junior boxers in the ring." Much obliged for the suggestion.

TWO FINE LETTERS.

One of these comes from Kenneth A. Bruce, Glenelg, Liverpool Road, South Strathfield, Sydney, Australia: "Living in Sydney, and being a regular reader of the GEM, I desire, on behalf of myself and friends, to ask you to have a competition for your readers in the uttermost parts of the earth. I have often cast longing eyes on your competitions, but we all know well that it is impossible for us who are far away."

I should like to oblige this correspondent, but there are many difficulties to be surmounted.

The second letter is from "H. D.," Manchester. It runs: "This is the first time I have taken the liberty of writing to you, but after reading this week's GEM I felt that it was the least I could do to congratulate you. I have read the GEM for eight years, since being a nipper at school, and from the very beginning I have never read anything to equal it. I wish the GEM every success.

I am much obliged to the writer, and hope he may pass many good, cheery hours in the company of the old paper.

JACK BLAKE.

The popular leader of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. (Another special portrait study next week.)