

"FIGHTING FOR THE ASHES!"

Special School and Sporting
Story Inside.

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EVERY WEDNESDAY.

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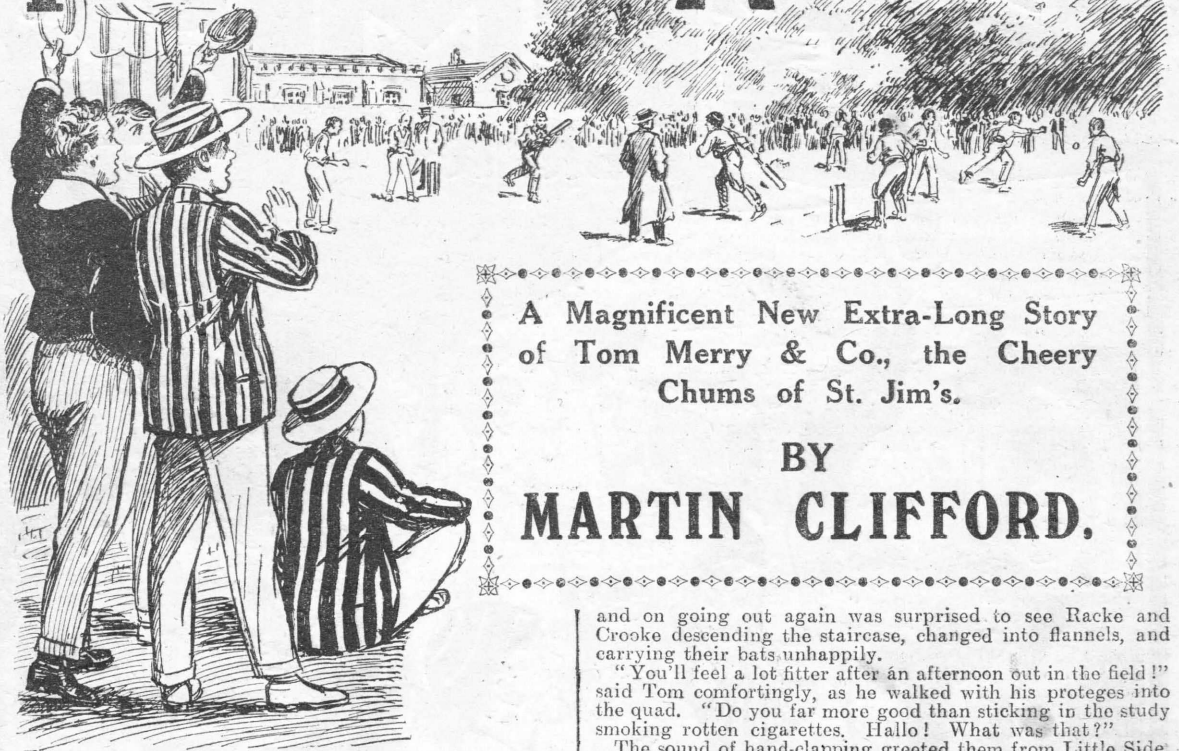
FIGHTING FOR THE ASHES!

THE HEROES OF THE MATCH!

(A scene of lively enthusiasm after the exciting match between St. Jim's and the Australian schoolboy cricketers, described in this week's grand school story.)

NEVER BEEN BEATEN! That's the record a team of Australian schoolboy cricketers, touring England, bring with them when they arrive at St. Jim's. But Tom Merry & Co. go all out to change that state of affairs!

FIGHTING FOR THE ASHES!



A Magnificent New Extra-Long Story
of Tom Merry & Co., the Cheery
Chums of St. Jim's.

BY
MARTIN CLIFFORD.

CHAPTER 1.

Racke Asks for It!

"TUMBLE out, you slackers!"

Tom Merry kicked open the door of Racke's study in the Shell passage, and then stopped suddenly. He coughed, and his eyes gleamed. The study was full of smoke, and the atmosphere could almost have been cut with a knife.

The two occupants, Racke and Crooke, jumped to their feet as the Shell captain entered, thrusting their cigarettes hastily behind them.

"Oh, my aunt! You!" gasped Racke, with intense relief. "Only Tom Merry!" echoed Crooke, bringing his cigarette into view again. "You gave us a turn, you fool, barging into the study like that!"

"It might have been a master!" gasped Racke. "I thought you'd locked the door, Crooke. We might have been caught!"

Tom Merry's lip curled as the two cads replaced their cigarettes between their lips and sat down again, breathing a little quickly.

"Serve you jolly well right if you had been!" he remarked grimly. "I looked in to see that you slackers turn out for cricket practice—it's compulsory to-day, you know!"

"Hang cricket practice!" growled Crooke. "Hang it as much as you like, but it'll do you a sight more good to chase a ball about than frowsting in here on a sunny afternoon!" retorted Tom witheringly. "Put some beef into it. Kildare will be along in a minute to see why you haven't turned up!"

Crooke growled, but rose from his chair. "Come on, Racke!" he grunted. "We shall have to turn out, I suppose. Hang cricket, hang Kildare—and hang you, Tom Merry!"

"Thanks awfully!" said Tom Merry, with a cheery smile. "I'll give you five minutes to change, and after that I'll come up to you with my bat. Sharp's the word!"

Crooke, with a further grunt, left the study, and Racke slouched after him, giving Tom Merry a venomous glance as he passed.

"Five minutes, mind!" said Tom warningly. He strolled back to his study for a pair of batting-gloves,

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and on going out again was surprised to see Racke and Crooke descending the staircase, changed into flannels, and carrying their bats unhappily.

"You'll feel a lot fitter after an afternoon out in the field!" said Tom comfortingly, as he walked with his proteges into the quad. "Do you far more good than sticking in the study smoking rotten cigarettes. Hallo! What was that?"

The sound of hand-clapping greeted them from Little Side, where cricket practice was in progress under the supervision of Kildare of the Sixth, this particular Saturday being a compulsory day for junior boys.

"Good old Figgy! Well hit, sir!"

"New House for ever!"

Tom Merry's eyes lit up as he saw the ball tossed back to Kildare, who was sending down a few deliveries to the junior batsmen in the nets. Evidently Figgins was in form, and had knocked the St. Jim's captain's ball away in style. Tom Merry broke into a run.

"Come on, you bouncers!" he called over his shoulder. "Let's see Kildare trying to shift Figgy! Good man—oh, good man!"

There was another roar as the long-legged leader of the New House drove Kildare's ball away almost to the boundary.

"Well done, kid!" gasped Kildare, his face crimson with exertion. "Look out for your wicket this time!"

The ball came down, and there was a crash as Figgins' wicket was spreadeagled.

"You fellows think you could stand up to Kildare as long as Figgy?" inquired Tom Merry, grinning, as he turned to where Racke and Crooke were standing behind him—or, rather, where they should have been standing. The Shell captain blinked, and then gave a shout as he espied two figures disappearing in the direction of the gates at top speed—a fag having been bribed to take their bats indoors again.

"Ahoj, there! Come back, you rotten slackers!"

"Put it on!" gasped Racke, between his teeth. Crooke merely grunted, having no breath to waste on a reply. Too many cigarettes had robbed Crooke of his wind, and he was not in a condition to enjoy a foot race.

The cads swung out of the gates and into the lane, casting anxious glances over their shoulders in the direction of the playing-field. Tom Merry's voice sounded again, but he had evidently not troubled to give chase, their start having stood them in good stead.

"Better than chasing a ball about in this sun!" gasped Racke, mopping his brow. Too many cigarettes in the study had taken away Racke's wind, too, and he was feeling the strain of a short sprint exceedingly.

"Tons better!" agreed Crooke, thankfully slowing down into a walk. "There'll be the dickens to pay afterwards, though, Aubrey!"

"Hang that!" snarled Racke. "We can make up some yarn—Merry dragged us out of the study when we weren't fit—anythin' will do! If it comes to the worst, it will have to be a lickin' or lines. Blessed if I wouldn't sooner be licked than play cricket for two or three hours on end!"

"Ahem! Yes!" agreed Croke, though in a rather half-hearted tone. It almost appeared as if Croke were beginning already to regret his defiance of authority—Gerald Croke not being of the courageous order. Still, he reflected, they had escaped the immediate evil, and had the afternoon before them.

"Shall we drop in at the Green Man?" suggested Croke hopefully.

Racke's frown darkened, and he grunted angrily.

"No, of course not, you idiot! Didn't I tell you I owe Lodgey a matter of twenty quid, and I haven't a penny at present to pay him? I suppose you can't lend me the cash, can you?"

"Sorry, old man!" said Croke. "I'm pretty hard up against it myself!"

"Till I get my next allowance from the pater, I'm broke!" grunted Racke. "An' it's no good writin'—I had a jawin' on the subject of economy the last time I wrote! I'll have to keep out of Lodgey's way for a bit, that's all!"

"Yes; but what shall we do this afternoon, then?" queried Croke, wishing more than ever that he had not cut cricket practice, now that there was to be no game of billiards to lighten the burden of life.

"Let's go to old Pepper's barn and have a smoke!" suggested Racke.

"That's about all there is to do!" growled Croke. "We'll have to go to the village first, though, and fetch my watch. I left it to be repaired a few days ago. Then we can go to the barn. Pretty miserable sort of an afternoon, I must say!"

"Supposin' you suggest somethin' better!" snarled Racke.

Croke grunted out in reply to that remark, and the two young rascals walked on in silence till they were in the old High Street of Rylcombe. Croke fetched his watch, and they began to retrace their steps. They had passed the sleepy old railway-station, when a sudden hail caused them to turn again.

"Stop a minute, chum!"

"You fellows from St. Jim's?"

Racke and Croke swung round in astonishment, to behold a crowd of fellows about their own age emerging from the station and carrying bags and portmanteaux. The foremost, a tall, good-looking youth, in a lounge suit, accosted Racke.

"Excuse me!" he said, with a grin.

"You're from St. Jim's, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Racke wonderingly.

"Good! I can see your cap now.

My name's Charlie Hill. Pleased to meet you!" And the youth held out his hand cheerily.

Racke winced as the stranger gave him a grip.

"Mine's Racke!" said that worthy sullenly. He had taken an instinctive dislike to this cheery, open-featured youth, wherever he came from. Possibly the stranger was not over-impressed with Racke, but he politely concealed it, if that was the case.

"I don't know you, but how d'you do?" continued Hill, giving Croke a grip that made him wriggle. "We're the Australians, you see, ready to lick your team to a frazzle!"

"Oh!" said Racke, a light dawning on him suddenly.

"So you're the Aussies!" ejaculated Croke. "Oh, I see. But you were expected late to-night. We heard you were travelling from London after finishing a match. Tom Merry and his pals were coming down to meet you."

"We got away sooner than we expected," explained Charlie Hill. "Sorry if we've inconvenienced anybody. Still, you fellows can direct us to St. Jim's, I expect. And we shall want a car to stack our tackle in. Where can we get one about here?"

"You won't get a car in Rylcombe!" grinned Croke. "You ought to have got out at Wayland and gone to the garage. There's only the hack here."

The Australian junior glanced at the old hack that stood just outside the station, with its ancient horse and still more ancient driver.

"That! Why, I wouldn't like to make the poor old gee haul anything!" he grunted. "Old Randolph—he's our tutor and general manager, you know—told us to get out at Wayland, but the porter shoved us into the Rylcombe train. We didn't expect to land in a hamlet like this, though. Isn't there anything else at all?"

"Not here!" said Racke. "You could have got a taxi or a charabanc at Wayland."

"No matter. We'll walk!" announced Charlie Hill

optimistically. "I suppose you chaps aren't going back to the school, by any chance?"

"We're not. But we'll tell you the way," said Racke, winking covertly at Croke. "We've got some business to attend to in the village, so if you'll excuse us—"

"Certainly!" said the Australian at once. "The school's straight ahead, I take it?"

Croke opened his mouth to answer in the affirmative, but Racke stamped on his foot, and Croke gave a gasp instead.

"No; you turn to the right about a hundred yards farther along," lied Racke glibly. "Then keep straight on to the cross-roads, and strike up over the heath—you can't miss it!"

The Australians stared at Racke rather strangely as he gave them that valuable information. They had not missed the sudden and painful suppression of Croke. Hill gave the cad of the Shell a cool glance.

"Sounds a bit out of the way," he remarked.

"Oh, yes; it's quite out in the country, y'know," said Racke carelessly. "Follow my directions, and you'll get there all right. So-long! We must be trotting!"

And Racke turned and began to lounge away with Croke, who was trying hard not to grin and spoil what he regarded as a great jest. But the slackers did not get very far. Charlie Hill put out a hand and swung Racke round with astonishing ease.

"Just a moment!" remarked the Australian quietly. "A joke's a joke, I know; but we don't want a thundering long walk after our journey and find ourselves landed in some out of the way spot a dozen miles from anywhere. Let's have the straight goods. Is this the road to St. Jim's?"

"Let me go, confound you!" snarled Racke, wrenching himself free. "I've told you once. If you don't believe me, you can go to Jericho for all I care!"

The Australian gave Racke a peculiar look, probably somewhat surprised at that polite injunction from a perfect stranger.

"Look here," he said coolly. "We don't want to fall out as soon as we've met, Racke, if that's your name. But we're not here to be japed. I saw your friend start to tell us the truth, so you may as well own up. You've got a civil tongue in your head, I suppose? Tell us the way, and we'll be off!"

"I've told you!" said Racke sullenly. "I don't intend to repeat it, so put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

"I—I say, Racke—" began Croke, but dried up as Racke gave him an evil look. Evidently Racke was determined to ask for trouble, and Croke shrugged his shoulders and endeavoured to back away a little.

"Tell us again, and get it right this time!" suggested one of the newcomers, a short, rotund youth with an abundance of curly hair of the shade known as auburn.

Croke watched, with a slight grin on his face. If Racke was setting out to mislead the Australians, it was best to let him get on with it. The newcomers did not look as if they would be easy to mislead.

"Turn to the right—" said Racke at last.

"Oh, rot!" said somebody impatiently. "You don't know when a joke's finished!"

"Come on!" said Charlie Hill grimly. "We'll ask the porter. Could have done that in the first place if we hadn't spotted these chaps."

"Ask him, and be blown to you, then!" observed Racke. Racke's temper had been ruffled when Tom Merry turned him out of his study, and it had certainly not improved with keeping. Possibly his debt to Lodgey, of the Green Man, had something to do with his evil mood.

"Nice boy!" said the curly-headed youth, as the visitors turned towards the station.

"Come on, Aubrey, old man!" urged Croke, feeling that Racke was trying deliberately to be offensive to the Australians, and possessing a slightly thinner skin than his pal.

"And I hope you jolly well get licked!" said Racke, grinning as he delivered that Parthian shot.

"What?" roared a burly youth whom his comrades addressed as Johnny. "Say that again, you cheeky rotter! Blessed if we're going to stand that from anybody, St. Jim's chaps or not! Are we, you fellows?"

"No!" came a very decided chorus.

"Scrag him!" advised a voice.

"Here, hold on, you chaps—" began Charlie Hill, as his comrades made a rush and surrounded Racke, whose face whitened. "Remember he's a St. Jim's chap!" ejaculated Hill, as Racke lit out wildly and went under amid a chorus of shouts.

But his protest was too late. Two or three of the incensed

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(See pages 7 & 19.)

Aussies seized Racke, whose flying fists were doing considerable damage, and lifted him clear of the ground. Then they bumped him on the hard roadway in a manner which showed that, Australians or not, they were perfectly familiar with the time-honoured methods of corporal punishment meted out by schoolboys to their kind.

The dust rose from Rylcombe Lane in clouds before the visitors relinquished Racke, who rolled and roared, and then sat up dazedly. Croke took a step to aid him, but paused, in two minds whether to run for it before his turn came. But he need not have feared.

"Chuck it!" said Charlie Hill. "We don't want to get ourselves a bad name before we've been here half an hour. Let him alone, Mac, you ass!"

"Dinna excite yerself!" observed a lean, lanky junior who had halted over the recumbent form of Aubrey Racke. He eyed the Shell fellow's crimson features and gleaming eyes gravely for a moment.

"Careful it is!" he warned seriously.

"Eh?" ejaculated Racke.

"Ye mauna tread on the Scotch thistle!" observed the stranger with great gravity, and with a glimmer in his blue eyes he walked after his comrades, leaving Racke gasping for breath and staring fixedly after him.

CHAPTER 2. Lodgey on the Warpath!

"YOUNG gents—" Racke started violently as that well-known voice struck his ears, coming from the stile leading into Rylcombe Wood. Both he and Croke turned quickly and perceived the owner—Joe Lodgey the racing tout and "hanger-on" of the Green Man.

Lodgey was leaning negligently on the stile, idly swinging a silver-knobbed cane and smoking a particularly fat and obnoxious cigar. He smiled a polite and oily greeting to the two Shell fellows, and touched his greasy bowler hat.

"Scuse me, young gents, but seein' you passin' I thought maybe as you'd like to square up a little bit on account. 'Ow about it, Master Racke, sir?"

Racke, his face flushed, left the lane and approached the stile, an evil glitter in his eyes. His voice was cool, however, when he spoke.

"Fancy seein' you here, Lodgey! I'm sorry we can't stop for a chat. We've got to get back for callin'-over, you see."

The bookmaker did not fail to note Racke's eagerness to be off, and he took his cue with an inward chuckle.

"Wot, not got a minute for an old pal o' the likes o' me?" he asked indignantly. "Me wot's never refused to 'ave a bit on a 'orse wi' you, young gents, and 'as paid up reg'lar, and no quibblin' over the winnin', neither!"

"Fat lot I've ever won from you!" sneered Racke. "You've made a tidy little sum out of me at times, I should say. It's no good asking me for money just now—I'm broke, and shall be for the next fortnight, at least!"

Lodgey fixed a bleary eye on Racke's face, and winked a very knowing wink.

"You mean, you've 'ad enough, young sir?" he suggested. "You're fed up wi' backin' your fancy for a bit, like? You've 'ad bad luck, sir, I'm willing to admit you 'ave. Crock 'ard cheese it were over that there Blue Peter wot came in larst in the Sandown Sweepstakes. Still, them as sticks to it comes out on top in the end, Master Racke!"

"Well, I've told you the position—I'm stony, so you'll get nothin' out of me for a while, anyhow!" said Racke, irritably. "I know I owe you a decent sum, Lodgey. But it'll have to wait, that's all there is to it!"

Lodgey's face took on a scowl, and he took the evil-smelling cigar out of his mouth.

"See here, young sir!" he said grimly. "I knows a gentelman when I sees one—I do that. But time comes when a man wants 'is money, don't you see—an', if you'll 'scuse me sayin' so, I'm a bit hard pressed meself this week, as it 'appens. So I'll be obliged if you'll let me 'ave somethin' on account, say a fiver, that'll do to go on with! I 'ope as 'ow we shall allus be good friends, Master Racke!" he added solicitously.

Racke's eyes glittered still more, and he clenched his fists. But he held himself in with an effort. To be seen talking to a character of Lodgey's calibre was a fear which the cad could not dismiss till they were away from the public highway. A master or prefect might pass at any moment, and then—Racke hardly dared to think of the consequences.

"Come into the wood!" he urged. "Come on, Croke—let's get out of sight, anyway!"

"Just as you like, sir!" said Lodgey obligingly. He walked, grinning, with the two young rascals till they were concealed from the roadway. Then, halting on the narrow footpath, Racke turned fiercely on the bookmaker.

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"How much do I owe you exactly, you swindler?" he ejaculated.

Lodgey held up a fat, beringed hand soothingly. "Now, young sir!" he warned. "Ard words, Master Racke! But as you mentions it, you owes me a matter o' twenty pun over that there 'orse Blue Peter; Saucy Sue 'aving gone down just previous makes up the total, sir!"

"Well, I haven't got it!" said Racke, sullenly.

"No?" said Mr. Lodgey, politely. "I wonder when you will 'ave it, Master Racke?"

"I told you, you fool!" hissed Racke, almost beside himself with anger. "You'll have to wait a fortnight, at least! And if you speak to me again in the lane, where anybody might see, I sha'n't be at St. Jim's much longer, and then you'd lose the whole lot! Whatever possessed you to play the fool like that, Lodgey?"

"Gently, gently!" observed the bookmaker tranquilly, knocking the ash from his cigar. "Sorry if I've offended you, sir. No offence meant, I'm sure. Only—only a man must 'ave 'is money some time, d'ye see, and bein' a bit 'ard pressed this week, I thought—"

"You won't get a penny from me!" growled Racke. "And hang your rotten apologies! Now, let me pass. I'll come down to the Green Man when I've got the money. Till then, you can keep your distance!"

Mr. Lodgey eyed Racke sorrowfully; and then looked at Croke, who shuffled his feet uneasily.

"And you, Master Croke—you owe me a little, too! Can I 'ave a little on account from you, sir?"

"I'm sorry—" began Croke, hesitatingly. "You see, I'm almost broke, as it happens, and I sha'n't be in funds again for a week, at least. I'll pay up, of course!"

"Oh, o' course!" agreed Mr. Lodgey, seriously. "But you see 'ow it stands; a man can't wait for his cash for ever, can 'e, now? So I'd be obliged if you could let me 'ave a five pun note between the two o' you, that's not much to young gents at a swell school, and I'll wait till next week for the rest! That's a gen'rous offer, young gents!"

"We've already told you that we haven't a ten bob note between us!" said Racke, impatiently. "Don't be funny, Lodgey. You'll get nothing by threats. I'm off, come on, Croke!"

"Old on a minute!" ejaculated the bookmaker, as the juniors turned and endeavoured to shove past him. "Old on a minute, I says—you'd better, unless you wants your 'eadmaster to 'ear of these goin's on, I'm thinkin'!"

"What?" roared Croke in alarm. "You fool, you'd get nothing by telling the Head. He wouldn't listen to you, and you know it, you rotten swindler!"

"Easy does it, sir!" observed Mr. Lodgey philosophically. "Jest you listen 'ere, and you'll see 'ow you stand. Y'see, I'm 'ard up at the moment, and a 'onest man must pay up 'is debts. If neither o' you gents can let me 'ave anythin', I'll jest 'ave to post your IO Us to Dr. Holmes. 'e'll get 'em in the mornin', and see if 'e can get you to pay up, see? Pr'aps 'e'd be glad to give me my dues; d'you think so, young gents?"

"You rotter!" gasped Croke, white faced. "If you give us away—his voice trailed off as he visualised the interview with Dr. Holmes and the subsequent and inevitable expulsion; perhaps with a flogging thrown in as a makeweight, so to speak!

"Look here, Lodgey!" began Racke, moistening his dry lips. "We—we can't pay up now, that's certain! But you won't get anythin' by givin' us away; the Head would give you in charge for dealin' with fellows under age!"

"Would 'e?" sneered Lodgey, cunningly. "Would 'e, old covey? And get the school's name in the papers; I think 'e'd want that? No, I don't, Master Racke. I think 'e'd sooner pay up and look pleasant, 'opin' as 'ow it 'ud all blow over nice and quiet, as you might say. Don't you think so, young sirs?"

"You—you awful rotter!" gasped Croke, faintly.

"A man must live!" remarked Mr. Lodgey peacefully.

"Look here!" said Racke desperately. "You mustn't tell the Head; you understand? If he saw those IO Us, we'd be finished at St. Jim's, and that wouldn't help you in the least, you rotter! And I'm prepared to have a bet—"

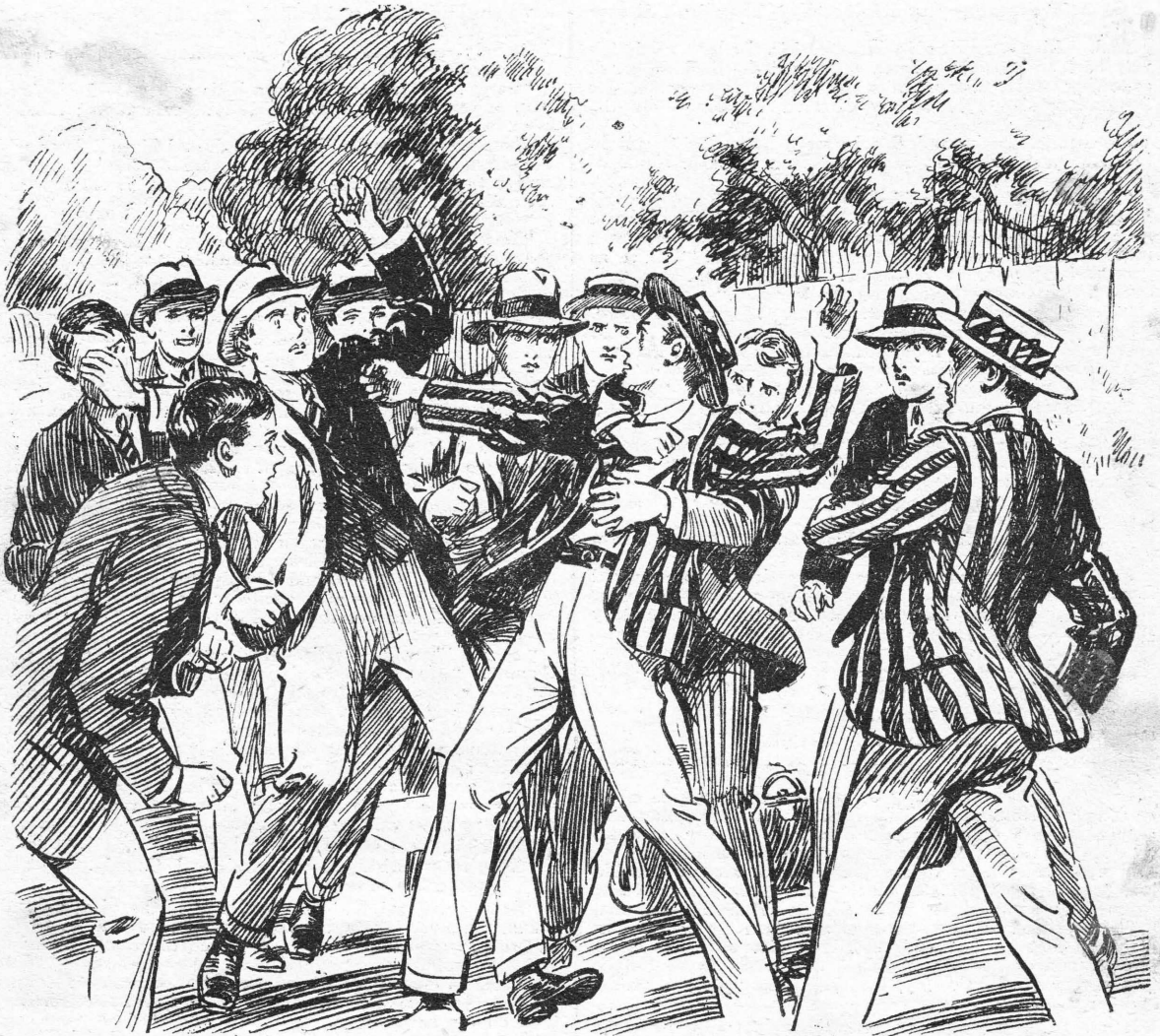
"Eh?" ejaculated Lodgey, his eyes gleaming.

"A sporting chance—" continued Racke, rather hoarsely.

"Now you're talkin', young sir!" said Mr. Lodgey genially. "There's no need for friends to quarrel like this 'ere, Master Racke, if you're willin' to be sporty about it! Wot can I do for you this time?"

"You see—it's—it's—"

"Bless you, I can let a young gentelman's account run a bit so long as I'm doin' reg'lar business with 'im, d'ye see?" said Lodgey, genially puffing at his cigar. "Anythink you like, sir, I'll take a bet on any 'orse wot is runnin' to-day, knowin' you haven't seen the papers yet. Wot is it?"



"Come on, chaps!" cried a voice. "Scrag the cheeky rotter!" "Here, hold on, you chaps——" began Hill, the Australian tourists' skipper, as his comrades made a rush and surrounded Racke. "Remember he's a St. Jim's chap!" But his protest was too late. Racke, whose flying fists were doing considerable damage, was lifted clear of the ground. (See Chapter 1.)

"It's not what you think——" said Racke haltingly.

"Not the fav'rite this time, sir?" grinned Lodgey, nodding understandingly. "Well, I'll admit fav'rites 'aven't been doin' as they should 'ave done lately. I don't blame you for givin' 'em a miss, Master Racke. Which is it, Demon Eye? 'E's a good 'orse for the three o'clock, if ever there was one!"

"It's on a cricket match!" said Racke, getting it out at last.

"Oh!" Mr. Lodgey removed his cigar, and stared at Racke quizzically. "A cricket match, you say, sir? And where is it to be played, and who's playin', if I might ask, sir?"

"You've heard of this team of Australians—fellows about my age—they're tourin' England this summer an' playin' all the biggest public schools, well, they arrived here this afternoon, an' I want to bet on their match against St. Jim's!"

Mr. Lodgey chewed his cigar thoughtfully.

"Let's see, now. These 'ere Australian fellows—they 'aven't been beat yet, 'ave they?"

"No," said Racke, his eyes gleaming hopefully.

"Maybe as you expect me to back your school agen 'em?" asked Mr. Lodgey sarcastically.

"No. I want to back St. Jim's!" said Racke, breathlessly.

Mr. Lodgey stared, and rubbed his nose, but finally nodded.

"Right you are, sir!" he said agreeably. "If you want to take a chance—and you've got as much chance as any other team, I s'pose. I'm willing, up to any amount!" he added recklessly.

Racke smiled.

"Good man, Lodgey!" he answered, in quite a friendly tone. "I'll back our fellows for twenty quid, all I owe you!"

"Wot! Twenty quid?" gasped Mr. Lodgey, faintly. "I'll back 'em for twenty quid, even money!" said Racke, coolly. "You said any amount!"

"My only 'at! Why, if you loses, you'll owe me forty pun in all, Master Racke!"

Racke suffered an inward tremor, but he nodded calmly.

"That's it!" he agreed pleasantly. "I'm confident of winning, and if I don't, I shall be in funds by that time, so you're sure of your money, Lodgey!"

The bookmaker was silent for a few moments.

"We'll 'ave this 'ere in black and white!" he said at last, producing a grubby notebook and a fountain-pen. "Ere you are, jest write it out on a page out o' this, will you, Master Racke?"

"Certainly!" said Racke, and, scribbling the agreement, handed the notebook back, with a grin.

Lodgey goggled at the signature with bleary eyes, and then made out a receipt for the bet.

"Good enough!" smiled Racke. "Then we'll call it good-afternoon, Lodgey! Come on, Crooke!"

And before the rascally bookmaker had recovered from his surprise at "landing" such a huge bet the two cads had hastened along the woodland path and were gone.

"Well!" observed Mr. Lodgey to the world in general. "Well, my only 'at! 'E'll lose, as sartin as Fate—and then 'e'll owe me forty blinkin' pun! Those young gents didn't

ought to have money—they didn't really! They don't deserve it!"

And, still murmuring to himself, Mr. Lodgey made his way back to the Green Man, overjoyed at the prospect of collecting forty pounds in a fortnight's time—when the Australians should have duly defeated St. Jim's on the cricket field.

Meanwhile, Racke and Crooke were hastening to get in in time for calling-over, in far from an enviable frame of mind.

"You fool, Racke!" said Crooke. "You've got yourself into a bigger mess than ever. Tom Merry & Co. haven't an earthly against these Australian chaps—they were born to cricket, and have been trained by experts. You're as good as forty pounds out already. And you won't be able to square. That was all bluff, and you know it!"

"I could have told you that. Shut up!" growled Racke. "I had to tell him something to get clear, didn't I? And there's just a chance. I haven't thought it out yet, but I've got a wheeze, and I think there's a chance—"

"It's a pretty poor one!" grunted Crooke. "And if Lodgey goes to the Head and says you owe him forty pounds—"

"Shut up, you blessed Jonah!" ejaculated Racke fiercely. "I'm trying to think it out. I believe I've got a good chance. And there's hardly any risk!"

"What have you got in your head now, you ass?" asked Crooke, in alarm.

"Wait and see, dear man! Wait and see!" said Racke calmly.

And, since there was no more information to be extracted from Racke that evening, Crooke resigned himself—rather apprehensively, it is true—to await the unfolding of Aubrey Racke's scheme.

CHAPTER 3.

"Welcome, Australia!"

"HELP! Fire! Murder! Keepimoff!"

"Stop, you fat little rotter! Stop—and I'll—I'll burst you!"

That entrancing offer had no perceptible effect on Baggy Trimble's fat little legs, which were going like clockwork in a desperate effort to keep a safe distance between his fat self and the furious avenger on his track.

It was unfortunate, to say the least, that after Trimble had been at great pains to assure himself that Wilkins and Gunn were occupied on Little Side with the cricket, and had sneaked off at great personal risk from the compulsory practice, that he had entered Study No. 3 in the Shell passage and opened the cupboard door, only to be caught in the very act by Grundy, who had come up for a bat he had forgotten.

Hence Baggy's sudden and frantic flight, with the great George Alfred roaring on his trail, the cricket-bat flourishing in a way that suggested dire results for Baggy if he were captured.

He came down the School House steps three at a time, and rolled down the last few with sundry grunts and yelps. Scrambling up, he got off the mark just in-time to escape a furious lunge from Grundy's bat.

"Ow! Stopit, Grundy! I—I wasn't— Fire! Help!"

Grundy snorted grimly and put on speed. His long legs fairly ate up the ground, while Baggy's short ones, going their hardest, could hardly hope to win. In desperation, the fat junior turned towards the gates, and, with the perspiration streaming down his features, spurted wildly into the road.

Grundy, grinning at the terrific efforts Trimble was making, came dashing after him, whirling his bat like an Indian club. His hand closed an inch from Trimble's collar.

"Got you! Why, what the thump! Oh crickey!"

Grundy swerved wildly as he found himself in amongst a crowd of youths, all about his own age, but his speed was too much for him. It was too much for Trimble, too!

There was a sudden roar from one of the strangers as Baggy's bullet-head crashed in the region of his waistcoat, and they sat down together with two loud bumps. Grundy, his bat flying out of his hand, collided violently with a tall, good-looking youth who was carrying a valise and cricket-bag. The valise went one way, and the cricket-bag went another. The good-looking youth gave a yell and went over, with Grundy inextricably mixed up with him, and the pair of them rolled in the dusty roadway.

"Oh, mon! 'Tis broken are my ribs!" groaned the youth who had borne the brunt of Trimble's charge, as he sat up slowly and painfully and pumped in breath.

"Gerroff my chest!" came in stifled accents from beneath Grundy. Then, as George Alfred rolled off him, the newcomer sat up and glared, his features crimson with excitement.

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 963.

"You blithering euckoo!" he roared. "You fatheaded goat! Why, you ought to be in a padded cell!"

Grundy scrambled to his feet, looking, for once, a little shamefaced.

"Sorry!" he grunted, going a little red. "I—I didn't see you, of course! I was after that fat rotter there; I hadn't time to stop!"

The stranger breathed hard, and dusted himself down with the aid of his friends. The lean, solemn-looking youth whom Baggy had smitten was eyeing the fatuous Trimble with a mournful air.

"Oh, mon, whatever made ye do it?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Baggy. "You should have got out of the way, you fathead! Couldn't expect me to see you coming in the gates, could you? Dust me down and make yourself useful!"

"I didna mean that!" responded the stranger gravely. "I thought ye'd been frying your face! I see now—it's natural, eh, Chairlie?"

Grundy's victim grunted and shrugged his shoulders. "Seems to be the custom to greet visitors like this here!" he observed. "Let's hope the rest of the fellows are a bit more gentle, that's all!"

"Visitors?" repeated Grundy suddenly. "Did you say you were visitors, you chaps? You're—you're not the Australians, I suppose?"

The youth who had been addressed as "Chairlie" nodded and smiled.

"The same!" he said calmly. "My name's Hill—Charlie Hill—I'm the skipper. Pleased to meet you!"

He extended his hand, and Grundy gripped it warmly.

"I'm Grundy," he said excitedly. "Why, you weren't expected till this evening! I'll tell Tom Merry you're here!"

"Thanks!" said Charlie Hill, entering the quad with Grundy. "Merry's your skipper, isn't he?"

"He's a good man," said Grundy judiciously. "I had a row with him recently, but I'm backing him up now. St. Jim's would have a better chance if I were captain; but you'll have a job to beat the team as it stands, Hill."

"Think so?" said Hill politely. "We'll give you a run for your money, anyhow. Hallo! What's that?"

There was a roar from Little Side, and the Australians pricked up their ears.

"Well hit, Tom Merry!"

"They're practising now," explained Grundy. "This way, if you'd like to see them."

"Lead on, Macduff!" answered one of the visitors; and, having dumped their baggage just inside the gates for Taggles to attend to later, they moved off, under Grundy's fatherly guidance, towards the junior cricket ground. Trimble, in the rear, fell in step with the sombre-looking lad whom he had butted, and slipped an arm affectionately through the newcomer's.

"Don't worry about having upset me," urged Trimble, in his most pally tones. "I'm—ahem!—used to it! I mean, I'm pretty hard, you know. I say, what's your name? Mine's Trimble—Bagley Trimble, of Trimble Hall."

"Michael McLean, at your service," said the youth seriously.

"Mac for short—eh?" said Trimble affectionately. "I can see we shall get on together a treat, Mac! It must be fine touring the country like you're doing—and getting off lessons, too!"

Michael McLean grinned.

"We don't do that!" he answered. "We've got a tutor—a fine, braw dominie, d'you ken—and he sees to the business o' the trip, and gives us work to do, an a' that. He's busy arranging something in London this very moment, but he'll be along o' us again afore the night."

Baggy's jaw dropped as he listened to McLean's rich accent, but he caught the Scottish junior's eye suddenly, and replied hastily:

"Oh, that's rotten! Still, you can't have time for much work. And, I say, are you—I happen to be in rather a peculiar position this week, Mac—I was wondering—"

"Ah!" said McLean innocently.

"If you could advance me a little on a cheque I'm getting on Saturday? It's for five pounds, but a pound would do! It's rare I get cornered like this, but if you could oblige me—"

"Ah!" said McLean again, but this time eyeing Trimble with a glimmer in his blue eyes.

"Well, say a couple," said Baggy eagerly. "After all, a pound's nothing to me. I could do with a couple, now you mention it! Just hand them over, and I'll let you have the money on Saturday, without fail—honest Injun!"

"As ye will," observed Michael McLean calmly, clenching his bony fist. "Here's the first pound!"

He shot the fist forward quite suddenly, catching Trimble full upon his fat chest. Baggy gave a wild yell and staggered under the impact.

"Yaroo!" he roared angrily. "What the thump—
Yah! Chuck it, you idiot!"

He emitted a further yell as the Scot delivered the second pound, and sat down with a bump, gasping. Michael McLean shoved his hands in his pockets, and, with a sly grin at Baggy, strolled on.

"Dinna worry to pay me back!" he remarked over his shoulder.

Baggy glared after the retreating Scotsman and glowered. "Beast!" he grunted.

The rest of the Australians had arrived at the ropes, and were eagerly watching the practice, where Tom Merry was making hay at the wicket in his best style. The tourists

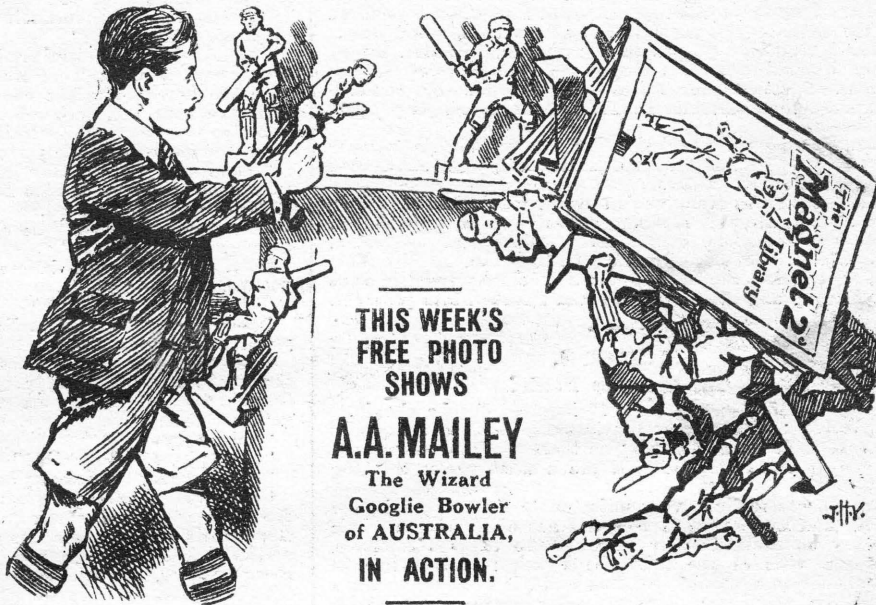
"Rotter!" he growled.

But he did not attempt to spin his cheque story again. The Scottish junior's knuckles were much too bony for Trimble's liking!

The swarm of juniors came to the bottom of the School House steps, and halted in surprise. For on the top step, framed in the big doorway, stood the elegant form of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the swell of St. Jim's, a sheaf of papers clasped in his hand and his celebrated monocle glimmering in its place.

Gussy bowed and smiled benignantly as the crowd approached, and then, with a preliminary glance at his notes, began his speech.

STUNNING CUT - OUT STAND - UP PHOTOS OF FAMOUS ENGLISH AND AUSTRALIAN CRICKETERS—



—ARE BEING GIVEN AWAY WITH

The "MAGNET."

Get this week's striking likeness of A. A. MAILEY To-Day, Chums!

The captain of St. Jim's, who had been coaching a few of the more backward juniors at the nets, came across and shook hands heartily with Charlie Hill.

"Glad to see you've arrived, this side up with care!" he said genially. "Merry here will take you to Mr. Railton: he's arranging your digs. You'll be split up amongst the junior studies, and extra beds have been fixed up in the dormitories. The fellows are keen to lower your colours, so you'd better get plenty of practice!"

And, with a cheery nod, the St. Jim's skipper strolled away, leaving the Aussies surrounded by excited juniors, all eager to shake hands with and talk to the newcomers. There was an ejaculation from Charlie Hill as he caught sight of Harry Noble, the Kangaroo of the Shell.

"Why, Harry, old man!" "Hallo, old top! It seems ages since we met, and it was only last summer vac!" grinned Noble. "How's things going?"

"Fine, thanks! We're all in great form, and now we've decided to give your chaps a licking!"

"Some hopes, old man! This is Tom Merry—Lowther—Figgins—Gussy—"

Harry Noble proceeded to introduce the St. Jim's fellows, one after another, till Charlie Hill's arm ached with repeatedly shaking hands, and his grin became fixed.

"Tea!" said Tom Merry at last, much to the Australians' relief. "Come on, ye cripples! Nothing like a good feed to set you up after a long journey!"

"Hear, hear!" chorused the visitors. And somewhere on the outskirts of the crowd a voice sounded:

"Where's my pal Mac? Mac! Mac!" "He wants another pound, the noo!" grinned Michael McLean; and Baggy, spotting his quarry, emitted a snort.

"Welcome, stwangahs ffrom ovah the seas—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come off it, Gussy!"

"As weppesentative of the Lowah School, I have gweat pleasuah in welcomin' you to St. Jim's. I hope that you will have a good time—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"I may say that we shall do our utmost to send you away with your tails between your legs—"

"Hear, hear!"

"Good old tailor's dummy!"

Gussy and the large majority of his hearers were completely in agreement on that point, at least.

"And I am confident that we shall do so. Nevahtheless, I twust you will nevah wegwet havin' been our guests, an' I wish you complete ffreedom ffrom the attentions of Twimble and similah cadgahs, though I do not intend to mention any names, of course—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You rotter!" roared Trimble ferociously.

"Go it, Gussy!"

"And—and—"

Gussy began to turn over the pages of his sheaf feverishly. "That is to say—I mean, I wish you all a vevy good time, an' your shadows nevah gwow less, deah boys!"

And, with another graceful bow, Gussy descended the steps to meet the visitors.

"By jingo! Talk about a triumphal entry!" grinned THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 963.

Charlie Hill, gripping Gussy's proffered hand and trying not to laugh. "I can't say much in reply to all that, but I echo your sentiments, old man, excepting that we're going to lick you. That's about all, I think."

"Permit me to introduce myself," said Gussy gracefully. "Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of Study No. 6 in the Fourth. An' heah is my friend Blake, with the nose, an' Hewwies with the feet, an' Dig—Dig with the twistin' expression!"

"You—you—" gasped Blake.

"Feet! Me with the feet!" repeated Herries indignantly.

"And me—trusting expression!" breathed Digby.

"Tea!" roared Tom Merry above the tumult. "Tea in the junior Common-room in a quarter of an hour! All are welcome to attend!"

And with a cheer for the Australians, the crowd broke up, and the visitors were conducted by the junior cricket committee to the Housemaster's study, where Mr. Railton interviewed them, and instructed them as to the studies in which they had been "billeted." Fortunately, Arthur Augustus was in funds, and had nobly contributed a couple of fivers to pay for the spread; and, while the rest of the juniors laid the long table, the four chums of Study No. 6 repaired to the tuckshop and purchased supplies on the grand scale.

The spread was quite a record, though, as usual, Baggy Trimble rolled in and demolished the lion's share of the provisions. Speeches were spoken—or stuttered—by self-conscious orators, and toasts drained in foaming ginger pop and lemonade.

The meeting dispersed, leaving Baggy Trimble to clear up any stray crumbs, and the Australians were distributed among the junior studies.

Charlie Hill, at Kangaroo's request, was billeted in Study No. 11, and Michael McLean went next door with Talbot, Gore, and Skimpole. Rotund, red-headed Georgie Horton, the visitors' wicketkeeper, shared Study No. 10 with Tom Merry and his chums, and the rest of the tourists were disposed up and down the Shell and Fourth Form passages.

CHAPTER 4.

The Rylcombe Match!

"WHAT'S on for to-day?" inquired Croke glumly.

"I'm pretty nearly stony—and so are you!" grunted Racke. "So there won't be one of our little excursions, if that's what you're thinking about!"

Which was really a very unfortunate state of affairs for Racke and Croke, since they did not often have a whole holiday on a Wednesday in which to enjoy themselves. But the visit of the Australians was regarded by the authorities as a special occasion, and Sir John Maxwell, a prominent member of the governing board of St. Jim's, who was arranging the "Aussies" fixtures in the district, had prevailed upon Dr. Holmes to allow his pupils complete freedom to watch the tourists when they were playing. Needless to say, the St. Jim's juniors were in hearty agreement with Sir John, and they were going over to the Grammar School in crowds to get a glimpse of the cricketers who had so far refused to strike their flag, to see how they fared against Gordon Gay & Co. Croke, however, was not interested in cricket, and appeared to think that some alternative entertainment ought to have been provided for his benefit.

"Well, we shall have to do something!" he growled.

"Leave it to me!" suggested Racke. "I've been thinking—and I've mapped out our programme—not that you're likely to enjoy it much, Gerry! But it's a case of needs must; and I've got a wheeze!"

"You can count me out!" said Croke at once.

Racke glared.

"Don't be any more of a fool than you can help!" he said tartly. "There won't be any risk, and if there is, I shall take it!"

"You'll have to!" said Croke sullenly. "I'm not getting mixed up in any of your schemes just now, I can tell you!"

"Fine pal, you are—I don't think!" sneered Racke. "Well, anyway, it won't hurt you to know what the wheeze is. Come and get the bikes out!"

"Where are we going, then?" asked Croke, looking a little more hopeful.

"Don't you know that our cheery Australian visitors are playin' Gordon Gay & Co. at Rylcombe, old bean?"

"Of course!" grunted Croke. "But you surely don't intend to waste a whole holiday watching silly duffers chasing a ball about, do you?"

"You've hit it!" said Racke, cheerily kicking open the door of the bike shed. "Get your jigger, follow your leader, and chuck growling!"

Croke stared at his chum as if doubting his sanity, but made no further protest. He got out his bike and followed

Racke to the gates, where a crowd of juniors were just setting out for Rylcombe.

"There's the charabanc!" said Racke, as a big grey car swung in at the gates, with the name, "Blankley's," in imposing characters on the side. Blankley's, the big store in Wayland, believed in advertising their varied business as much as possible.

"They're doin' the thing in style!" grinned Racke.

There was a roar of cheering for the "Aussies" as they emerged from the House, carrying their cricket equipment, and headed for the big charabanc. Tom Merry and a few of his chums were travelling with them, but the majority of the St. Jim's fellows were cycling over.

"Tom Merry & Co. ought to be able to pick up one or two useful points on the Australians' game!" said Racke keenly, as they shoved their way through the crush.

"Mighty anxious for 'em to win, aren't you, Aubrey?" grinned Croke. "If they don't you're in Queer Street, and no mistake!"

"Shut up!" growled Racke, scowling. "If I'm landed, Lodgey will be after you as well!"

"Three cheers for Australia!"

"Good old Aussies!"

The Australians clambered into their seats amid a clamour of cheering, Tom Merry being beside Charlie Hill with the driver, and the charabanc rolled away. It was both preceded, and followed by a swarm of cyclists, all eager to see how the Australians would shape against the Saints' ancient and deadly rivals of the Grammar School.

"You'll find Gordon Gay & Co. a tough lot to handle!" said Tom Merry to Charlie Hill.

The Australian grinned.

"Tougher the better!" he observed grimly. "We'll beat them—never you fear!"

"Pwidge goeth evah before a fall!" remarked Gussy poetically.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rely on us!" said Charlie Hill. "And I don't think you'll be disappointed!"

The short journey to Rylcombe was soon completed, and the charabanc rolled in at the gates of the Grammar School, to find nearly the whole of the Lower School gathered to meet it.

"Here they are!"

"Hip, pip, for Australia!"

"This is your Waterloo, you fellows!"

Charlie Hill, with Tom Merry in his wake, descended from his seat, and shook hands with Gordon Gay, the Grammarian leader. He was quickly introduced to Carboy and Frank Monk, the two Woottons, Mont Blanc, the French junior, and the eccentric Tadpole.

"Jolly glad to have the chance of licking you!" said Gay, with a grin. "I'm Australian myself, so look out for yourselves!"

"We'll take all you chaps can give us!" grinned Charlie Hill. "By jiminy, what a crush!"

Amid a cheery, chaffing swarm, the teams were escorted to the cricket field, where almost the whole school, with a sprinkling of local spectators, had gathered to watch the youthful champions. The Australians' fame had spread even to the quiet village of Rylcombe, and there was great enthusiasm as the cricketers arrived on the ground.

Dr. Monk, the Grammar School Head, shook hands with the team, and expressed the hope that they would have an enjoyable game. Then the two teams retired to the pavilion and proceeded to change. Tom Merry and his chums found themselves deck chairs and prepared to witness a keen struggle—and, incidentally, to pick up any information they could concerning their opponents' play. As Monty Lowther said, forewarned was forearmed!

There was a terrific roar as the rival captains tossed in front of the pavilion, and Gordon Gay was seen to have won.

"We bat!" he grinned. "Come on, Jack!"

The elder of the two Woottons accompanied Gordon Gay to the wicket, and there was a hush. Charlie Hill, setting his field with great care, put on a youth to whom he alluded as Dicky Steele to bowl, with Michael McLean at the other end, and the game began.

It began in a sensational manner. Gordon Gay, watching Dicky Steele's delivery, perceived what was ostensibly an easy ball, and smote hard at it, expecting to see it flash to the boundary. But he reckoned without the wiles of the bowler. The ball swerved bewilderingly, and collided with the middle stump just hard enough to cause the bails to leap lightly into the wicketkeeper's hands. There was a chuckle from Georgie Horton, behind the wicket, and the umpire pointed upwards.

"Oh!" ejaculated Gay dazedly. "Oh, my hat!"

After that remarkable start, Frank Monk came to the wickets, determined to settle down before he attempted to score. He played Steele's deliveries with great care, and

then snicked a single, leaving Wootton to take the last ball of the over. The ball spun down, swerved, and flashed past Wootton's bat to make a disastrous mess of the Grammarian's wicket. There was a round of clapping, and Dicky Steele grinned.

"Two doon, the noo!" observed Michael McLean. "Ah, well, ye canna ha' ower muckle o' this!"

While Tom Merry & Co. watched, with grave misgivings as to their own chances against the tourist's bowling, another wicket fell—to Michael McLean this time—and yet another! Four down, and a meagre ten runs on the board!

But the next pair made a stand. The younger Wootton and Carboy put up a resolute defence, and although they did not score quickly, they kept their end up, and increased the total with singles and "twos." After a while, Carboy began to hit, and the score began to move appreciably. Thirty had appeared ere a high ball from Carboy's bat found a safe billet in Georgie Horton's gloves.

The innings was kept alive, but it was obvious that the Australians were on top, and intended to stay there. Their fielding was clean and swift, and they saved runs with uncanny anticipation. They penned the batsmen in, and by

his runs with short, neat strokes, and was deftness personified.

Gordon Gay altered the field cunningly to cope with the Australian's "glides," but Lockwood continued to find a convenient loophole in the circle and to send the ball through it with inimitable ease and grace. Andrews, as he played himself in, began to hit harder and oftener, till twenty went up, and the batsmen set.

"Get one, Frank!" urged Gay, as Frank Monk gripped the ball again.

Frank Monk nodded, and sent down the best he knew. The ball fairly whizzed off the turf, and before Andrews could recover, had reduced his wicket to a pile of debris.

"Well bowled, Frank!" came in a yell from the Grammarians.

"Good man!" observed Andrews coolly, as he left the crease.

Michael McLean followed in, and gave early evidence of being a dour and frequent hitter. He drove all round the wicket with almost complete disregard of the placing of the field, and in spite of the home team's desperate efforts,

CAMEOS OF SCHOOL LIFE.

No. 5.—THE BATHING PARADE.



THE afternoon is baking hot,
The sun is scorching down;
But on our faces there is not
The semblance of a frown.
With towels and costumes we parade,
A hot but happy band;
Shortly to seek the cooling shade,
Where bathing has been planned.

We march towards the rippling Rhyl
Which winds through copse and
bracken;
Our faces are perspiring; still
Our footsteps do not slacken.
Tom Merry, Manners, Lowther,
Blake,
March gaily on ahead;
But Baggy Trimble starts to quake—
Bathing is Baggy's dread!

We halt beside the river's brim,
And gaily start to strip;
All eager for the daily swim,
The pleasures of the dip.
Except for Trimble, who, in funk
Attempts to dodge away;
But Baggy's not allowed to bunk.
He's seized, and made to stay!

Tom Merry dives, in graceful style,
From off the grassy bank;
And Monty Lowther, with a smile,
Plays many a merry prank.
A sudden and a playful push
To Trimble he'll deliver;
And Baggy, with a splash and swoosh,
Goes floundering in the river!

"Oh, help! I'm drowning! Save
me, quick!"
Splutters the frantic Trimble;
Jack Blake's beside him, in a tick,
His dive is neat and nimble.
He seizes Baggy by the ear
And tows the youth along;
While laughter rings out loud and
clear
From all the merry throng!

To swimming, healthiest of sports,
We raise both cap and "topper";
And every British boy supports
This pastime, fine and proper.
When scorching summer days are
here,
Our hearts with joy are brimming;
We seek the river, cool and clear,
And taste the joys of swimming!



bowling a perfect length, rendered it extremely difficult to hit the ball into the "deep."

Fifty had rattled on the board before the last pair arrived, but they were soon in difficulties. Finally, a break from Michael McLean put "paid" to the Grammarians' account, and the innings closed for 55.

There was a brief interval, and then the Australians went in to bat.

"They're hot!" gasped Gordon Gay to Tom Merry. "Their fielding's wonderful!"

"You're right!" agreed Tom. "You'll have to play your hardest, old man!"

"And we shall, too!" said Gordon Gay grimly, rallying his men.

The Australian first pair were Lockwood and Andrews—the former tall and lithe and fair-haired, the latter short and sturdy, with keen, dark eyes.

Gordon Gay set the field, and put Monk and Wootton major on to bowl. He awaited the crash of a wicket, but he was disappointed. Lockwood took the first over, and speedily revealed an elegant, effortless style, with a penchant for "gliding" the ball casually to the boundary at the exact spot where there was no fieldsman. Andrews got

thirty, and then forty, rattled on the board, and still at the cost of a solitary wicket!

At this point there was a brief halt for lunch, and then the Australians resumed in full blast, as it were.

Gordon Gay took the ball at last, and succeeded in dismissing the languid Lockwood in his first over. But he found Charlie Hill, who followed, a proposition beyond his powers.

The Australian skipper used his height to the full, getting well over the ball and punishing it severely. McLean fell to a clever catch by Carboy, and then came "Tim" Richardson, the smallest but swiftest-footed batsman in the team. Richardson had a stroke for everything—and banged the poor stuff to the ropes with energy and dispatch.

"That's beaten our score!" groaned Gay, as a "four" from Hill went whizzing through the ropes. "Buck up, you chaps, for goodness' sake!"

The bowlers put their heart and soul into the work, and their redoubled efforts were rewarded by the fall of Hill's wicket—a brilliant catch taken at full length by Gordon Gay dismissing him. Torrance, the next man, was sent back with a "duck," and the hopes of the Grammarians rose.

"tail," however, proved itself to be anything but a "tail" in the accepted sense of the word, and it wagged freely. The last wicket eventually fell, with Tim Richardson still undefeated, and the total at 112.

"My giddy aunt!" gasped Gordon Gay, as the cricketers adjourned for a few minutes. "They've made twice our score! Thank goodness there's a second innings!"

The Australians resumed play, determined to finish off the Grammarians under their former total, and win by an innings. Gordon Gay and Wootton major went in to bat equally determined to lay a foundation that would destroy those hopes.

This time caution—coupled with experience—saw the batsmen unparted after the first few overs, and well set. The bowling was changed, but without effect. Gordon Gay, playing the game of his life, even ventured to lift one of Dicky Steele's deliveries over the ropes for "six."

The Australians buckled to with renewed vigour, but met with sparse success. Jack Wootton was dismissed, having made fourteen, but Gay batted on gaily with Frank Monk as partner. The fifty was passed before Gordon Gay was out "leg before," with twenty-eight to his credit.

There was high hopes in every Grammarian breast as Harry Wootton sallied forth to the crease. The total had leaped to seventy before Frank Monk was sent back, and Carboy was called upon. When eighty rattled up, with the batsmen still going strong, Gordon Gay gave a chuckle.

"They'll have to bat again, anyhow!" he grinned. "We've got a decent chance now!"

But even as he spoke, Carboy's middle stump was knocked spinning, and a new batsman was required. The runs came slowly now, and it seemed as if the bowlers were getting on top again. Another wicket fell, and another. The hundred was passed amid thunderous cheering, but the end was obviously near. Mont Blanc, going in last, gave an unexpected exhibition of fireworks, and the last wicket went down with the score at 121.

"Sixty-five to win, by Jove!" said Gordon Gay, as the teams left the field for the tea interval. And Charlie Hill chuckled quietly.

"We'll get 'em out or bust in the attempt!" said Gay grimly, as Lockwood and Andrews walked to the crease. "If we bowl our hardest, they won't have time to make the runs, in any case—there's only just over an hour to play!"

Early success crowned the Grammarians' efforts. Monk sending Lockwood back to the pavilion before he had settled down, but Michael McLean followed and refused to be rattled. The score crept up, and began to increase in pace. Bowling changes seemed ineffective, and as thirty appeared on the board, the home team's faces grew longer.

"Half of 'em!" muttered Gordon Gay. "Bowl all you know, you fellows!"

The bowlers needed no urging, and the sudden crash of Andrews' wicket was music to their ears, though the total had gone to 37. Charlie Hill came in, and began to open his shoulders at once. For a few overs the bowlers faltered under his aggressive display, and in that brief time the Australian skipper got his side ahead of the clock and made victory practically certain.

Michael McLean narrowly missed being run out at 51, but from that time, neither batsmen gave a chance, and it was left for Hill to make the winning hit—a characteristic drive to the off resulting in a boundary. After an exciting game, the Australians had won with the loss of only two wickets in the second innings—and thanks to Charlie Hill's hurricane innings, with ten minutes in hand!

There was a whole-hearted roar of cheering, in which Gordon Gay and his supporters joined lustily.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "We'll have to play hard to beat them! What do you think, Blake?"

"Of course we can handle 'em, Tom!" said Blake confidently. "But it's just about all we can do, I'm thinking!"

And while congratulations were being showered upon the tourists from all sides, Crooke, feeling unutterably bored after a day in the open air, summoned up a grin as he glanced at Racke.

"Think St. Jim's will lick 'em, Aubrey, old man?"

Racke, who had insisted on watching the match right through in connection with his secret scheme, gave Crooke a glance, and it was well for the young rascal that there was no master or prefect near enough to hear his reply.

CHAPTER 5. Racke's Plot!

"HAKE!" said Racke, as the cricketers streamed off the field in the midst of an enthusiastic crowd.

"Hake!" echoed Crooke. "What do you want with that rotter?"

On his last visit to the Grammar School, Hake of the

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 963.

Sixth had cuffed him, a circumstance that Crooke was not likely to forget.

"Because he's the very man I want to help me make sure of my bet!" said Racke, with a cunning grin. "By gad, that was a regular brain-wave! A senior will make it look a lot more impressive, too! Gerald, my boy, I'm going to win, after all!"

"Get it off your chest!" suggested Crooke, as they strolled towards the House. "I've been waiting to hear about this scheme of yours long enough, I should think! You may as well cough it up, for what it's worth!"

"Patience, dear man!" grinned Racke. "We'll go an' see Hake now; he'll be in his study havin' tea, I expect. I'll tackle him while I'm thinkin' of it, and if he doesn't bite—"

"I happen to know that Hake's in rather low water just now," remarked Crooke thoughtfully. "I saw him at the Green Man last week. He'd just backed a loser, and Lodgey was dunning him!"

"All the better!" said Racke joyfully. "It couldn't have been more convenient! Here we are!"

The juniors halted outside the Sixth-Former's study, and Racke knocked. A disagreeable voice answered.

"Come in, you little rat!"

"Nice boy!" murmured Crooke.

Racke grinned, and entered the study. He nodded to the Sixth-Former, seated at his tea-table, and lounged towards a chair.

"Oh! You! I thought it was my fag!" ejaculated Hake.

"Don't you ask your visitors to sit down, Hake?" asked Racke politely.

Hake scowled, and glared at Crooke.

"Shut the door!" he grunted, and turned to Racke again.

"Well, young war profits, what do you want this time?"

Racke bit his lip. He was still a little "touchy" on the subject of his pater's suddenly acquired wealth, and thoughtless—or intentional—references to it were apt to irritate him.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, Hake!" he responded coolly. "I've come to put a little proposition before you—something you'll be jolly glad to get into when I tell you all about it."

"Oh!" said Hake, interested.

The rascally Sixth-Former had much in common with the cad of the Shell, and often profited by a racing "tip" given him by Racke, though it must be said that he more often lost over those exclusive tips. Hake was not particular how he picked up money, his pater not having seized his opportunities during the War-time as Racke's father had done.

"I shall want you to help me one or two evenings!" said Racke, drawing a beautiful silver cigarette-case from his pocket and extending it amicably.

"Thanks!" said Hake.

And the three—Sixth-Former and juniors—lit up and puffed away, fondly imagining themselves "men of the world."

"It's rather theatrical, of course," admitted Racke thoughtfully. "Still, that's no disadvantage. An' there's no risk worth botherin' about, an' that's the main thing."

"What exactly are you babblin' about?" inquired Hake.

"Look here, I'll put it plain!" said Racke, coming out into the open at last. "I'm in the very dickens of a hole over a horse—Blue Peter. I expect you remember the rotten gee came in last but one—"

"I remember!" said Hake grimly. "I backed him with my last dollar myself!"

Crooke grinned, having, quite accidentally, refrained from backing that particular horse, and feeling somewhat "bucked" in consequence. Had he done so, his affairs would have been in as parlous a state as Racke's.

"Lodgey has been dunnin' me," observed Racke calmly. "He got on to us in the wood the other afternoon, and threatened to go to the Head an' blab out the whole thing. Sheer bluff, of course!"

"Heavens," ejaculated Hake, "he'll be after me soon! What's up with him—hard up?"

"That's about the size of it," agreed Racke, knocking the ash off his cigarette. "So, you see, as matters stand, I owe him twenty pounds, an' haven't any hopes of payin' him for a while!"

"Twenty quid!" repeated Hake, in amazement. "By gad! You go it a bit, don't you, kid?"

"Oh, I'm a sport, you know!" said Racke airily. "But, as I said, Lodgey cut up rusty, an' I had to put him off with a sop. I've bet him double or quits!"

"What!" roared Hake, upsetting his teacup in his excitement, but apparently not noticing the damage to his nice white tea-cloth. "You mean to say you're riskin' owin' him forty quids?"

"You heard me the first time," said Racke, grinning.



With Grundy hard on his track, Baggy Trimble fairly bumped into the group of strangers. There was a sudden roar as his bullet head crashed one of them in the region of the waistcoat. Grundy, his bat flying out of his hand, collided violently with a tall, good-looking youth who was carrying a valise and cricket-bag, and the pair of them rolled in the dusty roadway. (See Chapter 3.)

"But if I win I'm square, an' I shall take jolly good care to keep out of his rotten clutches for a bit, I can tell you! It's about the bet that I've come to see you."

"What have you put it on? Is it a cert?" asked Hake eagerly.

Crooke grinned, and Racke chuckled.

"Right off the lines, Hakey, old man!" he replied. "It isn't a horse; it's the cricket match between St. Jim's an' the Australians!"

"Oh, I see! And you're backin' your—your own school, I suppose?"

Racke nodded.

"Who won to-day?" asked Hake, nodding out of the window towards the playing-fields.

"The Australians, with eight wickets in hand," answered Crooke, grinning.

"Good heavens, you've got some hopes, then, young Racke! Your forty pounds is as good as lost already!"

"Perhaps—and perhaps not!" said Racke enigmatically.

"That's what I'm comin' to—the part where we make sure of St. Jim's waddin', leavin' us able to bet as much as we like on the result. Anybody will take us on; the Australians haven't been beaten yet, and it's big odds against them going down to St. Jim's after beatin' schools like Eton and Marlborough, isn't it?"

"Much too long odds for my taste!" said Hake cautiously.

"Wait a minute!" said Racke. "Listen to my little scheme. I'm in deep water. I happen to know you are, too, Hakey!"

The Sixth-Former's face clouded over, and he nodded morosely.

"I don't see how you know it, but it's true!" he grunted. "I owe that rotter Lodgey five quid—a lot of money to me—and I don't see any way of payin' up yet awhile!"

"And he's gettin' short-tempered, as I told you!" reminded Racke cunningly.

Hake grunted again.

"Well, what's the scheme?" he inquired, without much enthusiasm, however.

"D'you remember the IOU you gave me a little while back, Hake," asked Racke smiling—"a couple of quid? I was an ass to let you have it, knowin' you'd never pay it back again!"

Hake coloured, and his eyes gleamed angrily.

"Shut up about that, you little cad!" he ejaculated. "I shall pay you all right when—when I get some money. Get on to your scheme. If it's workable I'll be on like a shot; but—but—"

"Life's full of 'buts'!" observed Crooke oracularly.

"If you two idiots would stop buttin' like a pair of dashed nanny-goats," suggested Racke politely. "I could explain the stunt. This is just an outline. I think we all realise that on form the Australians will win hands down. I've been watchin' 'em to-day, an' I'd back 'em against Tom Merry & Co. with my last bean if I could get anybody to take me on!"

"I'd put a fiver on them!" said Crooke frankly.

And Hake nodded.

"Well, suppose—just suppose—that one or two of their best players were 'got at' before the match an' prevented from puttin' up their best game?" asked Racke cunningly.

Hake stared uncomprehendingly at him, but Crooke's face paled.

"You can leave me out if you're thinkin' of foul play!" said Hake at last. "I don't want to get lagged! And that's what's likely to happen if you're given your head, you young jackanapes!"

"You fools!" said Racke angrily. "It's safe as houses! Listen a bit, an' shut your sheeps' heads! This is my idea. We form a gang—I thought of callin' it the Black Gang—wear black robes an' cowls; we can make them easily so as to conceal our identity completely. If we disguise our voices, our best pals won't be able to recognise us!"

"What do we do when we're all togged up like that?" asked Hake sarcastically. "Kidnap the Australians one by one, and knock 'em over the head in old Pepper's barn? Look well in the newspapers afterwards, won't it?"

"Too risky—whatever the rest of the scheme is!" said Crooke decidedly.

"I haven't finished yet," said Racke patiently. "I'm comin' to what we do to 'em! My wheeze is to capture the star men of the team and take 'em to Pepper's barn, as Hake suggested—"

"An' hang 'em?" asked Crooke humorously.

"No, you idiot! Rag 'em till they can't crawl!" said Racke grimly.

"What?" ejaculated Hake.

"Put 'em through it, so that they won't feel like cricket for a week, at least!" said Racke maliciously. "There'll be enough of us, if they put up a fight! We three, an' Lacy and Carker—they'll join up, if I ask them. Then we can get Mellish an' Scrope from St. Jim's—an' one or two more if we want 'em! How does that strike you for a wheeze, Hake?"

"You—you little cad!" gasped Hake excitedly. "Why, you ought to be in a reformatory—that's the only place fit for a fellow of your kidney! I wonder you haven't been hooped out of St. Jim's on your neck before this—you deserve to be, anyway!"

"Steady!" said Racke, his eyes glittering dangerously. "That's enough of your weak-kneed bosh! I don't like it, so shut up! This idea is as sound as a bell. I suppose you can lick a chap with a stump—or your ashplant, if you like—an' you'll look well as Grand Master, too! I tell you it's easy money—think of that part of the bisney! If you don't get some cash from somewhere, you'll have Lodgey to deal with, an' he's not a pleasant customer when he's roused. As it is, I stand to lose forty pounds to the blighter; an' I tell you plainly that I don't intend to lose it!"

"But—" began Crooke.

"Think it over!" urged Racke, more calmly. "We could begin on the Australian skipper—fellow named Charlie Hill. I've watched him to-day; an' I'm sure that with him an' one or two others feelin' off colour, St. Jim's would have a first-class chance of winnin'! Catch him unawares—we shall have to ambush the rotters—and once we've got him into Pepper's barn, we can put him through it completely! One or two of the rest treated the same, an' our money's safe! It's no worse than givin' them a floggin', Hake! An' think of the bets we can make! Knowin' the result beforehand, we can make a small fortune out of it!"

Crooke's eyes gleamed.

"Somethin' in that!" he agreed. "It's—it's pretty rotten, I suppose, but a fellow must look after himself first. An' it's no worse than if the Head pitched into them. Think of the money, Hake!"

The Sixth-Former had risen to his feet, and was pacing up and down the narrow confines of the study. He gave a half-hearted laugh at Crooke's words.

"Beggars mustn't be choosers—eh?" he said, grinning rather forcedly. "To be quite frank, I think you're rather a young criminal, Racke; but there's somethin' in your scheme, after all. And I must have cash—that's certain! Unless I can pay up pretty soon, I'm done for here—by Jove, yes! I can't afford to consider other people just now! Who else did you say you could get to join up, Racke?"

"There's Lacy an' Carker!" said Racke thoughtfully. "Carker owes me some cash—he can't very well refuse! Mellish will join up for what he can get, so will Scrope. That makes seven. If we want any more, I fancy I can get 'em at St. Jim's! But we don't want a crowd; we're only goin' to handle one chap at a time. The only point to be careful over is the disguises!"

"We'd better wear masks!" said Crooke. "Nobody could tell who we are with robes and cowls and masks on!"

"By gad!" said Hake, with a grin. "It sounds theatrical enough, but I believe there's a chance to make a bit out of it, and I need it, too!"

"Suppose we come down to brass tacks?" suggested Racke coolly. "I'm pretty low, but I think I can manage some material for the robes an' cowls—we can cut them out ourselves—an' that's all we shall want. One of us can pinch the key to old Pepper's barn—I believe Taggles keeps it in his lodge till it's wanted. The place will make a toppin' torture-chamber, by gad!"

"And the Australians won't know where it is," pointed out Crooke. "They've never even seen it, an' they won't know it passes muster for the St. Jim's Houses of Parliament!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" chuckled Racke delightedly. "I suppose we can call that settled, Hake? Shall we shake on it?"

"I'm a fool to have anythin' to do with you kids!" said Hake grimly. "But, as it happens, I've no choice! What about the arrangements—time's short, you know!"

"I'll get the stuff for the costumes on my way back to the school, Hake!" said Racke eagerly. "Oh, hang, though! It's Wednesday—the shops are shut! Still, I can get it to-morrow after dinner—an' we'll meet in the barn at six sharp to-morrow evenin'!"

"And then what do we do?" asked Hake.

"The Australians usually go out for a stroll before locking-up," said Racke. "We shall have jolly rotten luck if we can't ambush somebody by waitin' by the lane. We'll rely on you, then, Hake!"

The Sixth-Former nodded. From his expression he was not tremendously keen on Racke's rascally scheme, but his scruples had to be sunk in the face of dire necessity.

"Six, at the barn," he said, opening the study door. "Now cut off! I'm expecting my fag back at any minute, and I don't want him to think I hob-nob with all the fags at St. Jim's!"

Delamere, the captain of the Sixth, came along the passage and glanced curiously at the two juniors. It was unusual to see St. Jim's juniors in the Sixth Form passage, and Delamere could not help looking surprised.

Hake flushed, and pointed along the passage.

"Cut off, you young shavers!" he ordered grimly. "Sharp's the word!"

"Yes, Hake," replied Racke and Crooke obediently, and hurried off, grinning.

"Ragging about under my window!" volunteered Hake, as soon as they were out of sight. "I gave them a jawing!"

He nodded awkwardly to Delamere, and slammed the door with unnecessary violence as he re-entered the study.

His thoughts as he sat down and finished his tea were not of a pleasant order. He, a Sixth-Former and a prefect, was taking part in a fag escapade with juniors from another school—an escapade which, he realised, was not far removed from a criminal undertaking.

Still, he reflected, he was in deep water, and could not afford to pick and choose when he saw a way of saving himself. And Racke held his I.O.U. If that knowledge were public property—and it would be if he refused to pay up—he would not be able to hold his head up again for whole terms! A Sixth-Former borrowing from a junior!

There was a knock at the door, and his fag entered, rather late, with a bag of cakes.

"They weren't quite ready!" gasped the fag nervously. "I had to wait for them!"

Hake grunted, and hurled a loaf ungratefully at the junior's head; but the door slammed just too soon. In the Third Form-room it became known a few minutes later that Hake had backed another "outsider." Which was completely unjust, as it happened, as Hake was on what he believed to be a "cert."

CHAPTER 6.

Trimble Wants to Know!

"I SAY, Racke—"

Aubrey Racke gave a start, and spun round as that fat voice hailed him.

He had a bundle under his arm—material purchased at the local draper's—which was destined to be cut by amateur tailors into the robes of the Black Gang. At such a time Racke naturally did not wish to attract attention, least of all the curiosity of the fatuous Baggy Trimble. But Trimble had seen the parcel, and deduced what its contents must be—since there was only one thing in the world sufficiently valuable to be carried surreptitiously in a parcel—grub! And, once on the trail of a feed, Baggy was indefatigable and quite impervious to hostility.

"Roll away, old fat barge!" suggested Racke, disguising his annoyance with difficulty.

"Yah! What have you got there, Racke?" asked Baggy inquisitively, coming to a standstill a few paces from the Shell fellow. "You're looking jolly secretive, all of a sudden, Aubrey, old man! Nothing to hide from an old pal, is it? I say, if it's a feed, I'm on!" he finished eagerly.

"Well, you needn't raise your fat hopes—it isn't!" growled Racke, glaring at the fat junior as if he would have liked to exterminate him. "Take my advice, old barrel, an' roll away while you're safe!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Baggy indignantly, as Racke made a motion towards him with his boot. "That's not the way to treat an old pal like me, you know. I'm surprised at you, Aubrey! I am really—Ow! Yah! Keep off, you idiot! Yarooogh!"

Racke, his patience at an end, made a savage lunge at Baggy, and his well-shod foot found a mark on a convenient portion of the Fourth-Former's anatomy. Trimble gave a fearful yell, and scuttled away across the quad, rubbing himself and glaring back at Racke from a safe distance with a glare that ought to have withered his oppressor on the spot.

But it didn't. With a laugh, Racke turned and entered the House, hastening to his study and dumping his parcel down on the table, with a sigh of relief. He closed and carefully locked the door after him, and grinned at Crooke, who was lounging in an armchair with a pink paper, which he had hastily concealed at Racke's entrance.

"Oh, it's you, Aubrey! You gave me quite a turn, you ass! Is that the stuff? You've been jolly quick!"

"This is it!" said Racke keenly. "I scorched a bit so as to be in time for afternoon classes. We'll start on the job immediately we're let out. We shall have the costumes ready easily by six."

"Good man!" said Crooke, putting his pink paper into a drawer. "There goes the bell!"

Throughout afternoon classes Racke and Crooke might have been observed wearing expressions of subdued excitement, as might also Mellish and Scrope of the Fourth, both of whom had contrived to put a "little bit" on the result of the match, and were in high hopes of winning a round sum as a reward for their scheming.

When dismissal came at last, Racke and Crooke were the first to leave the Form-room, and in a few minutes they had their study door locked and the parcel open on the table.

"My hat! You've got enough of it, Racke!" said Crooke, with a grin. "There's enough for a dozen robes here, I should think!"

"We're sure to cut a few bits wrong at first," said Racke. "I've allowed enough for accidents. Hallo! Who's that?"

There had been a knock, and a voice answered the Shell fellow's query.

"It's all right, Racke—it's us—Mellish and Scrope!"

"Oh, good! Nobody about?" asked Racke cautiously.

"No. Open the door."

The key turned, and Mellish and Scrope entered the study. Having secured the door again, Racke seized a pair of scissors.

"Set to, you fellows!" he urged. "We've not much time to prepare before tea, but the job can be hustled if we put our beef into it."

"Here's a needle and a reel of cotton!" said Crooke. "Here you are, Mellish. You sew up a few cowls, and we'll rip off lengths of stuff for the robes!"

"Good wheeze!" agreed Scrope, unrolling a quantity of black material.

Racke, armed with a huge pair of scissors borrowed from the House dame, clipped determinedly until a length suitable of swathing one of the juniors had been severed. Mellish, taking the next chunk, cut it into smaller pieces, and proceeded to fashion a cowl from one of them, and, aided by Crooke, he succeeded, though nobody would have recognised the joint production for a cowl, as such. Still, as Scrope remarked, if it concealed the wearer's head satisfactorily, that was all it was wanted to do.

The robes were easily negotiated. Wrapping a voluminous length of material round themselves, and securing it with a giant safety-pin taken from a card purchased by Racke, presented few difficulties. Though it was a little awkward to walk with the skirts trailing round their ankles.

"My hat! You do look a beauty, Racke!" grinned Crooke, as the enthusiastic Aubrey enveloped his head in one of Mellish's cowls. "Enough to frighten any chap, I should think, to catch sight of you suddenly in that rig!"

"All the better!" grinned Racke, clipping a fragment of crepe into shape for a mask. "The bigger villains we look, the more effective the stunt will be. Fasten this mask behind my head somebody!"

Crooke performed the task, and Racke stood in front of the mantelpiece and admired himself in the looking-glass—and a truly terrible figure he looked.

"Good egg!" he said at last. "Nobody will recognise me like this, that's one comfort! What do you fellows think? Let's help you into that robe, Mellish."

Mellish was in difficulties, having swathed himself not wisely but too well, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to move arms or legs under his disguise.

"Remember," said Racke warningly, "we've got to alter our voices, and don't speak any more than's necessary. Hake can do most of the talking, as the Australians won't know his toot at all. We'd better speak when required, or it will look as if we daren't, and bring suspicion nearer home. We can't be too careful!"

"But what are we going to say to the chaps when we've captured 'em?" asked Scrope. "There's nothing much to say, is there—actions will count in this stunt!"

"I've thought of a better wheeze than that!" said Racke cunningly. "I shall tell Hake to speak as though we've captured them to punish them for something—we needn't say what—just take it for granted that the victim knows. By doin' that, we shall give the impression that we've got hold of the wrong man by mistake, you see, an' throw suspicion on anybody but our humble selves. We shall probably be taken for village chaps. If we keep it up that we're exacting vengeance for some mysterious offence, we shall throw them clean off the scent. My Hake, bein' a big chap, will help tremendously. You fellows see the point?"

"Somethin' in that, by Jove!" said Crooke. "Not bad, Aubrey! It'll certainly make certain that we don't get dragged into it personally. It's a bright idea, old bean!"

"It supplies a reason, too!" said Racke, with a grin. "If

we just caught one of 'em and ragged him, what would he think? He'd put it down—quite correctly—to an attempt to keep him out of the team, and very likely put it straight to Tom Merry. Not that that would matter—I wouldn't mind seein' 'em at loggerheads—but they'd be sure to comb the school lookin' for somebody with an interest in the game, an' if our bets came to light, it 'ud be all up, with a vengeance! No, my pippins, if we adopt the plan I suggested, we shall draw a red herring across our trail an' get clear away!"

"That's so," said Mellish. "If our bets come out—" He trembled inwardly at the bare thought.

"Nothin' will come out!" said Racke confidently. "I got Hake to join up because he can take the lead—act the part of the Grand Master—and he'll be a perfect stranger to the 'Aussies,' now and afterwards. Bein' bigger than us, he'll help to make us look like villagers, as I said!"

"You're a giddy genius, Racke!" said Scrope admiringly. "It's up to me to think of things—it's my scheme!"

grinned Racke. "By gad! Who on earth's that?"

The four juniors stared fixedly at the locked door, on which somebody had just knocked loudly.

"Who's that?" repeated Racke, trying hard to steady his voice.

"You there, Aubrey? It's me!" came in Baggy Trimble's well-known accents.

"Oh!" ejaculated Racke, drawing a deep breath. In that moment his visions of a master faded, and gave place to a fierce anger against the prying fat junior. "That fat slug! Why, I'll burst you next time I see you! Clear off, Trimble!" he shouted.

"I've called to see you, Aubrey," said Baggy fatuously.

"Well, roll off again!" snapped Racke viciously. "There's nobody in this study that's keen to see your fat carcass, and you know it! Clear off before I come out to you with a stump! I'm busy!"

"Having a little game?" inquired Baggy, with a fat chuckle. "Come on, old man, open the door. I'll join you. I'm a regular sport, you know. He, he, he!"

"What's the fat idiot cackling at now?" asked Crooke savagely. "I'd like to have him within reach of my boot!"

"It isn't a game at all, Trimble!" replied Racke patiently, but seething with anger beneath his outward calm. "Run away, there's a good chap. We're not opening—that's flat!"

"Yah! Secretive rotter!" howled Baggy indignantly.

"Sportin' your oak! What's the secret, Racke, that I mustn't come in?"

"You—" breathed Racke furiously.

"He, he, he! I know what I know, Racke! P'raps I've seen you all toggled up—p'raps I haven't! All I've got to say is, if you want to retain my friendship, this isn't the way I expect to be treated—so there! I'm going now, but I don't promise to keep your rotten secrets for you, that's flat!"

"The—the fat hound!" hissed Racke, his face convulsed. "He—he can't have seen anythin'—I locked the door, unless—unless—"

He bent down suddenly to the keyhole, and gave a gasp as he spotted the key lying on the carpet beneath. Evidently a pin, carefully inserted from the outside, had pushed the key back, causing it to drop to the floor, and leaving a clear view for Trimble to enjoy—and Trimble was an expert at making the most of the limited view permitted by a keyhole. Racke did not need telling that Baggy was the culprit, and that he had had his eye glued to the keyhole throughout the robbing of the Black Gang. He fairly trembled with rage and fear as he stood up and glared at his fellow conspirators.

"Hold on, Trimble!" he gasped. "I—I'll open the door. Just a jiffy, old man!"



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Fortunately, Trimble had not gone very far, and he rolled along the passage at Racke's call, and halted in the doorway.

"You want to speak to me, Aubrey, old chap?" asked Baggy fatuously.

"Y-y-yes, that's it!" gasped Racke, swallowing the "old chap" with an effort. "Just a minute, I'll soon have the door open, and you can come in."

"Don't mind me," said Trimble airily. "I can wait a second or two for an old pal like you, Aubrey. Besides, if anybody beside me sees how you're all dressed up—" he added, in a fat chuckle, while the four conspirators writhed in helpless wrath.

"Get your togs off—quick!" hissed Racke, tearing his robe off and untying his mask. "We've got to have all this stuff stowed away before we let that fat clam in!"

During the next few seconds the occupants of the study moved with frantic energy. Robes were rolled up and shoved into the study cupboard in a heap. Cowls went in on top, and the masks were shoved into a parcel. Crooke slammed the cupboard door and leaned on it, breathing heavily.

"All right, Aubrey—you can open the door now!" he gasped.

Racke turned the key, and the door opened immediately, to admit the fat form of Baggy Trimble, a triumphant grin on his greasy countenance. He winked prodigiously at Racke, evidently regarding himself in the light of an honoured guest.

"Quick change, wasn't it?" he grinned, ensconcing himself comfortably in the armchair. "Well, Aubrey, what's the little game? You don't mind letting a trustworthy chap like me into it, I suppose?"

From the gleam in Baggy's piggy little eyes, Racke realised that he would have to be told something, and something that would keep him quiet.

"No, not at all, Trimble," he responded easily, stifling the rage that surged up within him. "But you see we're keepin' this dark—it's a—jape, really."

The cad of the Shell nodded and winked, cudgelling his brains to think of some yarn wherewith to "stuff" the egregious and gullible Fourth-Former.

"I—I'm producing a play—that's it!" explained Racke, with a sudden inspiration. "But I want it to be a surprise—to knock Tom Merry and his pals into a cocked hat," he went on impressively, while Trimble eyed him curiously.

"That's what you saw, Trimble—we were rehearsing for one of the big scenes, getting some of the costumes ready, see? Of course, I can trust you to keep it dark, and not to tell a soul, I suppose? It would spoil everything to let the fellows have even an inkling beforehand," explained Racke gravely, while Crooke and the other two marvelled at the fertility of their leader's imagination.

"I'm thinkin' of callin' it 'The Abbey Ghost,'" lied Racke glibly, and getting as far away from the actual facts as possible. "What do you think of that for a title, Trimble?"

He eyed Baggy with great gravity, and the fat junior stared back at him.

"Oh! A play!" he ejaculated at last, giving Racke a very peculiar look, which the Shell fellow did not appear to notice. "But you weren't saying anything, only dressing-up, when I—ahem!—looked in?"

"Exactly!" said Racke easily. "We're getting the costumes ready, as I said. We have to make use of any odd minute we can get, you know. Can't very well explain to Linton in the morning that we were preparing a play and hadn't any time for prep, what? So you'll keep what you know to yourself, Trimble, old man?"

"I suppose so," said Trimble suspiciously. "Nothing to keep mum about, that I can see. Still, I'm willing to oblige an old pal, of course. I—I say—"

"Yes?" said Racke expectantly.

"I'm—I'm a bit hard up this week, as it happens," began Baggy doubtfully. "I'm—I'm expecting a cheque—"

"Ah! I know!" said Racke, with a grin of satisfaction. "How would ten bob do—till next week?"

"Oh, thanks awfully, Aubrey!" gasped Trimble, greedily seizing the note which Racke proffered. He had hardly expected to realise anything on such an innocent secret as a play, and he was agreeably surprised.

"Of course you can rely on me, Racke. I won't breathe a word!"

"Good man!" said Racke, as Baggy closed the door behind himself. "Good-bye, Trimble!"

All four juniors listened acutely till the fat Fourth-Former's footsteps had died away down the passage.

"He's gone!" breathed Crooke at last. "By gad! What an escape! You—you fairly take the cake, Racke! I thought it was all over then!"

"So did I!" gasped Mellish. "I—I say, don't you fellows

think it's a bit too risky, after all? I don't want to back out, but if Trimble finds out, and—and blabs—"

"He won't!" said Racke grimly. "And we've got to take the risk now—there isn't much, anyhow. I think I've stuffed him pretty completely. An' think of the bets you've all got on—it's too late to call them off now, you know!"

"Oh, my hat, yes!" ejaculated Mellish, who stood to win what was to him a veritable fortune. "We shall have to go through with it now."

"It's safe enough," said Crooke, with a confidence he was far from feeling.

- But in the hearts of the four conspirators was a haunting doubt of what Trimble might or might not know—and



exactly how much Trimble knew was known only to Trimble. Baggy knew what he knew—and that was more than Racke and Crooke suspected!

CHAPTER 7.

The First Victim!

"WHAT a fit!"

"Is this what you call a cowl, Racke?"

"Give me a hand with this robe, I'm all tangled up!"

Those exclamations, and sundry more of the same character, came from the occupants of old Mr. Pepper's barn, used for the sessions of the St. Jim's Parliament—now the headquarters of the Black Gang.

The time was a few minutes after six, and the seven

members of the Black Gang having all put in appearance, they were endeavouring, under Racke's direction, to don the robes and masks of their secret order.

Racke himself was swathed in a mass of black material, his head completely hidden by a billowing cowl, rendering his crepe mask quite unnecessary. He looked quite a forbidding figure, as, pushing his cowl back until he could see, he folded his arms and eyed his comrades, who were all struggling in various stages of their dressing.

Hake, with very ill grace, had discarded his tail-coat and allowed Crooke and Mellish to envelop him in his robe. He was now submitting to the indignity of a voluminous cowl. The mask he was thankful to don, as it concealed his



"Seat the prisoner!" commanded Racke. Hill was shoved down on a box, and two of the be-robed juniors mounted guard on each side of him. Then, acting in the capacity of Grand Master, Hake strode forward and bowed ironically to the Australian skipper. "Know that you have come before the High Committee of the Black Gang?" he announced, in a gruff voice. "Prepare to take thy punishment!" (See Chapter 7.)

identity and gave him a feeling of security. He swished his ashplant through the air, noting with pleasure the whistle that it made.

"It's—it's jolly risky, you know!" murmured Carker, the sneak of the Grammar School Fourth, as he adjusted his mask. "I—I don't think Hake ought to use his ashplant—it might give the game away. We've got cricket stumps, or a stick would do as well. If—if they once tumble to the fact that we're schoolboys."

"You might keep the ashplant out of it, Hake," said Racke, thoughtfully. "But there's no risk of recognition—our own grandmothers wouldn't know us in this outfit—let alone complete strangers—besides, we shall occupy too much of their attention for them to have time to scrutinise us!"

"Don't forget the veiled remarks about vengeance, an'

all that!" said Crooke, with a grin. "We want to impress the merry victim as much as possible, of course!"

"That's the idea!" grinned Racke. "Try all you can to give the impression that we're village chaps!"

"That ought to be easy enough!" agreed Mellish hopefully. "My hat, you do look a freak, Crooke!"

"Do I?" granted Crooke, ungraciously. "Take a look at yourself!"

There was a small mirror nailed on the wall, thoughtfully brought along by Racke, and before this each of the gang paraded in turn and assured himself that no vestige of his normal self remained un concealed. It was some time before they were all satisfied, but they were ready at last, and eager to get to work.

"We've not got much time before callin' over!" grunted Racke. "Still, with any luck we ought to capture one of the rotters to-night—I know they often ride down to the village on borrowed bikes to get letters from the post office. What we've got to do is to lie in wait behind the hedge, an' spring out on the first chap who passes—alone, of course. We can't handle a crowd. Roughly, we've got an hour. If things go well, we ought to make two or three captures, givin' 'em ten minutes each—I fancy that'll be enough! The rotters will feel sorry they gave me that bumpin'—though they won't know who's puttin' 'em through it, worse luck! You fellows ready—if you feel qualmy, remember your bets, my pippins!"

"Lead on, Macduff!" grinned Lacy, behind his mask. "This is really a brilliant wheeze of yours, Racke. I was a bit pushed for cash when you mentioned it, an' now I've got a bet with a man—besides several fellows at the school who have taken me on—they appear to think I'm getting weak in the head in my old age! But we know better, eh, Racke?"

"It's a great wheeze!" grinned Crooke. "An' I feel safe as houses in this rig—I don't think the Head himself could tell it was me!"

"Cut the cackle!" snapped Racke. "Time's short. Follow me, comrades! Let's hope our luck's in, by gad!"

Hake followed the rest, feeling decidedly foolish, and experiencing a growing distaste for the theatricality of the whole scheme. Still, he reasoned, peculiar though it might be, if all went as they anticipated it would mean a relief from financial worry for all the participants. So he drew his robes tightly round his somewhat lanky form, and followed the rest of the conspirators cautiously across the field wherein stood Mr. Pepper's barn, and so to the hedges overlooking Rylcombe Lane.

"Quiet now!" whispered Racke, as they crouched there in a group. "If anybody spots us we shall have to run for it—and we don't want to start the thing with a dash for cover!"

"I'm jolly cramped, crouching here like this!" grunted Mellish after a few minutes.

"Hear, hear!" growled Hake.

"Shut up!" hissed Racke tensely. "I can hear somebody comin'!"

The conspirators strained their ears to catch the sound of footsteps approaching their ambush. Sure enough, a quick tread coming steadily nearer, broke upon their silence.

"Get ready!" muttered Racke, crouching in readiness to spring out on their quarry before the latter had time to take fright.

The footsteps came closer, and suddenly the wayfarer swung into view. The juniors stared blankly at a short man of wide build, who carried a gun slung over his shoulder. He looked very much like a gamekeeper, and certainly, by no stretch of the imagination, could he be taken for one of the Australians. With one accord, the seven sank back under cover of the hedge and waited in deep but expressive silence till the man had passed.

"Well?" murmured Racke at last.

"If at first you don't succeed," grinned Crooke, seeing the humorous side of the incident.

"Shut up! I can hear a—"

"A bike!" gasped Mellish, over Racke's shoulder.

There was a whir in the lane, and a cyclist sped into view. Racke gave a jump as he saw that it was none other than Charlie Hill, the skipper of the Australian tourists—alone, and whistling blithely as he rode.

"What luck!" he gasped. "Come on, you fellows!"

As the bike drew level with their hiding-place, the seven be-robed juniors sprang from the hedge and barred the way with upraised hands.

"Stop!" commanded Hake, playing up valiantly as Grand Master.

"Stop!" said Racke, in a sepulchral voice.

The Australian captain jammed on his brakes and skipped off the bike, staring blankly at the Black Gang.

"What the giddy thump," he began, but he had no time for more.

"Collar him!" hissed Racke, and the Black Gang closed in suddenly, pinioning the Australian's arms to his sides.

"Bind him!" whispered Crooke, in an excited effort to disguise his voice, and a cord was produced from the folds of a gown. Charlie Hill put up a fierce struggle, but his captors had the advantage, and his hands were forced behind him and bound.

"What on earth— Who the giddy thump are you?" he ejaculated, as he was led in the midst of the bunch towards the old barn. "Do you idiots think you're kidnapping me? You—you—"

"Silence, prisoner!" ordered one of the comrades, turning a hooded and masked head towards the captive. "Your fate is sealed. Question not the justice that has come to thee!"

"Well, my only summer bonnet!" gasped the Australian, helplessly.

He did not resist, since there was nothing to be gained by it, and found himself in the barn, with the door shut, excluding all light save for a pale gleam from the grimy window high in the wall. A solitary candle shed a fitful illumination on the proceedings.

"Seat the prisoner!" commanded Racke, pushing Hake forward with a muttered injunction to act up to his part as Grand Master.

The prisoner was shoved down on a box, and one of the gang mounted guard on each side of him.

"Let's lick him an' get it over!" muttered Hake, glaring at Racke through the slits in his mask.

"You funky idiot!" hissed Racke, sotto voce. "Get on with it—as I told you!"

The cad of the Shell strode forward and bowed ironically to the Australian.

"Know that you have come before the High Committee of the Black Gang?" he announced, in an unrecognisable bass.

"Not really?" inquired Charlie Hill, politely.

"Yes!" The Grand Master made an effort and strode up to the box on which his victim was seated. "And you know what we want you for, too!" he growled, with a ferocious but unfortunately concealed glare.

"Careful, you ass!" gasped Crooke, in the stagiest of stage whispers. "That was very nearly your natural voice!"

Hake nodded shortly, and deepened his voice still more.

"You are well aware of the reason for your punishment!" boomed Hake determinedly. "So there is no need for me to repeat it. I have my duty to do—as instructed by the committee!"

"Your offences shall be expiated to the full!" growled Mellish, with a masterful jerk of the head.

"Just a minute!" interrupted Charlie Hill, his handsome face a little set. "You say I ought to know why I've been captured? Well—I don't! If I've got any enemies, this is the first time I've heard of them!"

"Ha! So you say!" said the Grand Master scornfully. "Let me tell you that bluff will not serve you now! Comrades, release the prisoner's hands!"

"Can't do much damage with his hands behind his back!" grinned Racke softly, handling a pliant switch that he had cut from the hedge.

The guards on either side of the Australian captain bent over him, drawing their penknives. Charlie Hill's eyes gleamed, and his hands relaxed. The rope that had secured them came away, and he was free.

Racke, with a malevolent grin behind his mask, handed Hake the switch, and motioned the rest to turn the Australian over in a convenient position for chastisement.

Charlie Hill waited for no more.

With a sudden twist, he broke his captor's hold, and let out his right at Hake's jaw. The Australian's fist crashed on the folds of a coat, but found something harder beneath, and with a gasping grunt, Hake staggered over, feeling as if he had been kicked by a mule.

Racke and Carker leaped to overpower the prisoner, but the former was met by a piston-like left, while Carker received a blow on his somewhat prominent nose which caused him to retire ignominiously into a corner to staunch the crimson, which was flowing freely.

Scrope and Mellish, seeing Crooke and Lacy rush to the attack joined in rather half-heartedly. But they were too late. Lacy went down with an eye fast closing, and the other three, none of whom were of the stuff of which heroes are made, jumped nimbly out of the way of further damage.

With a leap, the Australian was at the door, and slammed it in the face of his pursuers. Racke, with Hake holding his jaw and groaning, hurled open the door and stumbled into the field, just in time to see Charlie Hill crash through the hedge and pedal away on his bike.

"You—you—you funks!" hissed Racke, beside himself with rage and chagrin. "Seven of you—and you couldn't hold him! If you rotten funks had stood up to him for

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a minute, we could have mobbed him—and he wouldn't have had an earthly!"

"He knew that!" grunted Hake, savagely. "That's why he made a sudden dash for it—we might have expected it! Oh, my jaw. It feels as if it's busted; by gad!"

"Oh, by dose!" groaned Carker, his handkerchief saturated with blood. "I've just about finished with your rotten schemes, Racke! So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

With which Parthian shot, Carker threw off his robes and limped out of the barn in quest of a stream wherein to bathe his fast-swelling nasal organ.

Lacy had risen to his feet, and was feeling his right eye tenderly, where a dark bruise had already begun to form.

"By gad!" he gasped. "If I'd had another chance at the rotter, I'd have smashed him! As it is, I'll get even with him—you see if I don't! I shall have a prize eye in the mornin'!"

"Ten minutes to calling-over!" said Crooke suddenly, staring at his watch. "We shall have to cut, you chaps! If anybody's late in, after this—" He left the rest to the juniors' imagination. Certainly, it would not do to be late in when the Australian captain arrived at St. Jim's with his account of the ambush.

"It was a fool scheme from the first, Racke!" grunted Hake, as they trotted across the meadow. "You can count me out in future, anyhow! I've had enough of your kid's games!"

"You rotter!" hissed Racke, all the venom of his mean nature aroused. "An' what about my I O U? When are you goin' to pay up, eh? You can be friendly enough with me when I'm useful, but not when I want somethin'—that's quite a different tune, by gad! You rotter!"

The cad of the Shell left Hake staring rather apprehensively after him as he ran up the lane towards St. Jim's—it was dangerous to be late, even at the price of letting Hake's desertion pass unheeded!

They slowed down as the gates appeared in sight, and entered just as Taggles came out of his lodge, swinging his keys.

"Goin' to chuck it, Aubrey?" asked Crooke, rather doubtfully, it is true.

"Of course not!" growled Racke fiercely. "I admit that was a frost—but the next time it won't be—I can promise you that! I'll think out some wheeze—I tell you I must, or I shall owe Lodgey forty quid!"

"Which you couldn't pay," observed Crooke comfortingly. "I don't intend to lose it!" snarled Racke, as the gates clanged behind them.

CHAPTER 8.

The Benefit of the Doubt!

"MERRY!"

The captain of the Shell looked up cheerily from his work as Charlie Hill, the Australian skipper, appeared in the study doorway.

Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners, the chums of No. 10, were seated at the table, engaged in preparation for the morning's classes, and a side had been cleared for Georgie Horton, the rotund wicket-keeper of the Australian eleven, who was "billeted" for the duration of the visit with the Terrible Three. The Australians had to employ their spare time with study under their tutor, Mr. Randolph, but evidently something of greater import claimed Charlie Hill's attention at that moment.

"Come in, old chap!" invited Tom Merry, cordially.

"Prep. can wait for a sec. Take a pew!"

Monty Lowther shoved a chair forward, and proceeded to grace the coal-scuttle. Chairs were scarce in junior studies, but the Terrible Three were used to such little hardships.

"Spill the murder!" suggested Manners, in a grizzly tone. "Let's know the terrible truth at once—we can stand anything in this study—excepting Trimble!"

"There's not much to tell," said Hill, grinning. "And I expect you fellows will think I'm a duffer to be handled so easily—"

"Handled?" repeated Tom Merry, with a frown. "Who's been handling our visitors?"

"I don't know!" said Hill frankly. "You see, I ran over to the village after tea, to see if there were any letters—"

"I remember, you asked me to lend you my bike," said Tom Merry, nodding.

"Well, I collected two or three letters, and was cycling back along Rylcombe Lane—"

"Go on. The plot thickens!" said Monty Lowther with a grin.

"Shut up, Monty!" grunted Manners.

"—when a crowd of fellows in robes and cowls swarmed out of the hedge and surrounded me!" finished Hill, flushing.

Tom Merry stared, and Manners gasped.

"Did I hear aright?" ejaculated Monty Lowther. "Did you say robbed figures in Rylcombe Lane?"

"I was afraid you'd grin!" said Charlie Hill, shrugging his shoulders. "It sounds a bit like a film story, I know. But it's true as I'm standing here! There were seven of them, all with robes and hoods and masks—I couldn't tell who they were from Adam!"

"Well, my hat!" said Manners.

"In Rylcombe Lane?" repeated Lowther faintly.

"Look here!" said Tom Merry seriously. "Hill's not joking, I think—and this wants a bit of looking into!"

"That's not all!" went on the Australian captain, quietly. "I jumped off my bike, naturally—too surprised to do anything else, as a matter of fact! Then they mobbed me and dragged me across a meadow into an old barn—"

"Pepper's barn?" queried Manners thoughtfully.

"Possibly," agreed Tom Merry. "Go on, Hill."

"And tried to slobber me with a switch they had cut from the hedge!" ended the Australian.

"My only sainted Aunt Sempronia!" ejaculated Monty Lowther. "And what happened then?"

"I can see you can't swallow it," said Hill quietly. "But I'm not pulling your legs—they tried to put me through it—and then I broke loose. I think I gave one of 'em a prize eye," he grinned at the recollection, "and another one will have to nurse his jaw for a week or so, I fancy. I bruised my knuckles on it, anyhow—look!"

Tom Merry stared at Hill's knuckles, which bore obvious signs of having come into violent contact with some hard object, and he whistled.

"I'm sorry if we look a bit sceptical, Hill," he said, "but it sounded a little bit tall at first hearing! Your word's good enough, though—and I must look into this at once!"

"That's why I came to you, Merry," said Hill. "I don't want to take a yarn like that before the beaks—besides, it was quite possibly only a fool jape, and the idiots meant no harm, but I thought I ought to speak to you, as junior captain."

"I'm glad you did," said Tom Merry, frankly. "It would look bad for the school if a yarn—ahem!—if that got round far. I can't fathom who could have had a motive for doing a potty thing like that—pretty elaborate, too, as they wore togs to conceal their identity!"

"That looks as if they thought Hill would recognise them," said Monty Lowther keenly. "But he's a stranger in these parts. Who on earth would be likely—"

"There's a motive—" began Manners, and stopped.

"What's that?" asked Tom Merry quickly.

"It's rotten to think of it, but it looks a bit as if somebody got hold of Hill in order to—well, put him out of the match!" said Manners quietly.

There was a silence in Study No. 10 at that. Tom Merry and Lowther stared at their chum, the idea taking root

in their minds. Unless the whole thing was a prank—and from Hill's description, granting that to be accurate, it was much too elaborate to be that—this was a very probable and unpleasant explanation. The chums wondered what Hill must be thinking.

"Surely—" began Tom Merry, as the Australian glanced at him. "You don't think a St. Jim's chap would descend to such a rotten, low-down trick as that—"

Hill shook his head.

"I don't!" he said calmly. "It looks like a potty jape of some kind, though what the object, beyond trying to scare me for no reason, can have been, I can't imagine!"

"It's rotten!" said Lowther. "Manners' explanation is too ugly for words, but somehow I can't seem to satisfy myself by putting it down as a jape!"

"Japing visitors is hardly the kind of thing we want to encourage!" said Tom Merry grimly. "How big were these fellows, Hill?"

"About our own age," said the Australian, reflecting. "Though there was one big chap, he seemed to take the lead. I could recognise him again by one thing—"

"What was that?" asked Manners and Lowther together.

"A mole on the middle finger of his left hand!" said Hill quietly. "I noticed that particularly, for no special reason, and I'd know it again if I saw it; but it's hardly practicable to stop every fellow up to the Sixth and ask to see if he's got a mole—what?"

"They might have been villagers?" suggested Manners hopefully. "The big fellow could hardly have been anybody we know. Still, we can suspect anybody, if we put it on to the village rowdies, and they wouldn't tog up in robes, either!"

"Judging by the way they talked," said Hill slowly. "they'd got hold of the wrong party by mistake! They spoke of vengeance for something that I'd done—apparently taking it that I knew what they were referring to—so it's possible, of course, that the ambush wasn't intended for me at all. I don't see how they could have a grudge against me without knowing what I look like, though!"

"Unless that was a blind to put you off the scent!" said Lowther coolly.

Charlie Hill nodded comprehendingly.

"That's what I thought!" he answered. "I've no enemies that I know of; I hardly know anybody in England. It's highly unlikely that I should be mistaken for somebody else, out in the open."

"I'm going to sift the matter to the bottom!" said Tom Merry grimly. "It's up to this study to see that a rotten suspicion like this is squashed before it has time to grow! Of course, I know you and the rest of the team don't want a bother, but it's only fair play to make a few inquiries. Let's hope it was only some blithering idiot's idea of a joke!"

(Continued overleaf)



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FREE CUT-OUT PHOTOS!

THIS is of special interest to all readers of the GEM. Our Companion Papers, the "Magnet" and "Popular," are giving away the finest set of cut-out, stand-up portraits of famous cricketers ever put before the public. This week's photos are of A. A. Mailey (Australia), who appears in the "Magnet," and P. Holmes (Yorks) in the "Popular." Just see these grand free gifts for yourselves. They are unique for clearness, excellence of effect, and finish. It will be a set worth having and preserving, a splendid record of the Test year.

A LOYAL SUPPORTER.

A Cheshire chum asks me to mention in Chat that he has bound his copies of the GEM, so that other readers can follow his good example. My firm belief is that countless readers do sew their copies together, and make quite a neat job of it. Of course, any stationer would undertake the binding of the numbers, and such handy volumes of the old paper are good things to have on the shelf, for the foibles of Baggy and the adventures of Tom Merry & Co. can always be enjoyed again.

THE R.A.F.

A Gemite, writing from Sea View, Co. Waterford, asks me about his chances of entering the Royal Air Force. He is seventeen. In certain cases aircraft apprentices are accepted at this age. The usual age is 15-16½. "Sea View" should write to the Royal Air Force, Apprentices' Dept. 4, Henrietta Street, London, W.C. 2.

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YOUR EDITOR.

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"Where away, O chief?" asked Monty Lowther, as Tom rose to his feet.

"No time like the present!" responded the Shell captain. "I've got a fellow in mind. I'll just run along and put a few questions to him, like a jolly old lawyer. Excuse me, won't you, Hill?"

"I won't wait, thanks!" said the Australian. "I've got some work to do, and I'd better get on with it. Let me know if you find out anything, Merry. And thanks no end for offering to look into the thing. I don't want to cause any trouble, you know. Most likely there's nothing in it at all."

"Don't worry your head about it, old chap!" grinned Tom Merry cheerily. "Leave it to me. If anybody in the junior school knows anything about the matter, I'll ferret him out, though, to tell the truth, I don't expect to convict anybody!"

Charlie Hill nodded cheerfully and left the study. As the door closed behind him, Manners and Lowther laid down their pens.

"Ahem! I think I'd like to speak to Charlie a minute!" said Georgie Horton tactfully, and followed his chum.

"Tommy, old man," said Monty Lowther seriously. "I don't like to say it, but it looks as if there's a howling cad somewhere—and it's up to us to find him. Lead on, Macduff!"

"Whom do you suspect, Tom?" asked Manners bluntly.

"Racke!" said Tom Merry coolly. "I know it's rotten unjust to suspect anybody without reason, but he's the most complete blackguard in the lower school, and if there's any dirty work in the wind, you can nearly always expect to find him at the bottom of it! Anyway, he's only got his reputation to thank if I ask him a few questions! If he's got an alibi for this evening, he can soon say so!"

"Give a dog a bad name and hang him!" grinned Lowther.

"I don't want to do that, Monty!" said Tom irritably. "But I can't help thinking—"

"Let's get it over!" suggested Manners practically.

The Terrible Three strolled out of the study, not noticing a fat figure which scuttled round the corner of the passage as soon as the door opened.

Baggy Trimble arrived breathless, but fairly bursting with excitement at the door of Racke's study, and knocked loudly on the panels.

"Who's there?" called Racke.

"Me—Trimble!" gasped Baggy. "Tom Merry's coming! Let me in! You're found out, you rotter! Tom Merry's coming here to charge you with—"

The door was dragged open with such startling suddenness that Baggy sprawled on his hands and knees on the threshold.

"Get up, quick!" hissed Racke, his face white with fear. "What—what rot were you babblin' about me bein' found out? I've done nothin', you fat clam!"

"He's—he's coming!" gasped Baggy, scrambling up. "Tom Merry—Hill—he's been with Tom Merry in Study No. 10, and they were talking about an ambush. Chaps in crows and long robes—"

"What?" shouted Racke, his face livid.

"That was you—you and the other rotters, Racke!" said Trimble, taking great pleasure in Racke's terrified expression. "But you needn't worry, old man, I'll keep mum. Those Australians are a rotten mingy crowd. McLean refused to cash a cheque for me only this morning. Stingy cads, all of 'em! Rely on me, Aubrey! Here he comes! He, he, he!"

Racke moistened his lips as Tom Merry, with Manners and Lowther behind him, appeared in the study doorway.

"Hallo! What do you fellows want?" asked Racke, with a return to something of his old sneering manner. He was thankful that Crooke had gone down to the Common-room, for Crooke's face would certainly have given him away at such a crisis as this. But by lying desperately now, and silencing Trimble afterwards, Racke still cherished a hope of saving his bacon.

"Nothing to get flurried about, Racke!" said Monty Lowther, eyeing the Shell fellow keenly. "You look rather white about the gills, Aubrey!"

"Hands off, if it's a raggin'," said Racke cunningly. "This is the style of you fellows, though, I suppose—three to one!"

"Shut up, you rotter!" grunted Tom Merry, crossing the study, and closing the door. "You know it isn't a ragging. I've come here to ask you one or two straight questions, Racke. If you can answer them, I'll say I'm sorry and clear out!"

"Thank you for nothin'!" cried Racke sullenly, throwing himself into an armchair, while Trimble watched with deep interest in the proceedings.

"What's Trimble here for?" asked Lowther suddenly.

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"Trimble? I was just goin' to kick him out when you fellows barged in without bein' invited!" said Racke coolly. "Don't go now, Baggy. As you're here, you may as well know what Merry's got to say. I've nothin' to keep dark, so that's that!"

He contrived to give Baggy a meaning glance with those words, and Baggy grinned knowingly back. The fat junior had no love for the Terrible Three, and no scruples to bother him, and he felt that there would be further cash supplies forthcoming if he kept Racke's secret well.

"Look here, Racke!" said Tom Merry frankly. "What have you been doing from teatime till now?"

The cad of the Shell paled, but when he answered, his voice was cool and mocking.

"Have you been appointed dry nurse to all errin' youths in the lower school, Merry?" he inquired, taking out an expensive cigarette-case and eyeing it reflectively.

"No. And cheek won't satisfy me!" growled Tom Merry, frowning, as Racke drew a cigarette from his case, and tapped it preparatory to lighting up. "Put that thing away, you cad! And I want just a plain answer. Where have you been since tea?"

Racke's eyes glimmered as the captain of the Shell coughed, and his hand was as steady as a rock as he drew the cigarette from his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke in the direction of the Terrible Three.

Manners growled, and Monty Lowther coughed and glared.

"Now, I wonder," began Racke contemptively, "where I was? Do you remember seein' either Trimble or myself about the house since tea?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't think so," answered Tom Merry unsuspectingly.

"H'm! P'r'aps I can explain that by tellin' you that we've been together in this study all the time."

"Since when have you been keen on Trimble's company, Racke?" asked Manners, his lip curling.

"Since tea, Manners," responded Racke coolly, regarding the Shell fellow with a glimmer in his eyes over his cigarette. "It seems to me that my little secret is bound to come out. Dashed annoyin', an' all that, but there you are! Nothin' safe with Tom Merry pokin' his nose into everythin' that doesn't concern him, is it?"

"That's enough, Racke!" snapped Tom, his eyes flashing.

"If you stick to it that you were in this study all the time, what on earth did you want with Trimble?"

"He wasn't here!" said Manners decisively.

"I call on Trimble to bear me out!" said Racke calmly. "Since Merry's so pressin', I suppose I'd better tell the truth! We were discussing my new play, weren't we, Trimble?"

Baggy, who had been eyeing Racke askance, stared for a second, and then he almost choked.

"Oh, of course, Racke!" he agreed fatuously. "So you see, you're on the wrong track altogether, Merry!"

"Not quite," said Tom. "I want a fuller explanation than that, Racke!"

"Draggin' out all my secret ambitions!" said Racke plaintively, grinning cunningly at Trimble and winking unseen by the Terrible Three. "You see, Merry, I've been writin' a play lately. I wanted to produce it with a cast of my friends, as a surprise to the whole school an' a revelation of the buddin' genius behind my lofty brow!"

"Chuck leg-pulling," advised Manners, "and talk sense for a few seconds. You mean to say you wanted to talk over a play with Trimble—the biggest dunce in the Fourth?"

Baggy snorted and gave Manners a glare which passed unheeded.

"Just that!" grinned Racke imperturbably. "You see, I've got a part for a hefty fellow like Trimble. It doesn't want much histrionic ability, but it demands a chap with some girth, and I thought it would just about suit him down to the ground."

"Oh!" said Tom Merry, nonplussed.

"If you'd really like to know, we were discussin' the monetary side of the question," explained Racke, smiling serenely at the Shell fellows' discomfiture. "Trimble's a frightfully mercenary little beast, as you know. We were fixin' the fee for the performance, with, say, a couple of rehearsals thrown in!"

"Oh, I say—" ejaculated Baggy, glaring at Racke, and not at all flattered by that description of himself.

"We fixed it at a quid," said Racke coolly, drawing his Russian leather wallet from his jacket. "An', just to convince Doubtin' Thomas, there's the quid, Baggy! I shall want you to-morrow for the first rehearsal, mind!"

"I—I understand!" gasped Baggy, pocketing the note and hardly able to believe his good fortune. "I'll be here—rely on me, old chap. And—now I'll be going!"

Racke grinned. He could not help it. That pound, together with the ten shillings he had paid Trimble previously, left him absolutely stony, but he felt that it was worth it.

While Tom Merry and his chums stared mutely, Trimble

rolled to the door, and with a fat wink at Racke, left the study.

Racke's voice brought the Shell captain back to earth suddenly.

"Satisfied, Merry?" asked the cad, grinning openly. "Well, no!" responded Tom Merry. "But I—I suppose it's all right. What do you fellows think?"

"Spoof!" said Monty Lowther angrily. "We've no proof, of course," said Manners thoughtfully. "And he's got an alibi. After all, we may be doing him an injustice!"

"Thanks awfully for givin' me the benefit of the doubt!" said Racke sarcastically. "Shut the door after you! An' thanks for callin', Tom Merry! Always a pleasure to see your classic features, old scout! Ta-ta!"

The Terrible Three left the study, as there appeared nothing more to be done. And there was always the chance that Racke was innocent, after all. They did not want to give a dog a bad name, as Monty Lowther had suggested. At the same time, none of the three was satisfied.

"He's such a cunning rotter!" said Lowther, as they sat down again to prep. later than they had intended.

"Well, he's got an alibi," said Manners doubtfully.

Tom Merry flung down his pen at last and rose.

"I'll go and speak to Hill," he announced. "You coming, Horton?"

Georgie Horton had returned to the study, and was deep in the work set by Mr. Randolph.

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"Not for a bit," answered Horton. "This maths paper is taking all my time!"

"Right-ho!" said Tom Merry. And he shut the door behind him, while Manners kindly lent his aid in elucidating the maths paper set by Mr. Randolph, Manners being a whale at mathematics, and finding a pleasure in abstruse calculations which was denied to other fellows.

**CHAPTER 9.
The Last Card!**

"**W**ORRYIN' about that bet, Aubrey?" Gerald Crooke lounged into No. 7 in the Shell passage and grinned unsympathetically.

It was Friday, and on the morrow the Australians were to do battle with St. Jim's. If—and there was a very big "if," in Racke's opinion—St. Jim's proved victorious, his debt to Lodgey would be cleared off and a weight lifted from his mind. But there was another side to the question—the certainty, as it appeared to him now, of an Australian victory, involving him in a debt of forty pounds, which he was well aware he would not be able to pay on the nail. And, judging by Lodgey's demeanour at their last encounter, he would not be amenable to waiting indefinitely for his money.

The activities of the Black Gang had ceased, never to be renewed. It was useless to make a fuss about the two pounds which Hake owed, for the rest of the Gang were just as disinclined for a repetition of the previous day's farce; and Racke had listened, biting his lip, to some plain speaking from his followers.

Hence, he was not in a pleasant temper when Crooke broke in on his reflections. Nor was his response to Crooke's inquiry even remotely pleasant. He gave Crooke a burning glance.

"Hang you!" he growled, and relapsed into silence. "Feelin' down, what?" asked Crooke cheerily. It was said of old that there is a peculiar satisfaction to

be found in the misfortunes of our friends, and certainly Racke's evil humour seemed to afford Crooke considerable enjoyment. But his expression became more serious as he recollected that he, too, was pretty deeply involved in the match did not go as they hoped; and Crooke paused very thoughtfully and lit a cigarette.

"Look here, Aubrey, somethin's got to be done!" he said abruptly.

Racke glanced up from his chair, grinning evilly. "I know that!" he said grimly. "Tell me somethin' I haven't heard for a change. Suppose you suggest what's goin' to be done, as you're so knowin'?"

"Keep your wool on, old man," urged Crooke pacifically. "I'm in this—right up to my neck—an' I can't afford to lose any more than you can. An' somehow—we've not got much time, either—the Australians have got to go under!"

"I've been workin' my brain at high pressure ever since classes, tryin' to think of somethin'!" said Racke desperately. "An' I've got the glimmerin's of an idea. Crooke. It's pretty risky, but I'd risk a lot to get clear of that rotter Lodgey for good!"

"Lodgey's a sweet man!" said Crooke thoughtfully. "I don't owe him much, thank goodness, though if this doesn't come off I shall! Come out into the open, Aubrey. What's the wheeze? I hope it isn't too risky!" he added hastily.

"Oh, rats! There's nothin' to get the wind-up over!" grunted Racke. "I can handle it on my own—which is just as well, by the look of it! It's no use

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thinkin' of assault an' battery now that you fellows have chucked the whole thing up. An' I know Merry more than half suspects that I had somethin' to do with Hill's kidnappin'—only the fool can't prove it! If he only knew!" The cad shivered at the thought. "But he won't unless that fat cad Trimble—if he splits—"

"I've noticed he's been hangin' round you pretty close!" grinned Crooke. "Good thing you had a remittance to-day, old man!"

"Only a measly fiver!" growled Racke. "Enough to keep Trimble's mouth shut; but there's nothin' left for anythin' else. Oh, I'll smash the fat slug as soon as we've got this business over an' done with; I'll tan the little beast till he can't howl, I promise you! But I've got an idea—I think it can be worked—an' all I shall want you to do will be to stay in the study, an' swear, if necessary, that I was here with you all the time!"

Crooke listened while Racke outlined the scheme that had presented itself to his cunning mind, and Crooke's face showed that it was desperate enough.

"I can jolly well promise you I'm not takin' a hand, anyway!" he ejaculated, as Racke finished.

"I didn't ask you to!" snapped Racke irritably. "I know you haven't the nerve, you fool! But I'm in a fix, an' I can't get out any other way, so I'm going to do it!"

"There'll be an inquiry. You'll have to have a jolly good alibi, you ass!" gasped Crooke.

"I can buy Trimble's testimony any time I like!" grinned Racke. "It isn't worth much, but it's better than nothin'. An' you can corroborate anythin' I say, Crooke. There's not much risk if the thing is carried out as it should be. Anyway, I'm goin' to take what risk there is—an' get clear of Lodgey!"

Tap!
Both Racke and Crooke turned, looking rather startled, as that sound came from the door. It was opened without further preliminary, and a fat face and a fatter form came into the study.

"Oh, you're here, Aubrey, old man!" said Baggy Trimble affectionately, closing the door behind him and putting on his most chummy smile. "I—I just dropped in for a little chat before tea, and—and I'm rather hungry. I suppose you're having tea in the study?"

"No!" snapped Racke; and then, as an offended expression appeared on Baggy's face, he changed his mind rapidly. "Yes—oh, yes! Sit down, Trimble! Just run down to the tuckshop an' get some grub, there's a good chap, Crookey!"

Racke tossed a ten-shilling note on the table; and Crooke, with a scowl, picked it up and departed on his errand.

"Always glad to have an old pal to tea, aren't you, Aubrey?" asked Trimble, with a sly grin.

Racke grunted unintelligibly, and his gaze rested for a moment on Trimble's face with an intensity that made the fat Fourth-Former quake. Of course, he knew that Racke could not afford to quarrel with him, but he decided to adopt a more conciliatory attitude.

"I—I say, you know—" he stuttered.

"All right, I'm not goin' to hurt you!" grinned Racke. "Only, remember, if you open your fat mouth about anythin'—"

"I—I haven't said a word to anybody about—about your play, Racke!" gasped Baggy nervously. "I—I don't even know whether you were the Grand Master of the Black Gang or not; it—it may have been Crooke, or—or—"

"Shut up!" howled Racke, as the door opened suddenly—fortunately, only to admit Crooke, bearing a parcel.

"Here's somethin' to keep your fat jaws busy. Pile in!"

Baggy needed no second bidding, setting about the good things as Crooke unpacked them, and not even waiting for the formality of laying the tea-cloth. He ensconced himself in the armchair with a tin of pineapple, which he ate chunk by chunk with a dessert-spoon, while Racke and Crooke, with thoughts too deep for words, laid the tea.

"Jolly good pineapple this, Racke!" observed Trimble charitably, as he swallowed the last chunk and elegantly drained the juice from the tin. "Is there any more?"

"No—thank goodness!" growled Racke.

"Pity! But Crooke always was an ass!" said Trimble sorrowfully. "I could have done with another tin like that. Still, I'll sample the cake."

And while Racke and Crooke sat in silence and ate bread-and-butter, Trimble took the cake off the stand and began to demolish it at a speed that made the juniors stare—used as they were to Baggy's gastronomic feats. After having disposed of the cake, Baggy finished off the dish of pastries. He sat back after that, feeling that he had done well. But his eyes rested on the jam, and he thoughtfully took a spoonful, smacking his lips over it. He continued to take spoonfuls until the pot was empty. His breath came in short gasps by this time, and his colour was ebbing.

"I—I think I've had enough, thanks, you fellows!" he gasped, rising with difficulty and holding on to the edge of the table for support. "I—I'll be running along now—I—Ow! Yow! Oooh! Yarooogh! Lemme gerrout, for goodness' sake—"

Crooke made a dash to open the door, and Trimble fairly fled up the passage, en route for a bath-room.

Crooke returned to the study with an expression of almost homicidal fury on his face.

"Did you ever see such a fat, greedy, disgustin' pig as that?" he inquired.

"Never!" said Racke solemnly. "I'd—I'd like to smash the horrid little beast to a pulp—an' when this business is over—"

"When!" echoed Crooke, with relish.

"I'll take it all out of his hide!" said Racke grimly.

Meanwhile, Baggy was spending an agonising quarter of an hour in the bath-room, from which he emerged eventually a paler if not a wiser being. He descended the stairs with a slow and none too steady step, and wandered into the quad.

Most of the juniors were busy with prep by this time, but Baggy did not feel like prep. He blinked at a group of the Australians half-way across the quad, under the trees, returning from a visit to Figgins & Co. of the New House. He saw them stop suddenly and stare towards the chapel. When they set off at a trot Baggy stared in surprise.

"What the merry thump!" he murmured. "Those fellows have been over to see Figgy, I suppose. What on earth have they gone dashing off to the chapel for? I think I'll go and have a look."

And Baggy blinked again, and followed in the Australians' wake—rather a long way behind. But he knew where they were heading—or thought he did. Baggy's normal rate of progress was extremely slow, and in the circumstances of his recent indisposition it was reduced to a minimum for safety. He was only half-way across the quadrangle when a figure loomed up among the trees, and Aubrey Racke of

the Shell swerved just in time to avoid running into the fat junior.

"Oh! You!" he gasped, his face the colour of chalk.

"Yes! What are you staring at?" asked Trimble impatiently. "That pineapple must have been mouldy or something, Racke, you rotter! And the cake was poisoned. I've been sick—"

Racke, drawing breath quickly, slipped his arm into Trimble's and walked the fat junior away towards the House.

"Sorry, old man!" he muttered propitiatingly. "I thought they were all right. You haven't been very bad, I hope?"

"I've been horribly sick!" granted Trimble. "And I don't feel any too well now!"

"Too bad!" said Racke solicitously. "Come up to the study, old man, an' have a little game. Perhaps that will make you forget it."

"No, thanks, Aubrey," said Trimble hastily. "I think I'll stop out here in the fresh air for a bit, if you don't mind. But—but what were you doing over beyond the trees? You looked jolly startled when I met you. You're not keeping a guilty secret from a pal, are you, Aubrey?"

Baggy looked at Racke very inquisitively, and the cad clenched his fists till the knuckles showed white.

"You—you fat little frog!" he hissed, his eyes gleaming fiercely. "I—I'd just been over to see Clampe; nothin' for you to get suspicious about, you pryin' rotter! You're always spyin' on me lately, you fat blackmailer!"

"What?" roared Trimble indignantly. "Blackmailer—eh? I like that—I do really! You jolly well take that back, Racke, or—or I'll tell Tom Merry all I know. And then the fat will be in the fire with a vengeance, won't it, you cad? He, he, he!"

He ended in a fat chuckle, at which Racke came within an ace of smashing his fist in the fat Fourth-Former's grinding face.

"Here's Tom Merry—hang him!" he hissed desperately. "Hold your tongue, you little idiot! If you dare—"

"Well, I'm not standing any cheek, I can tell you that!" said Baggy independently. "You treat me like a pal, Aubrey, and I'll stand by you. But if I have any rot—"

"All right, old man!" gasped Racke, forcing a grin with a fierce effort. "All right! Keep quiet, there's a good chap! I'll make it right when we get up in the study."

"And not so much of the fat blackmailer!" said Trimble victoriously, failing to notice the approach of Tom Merry with Manners and Lowther, which Racke had observed some moments previously. "I don't mind keeping your rotten secrets for you, Racke, but I don't like being called a blackmailer when I'm doing you a favour really! I'll bet Tom Merry would like to know as much as I know about you, Aubrey! And you haven't told me yet what you were up to by the chapel, either! I saw the Australians disappear that way just before you came running up—Wh—what's the matter, Racke?"

The fat junior's voice trailed off as he perceived the Terrible Three, who had been passing so close that they could not help hearing what Trimble was saying, and he gave a yelp of alarm as he spotted the grim expressions on their faces.

"Ow! It wasn't me! I—I don't know anything about it, Tom Merry! You—you can take my word, I suppose?"

Racke, his face blanching, stood speechless while Tom Merry glanced from him to the Fourth-Former. He realised, with a sinking of the heart, that his fate was trembling in the balance now, and through Trimble's reckless tattle the whole miserable scheme looked like toppling down about his ears. And after that—Lodgey!

CHAPTER 10.

The Reward of the Schemer!

"THIS wants looking into!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"It does!" agreed Manners.

"It does—it do!" chimed in Monty Lowther, eyeing Racke and Trimble with a glance that was full of suspicion.

"What's Trimble been blackmailing you for, Racke?" asked Manners bluntly.

"Nothin'!" hissed Racke, finding his voice at last, and instinctively trying to lie his way out of the corner in which Baggy had placed him. "Nothin' at all! Only his silly gas; he'll tell you so himself!"

The cad of the Shell gave Trimble a glance, and the fat junior read in his eyes an urgent injunction to lie his hardest till they were safely out of this scrape.

"Really, Racke—yes, I mean that's it, Tom Merry!" he stuttered, blinking apprehensively at the Terrible Three. "You—you see, I—I'm not keeping Racke's rotten secrets for him—nothing of the kind! If you think he's afraid I'll let anything out you're quite mistaken! Besides, a pal can

make another a little loan, I suppose, without it being called blackmail? I'm surprised at you, Tom Merry—I am, really!"

And Trimble glared at the Shell captain, apparently under the impression that that remarkable statement closed the matter.

Tom Merry gave him a look, and seized him by the shoulder.

"Let's have this plain!" he said grimly. "A moment ago Racke was calling you a blackmailer—you were both shouting and looking excited—and you mentioned that Racke has just come from beyond the trees looking scared. Now tell us the truth, my fat pippin—and sharp's the word!"

"Yow! Leggo!" gasped Trimble, worming free from the Shell captain's grasp and glaring wildly from Racke to the others. "I—I don't know what you're talking about—so there! If you think I'm keeping a secret—anything to do with the Black Gang—you're entirely mistaken! I—I don't know anything about Racke being Grand Master or—anything at all about it! As for his looking scared—well, he was. You can't deny that, can you, Racke?"

Aubrey Racke gave him a glare that ought to have withered him up on the spot, but, fortunately, it didn't. On the contrary, Baggy pointed an accusing finger at the cad and glared back.

"You were, you rotter—looking scared stiff over something!" he repeated, with satisfaction. "I thought you'd been up to some rotten trick! Look at him, you chaps! He's fairly trembling!"

Tom Merry & Co. needed no information from Trimble on that point. Racke was indeed in the last stages of fright, and his knees were almost knocking together. For once his iron nerve appeared to have deserted him.

"I—I—" he whispered, moistening his lips feebly. "It's—it's only Trimble's rot, Tom Merry! You can't have anything against me. I'm innocent! I swear that!"

Tom Merry's lip curled, and Manners and Lowther glared. "I don't know exactly what you've been up to, Racke," said the Shell captain coolly, "but it's pretty obvious that it's of a pretty shady nature! As for what Trimble calls the Black Gang—if it was you, after all, and your cronies—"

"Stop! It wasn't!" gasped Racke desperately. "I—I tell you Trimble made all this up out of sheer malice! I don't know a word about the Black Gang—any more than you do, you rotters!"

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Trimble, with a virtuous glance at Racke. "And I saw him and the others dressing up in long black robes, with cowls and masks! He told me it was for a play—'The Abbey Ghost' He, he, he!"

"What!" roared Monty Lowther. "He stuffed you up with a yarn like that? Or did he pay you to keep your fat mouth shut? Robes and masks! Where did you see them, you fat chump?"

"In Racke's study!" gasped Trimble, edging away from the cad, who looked as if he might throw himself on the Fourth-Former at any moment. "Crooke was there, and Mellish and Scrope, too! I—I— As it happened, my shoelace came undone just outside the door, and I couldn't help seeing into the study. Of course, I didn't stay to watch! I wouldn't do such a thing!" he added virtuously.

"And that explains why Racke called you a blackmailer!" breathed Manners.

"Of course. He's been squeezing hush-money out of Racke ever since!" ejaculated Lowther.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom Merry. "I hardly know which is the biggest rotter! You run each other pretty close! So you were responsible for the capture of Hill, Racke? I suppose you'd got some rotten bet on the match! Is that it, you cad?"

"No. I wasn't!" hissed Racke, beside himself with rage. "You can't prove it, can you? It's only Trimble's word against mine, an' you know he's the biggest liar in the Lower School! You couldn't condemn a dog on his evidence!"

"Trimble's speaking the truth for once," said Manners. "I think that's plain enough. But you spoke about the Australians, Trimble. If this rotter— But he couldn't do anything on his own. Choke it up, you fat rotter!"

The Terrible Three waited while Baggy coughed and cleared his throat, backing still farther away from Aubrey Racke.

"Keep him off, you fellows!" he said nervously. "I'll—I'll tell you—if you'll keep him off! He's getting wild! You see, I saw some of the Australians come from the New House, and then I thought I heard a shout. Then they all disappeared towards the old chapel, and—and—"

The glance that Racke gave him fairly chilled the fat junior's spine.

"I—I don't know that I've got anything else to say, you fellows!" he gasped feebly.

"Get on!" grunted Tom Merry, glancing disdainfully at Racke. "We'll see that you don't get hurt afterwards. Racke won't feel like hurting anybody after we've done with him, I'm thinking!"

"All right! I'm—I'm getting on!" stammered Trimble. "A—a minute or so after the Australians disappeared Racke came rushing into me, as white as a ghost!"

"The Abbey Ghost?" inquired Lowther, with a grin.

"No, you ass! And he was trembling like—like anything!" continued Trimble impressively, grinning at Racke from behind Manners. "I—I didn't have time to ask what he'd been up to. But the Australians haven't come back yet. And—and it's funny they should all go off to the chapel now, isn't it?"

"My hat!" gasped Lowther. "I wonder—"

"What?" asked Tom Merry and Manners together.

"If this howling cad's anything to do with it—if he's trapped them somehow! Though what a feeble waster like Racke could do to those fellows beats me!" admitted Lowther.

"I say, you fellows, listen to me!" panted Baggy Trimble excitedly. "Perhaps he's shut them up in the vaults!"

"My only aunt, yes! I believe that's it!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "You say you heard a shout, Trimble? What kind of a shout?"

"Like a chap calling for help," said Baggy.

"Racke," snapped Tom, turning on the cad, "you may as well own up! Was it you? You—you rotten worm!"

"No; I admit nothin'!" hissed Racke, looking about for a means of escape.

If he made a dash for it, he knew that he would speedily be overtaken.

"Bring him along, you chaps!" said Tom Merry. "We'll investigate! You, too, Trimble! This has got to be sifted to the bottom!"

Lowther and Manners took an arm each, and Aubrey Racke was obliged to walk between them in the direction of the school chapel. His eyes fairly burned as they rested on Baggy Trimble, rolling cheerfully along with Tom Merry, apparently feeling that he was playing a very creditable part in the proceedings. As they neared the steps leading down to the vaults Tom Merry paused.

"If he's locked them in here, he's got the key on him!" he said grimly. "Search him, you fellows!"

While Manners and the Shell captain secured Racke, Monty Lowther ran swiftly through his pockets. He drew blank in the jacket, but the waistcoat yielded better results. The humorist of the Shell gave a whoop as he held up a rusty key.

"He must have pinched it from Taggy's lodge," he said excitedly. "Now deny what Trimble says, you rotter!"

Racke bit his lip savagely, but remained silent. So far as he could see, nothing could save him now—and all through the "blabbing" of Baggy Trimble!

Tom Merry descended the old stone steps, and inserted the key in the lock. As he turned it there was a muffled shout from within; but the thick oak deadened all sounds, and the prisoners—if any—could never have been heard in the quad.

The Shell captain swung open the door and peered expectantly into the pitchy blackness beyond. There was a sudden rush, and before he could speak or move he was bowled over by three or four fellows at once, and spread-eagled on the stone flags.

"What the thump— Look out, you idiots; it's me!" roared Lowther; but he was too late.

He went down with a crash, and found himself looking up into the grim face of the Australian captain. Perceiving that Manners held Racke, the rest of the Australians surged round him in a group, their faces grimy from their confinement, and fairly thirsting for vengeance.

"Look here!" roared Lockwood, seizing Racke's shoulder. "Which of you rotters locked us in there—or were you all in it?"

"Yow! Gerroff my chest, blow you!" gasped Tom Merry. "I tell you we came to the rescue. Give a chap a chance to explain."

"Great snakes! It's Merry!" gasped Charlie Hill, staring down at him in amazement. "Let him get up, you chaps; he's not the culprit, that's certain."

"Yow—wow! My collar's busted, and the stud's gone down my neck!" groaned Lowther.

"That's the rotter!" said Tom Merry, answering Charlie Hill's unspoken question. "We've just managed to squeeze the truth out of him, with Trimble's aid, and we came dashing to the rescue. If this is the kind of thanks we get—"

"Awfully sorry, old man," said Charlie Hill, grinning, and helping to dust the Shell captain down. "Lend a hand, you fellows. We've evidently handled these chaps for no reason. Let's straighten 'em up a bit!"

Under the kindly ministrations of the visitors, the Terrible Three soon reduced their rumpled garments to order again, and attention was focused on the struggling Racke. Manners,

with two of the Aussies, had the cad in a good grip, and he had no chance of getting clear.

"We owe you fellows an apology," said Tom Merry quietly. "This is the howling cad who was responsible for the kidnapping stunt yesterday, and this is his idea of a joke, on the eve of the match!"

"But this chap hasn't a mole; he wasn't the one who took the lead," said Hill, mystified.

"No; he got someone else to take the part of Grand Master, as Trimble calls it, for safety, probably an acquaintance in the village," said Tom Merry grimly. "But we've got Trimble's evidence that the Black Gang originated in Racke's study, and we know that Racke has been bribing Trimble to keep his mouth shut—lots of fellows have remarked on it. And just now, though he denied locking you up in the vaults, he'd got the key in his pocket all the time!"

"Oh!" said Charlie Hill, in a very altered voice. "I don't think we want much more evidence, do you?"

"If we want to prove it right up to the hilt, we can soon rout out some of the robes and things from Racke's study," said Tom Merry. "Monty, suppose you run up with one of these chaps, and see if you can find anything? Fair play's a jewel, and we'll give even Racke a chance!"

"Good wheeze, old chap!" said Lowther. "Come on, Lockwood!"

The two juniors disappeared towards the School House, whence they returned in a few minutes, each bearing a robe and cloak.

"These came from Racke's study," said Lowther quietly. "We found them in the bottom of the cupboard."

"That's the kind of thing they wore, sure enough," said Hill, examining the garments.

"What price this mask?" asked Lowther, fishing a piece of crepe from his pocket.

"There's no doubt that this fellow was in it, and it looks as if he was the ringleader," said Hill, nodding.

"Good enough," said Tom Merry coolly. "Now to decide what we'll do with him. From what I know of Racke, I've no doubt the idea originated from him, and he seems to have undertaken this little stunt all on his own."

"He did it well," said Andrews. "We thought somebody had fallen down the steps and hurt themselves, and then before we could turn round, the door slammed on us!"

"How long did you intend to leave us down there, you rotter?" asked Hill grimly.

"Not—not long!" stammered Racke, in a frenzy of fear. "I—I—don't take me to the Head, you fellows; he'd expel me! Anythin' but that!"

Tom Merry's lip curled scornfully.

"If Hill's agreeable, we'll handle you ourselves," he said.

"Rather!" said Hill quickly. "I'd sooner it was managed without a fuss."

"Good man!" said Monty Lowther approvingly. "Now, Racke, we're going to put you through it—you might as well tell the truth at once."

"I—I was thinkin' of keepin' you chaps there all night," said Racke miserably, "an' lettin' you out at dawn. I—I wanted to put you off form, so that St. Jim's would win to-morrow. You see—"

"You awful rotter!" ejaculated Tom Merry.

"I—I've got a bet on the match, an' if I lose I'm in deep water!" muttered Racke.

"Serve you jolly well right!" said Lowther angrily. "I don't want these fellows to lick us; but if they do, that'll be a consolation, anyway!"

"That—that's all," said Racke. "I was in a corner. I had to get out somehow. All I ask is that you don't take me to Dr. Holmes; he'd probably chuck me out on my neck!"

"Let's deal with him here and now," suggested Andrews.

"I put it to the visitors," said Tom Merry. "They are entitled to decide the fate of the cringing worm before them!"

"I suggest a bumping, the frog's-march, and running the gauntlet," chimed in Monty Lowther.

"Hear, hear! Get hold of him!"

There was no doubt as to the hearty agreement with which the Australians received that suggestion.

"Gather round, you fellows. That's good enough!" said Lockwood.

Racke was surrounded in a twinkling, and the Terrible Three lent a willing hand. There were nine of the Aussies, some of them having remained in the studies and escaped imprisonment, but there was more than enough to deal with half a dozen Rackes.

The helpless schemer was whirled aloft and allowed to drop with a resounding bump on the hard, unsympathetic flagstones. The process was repeated, each bump being accompanied by a loud howl from Racke, till six had been administered, and Racke landed for the last time, roaring.

Monty Lowther jammed a clod unceremoniously in his mouth, whereupon the cad choked and spluttered, and ejected grass and mould in the process.

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"Frog's-march!" chirruped Tim Richardson; and Racke was grasped securely, and frog-marched for a considerable distance, returning to the spot from which he had started. By the time the frog's-march was over Racke was feeling that life was hardly worth living, and he was gasping and grunting as if for a wager. But there was worse to come, as he speedily discovered.

The juniors lined up in two rows, and Manners started the cad from one end of the line with a hefty kick. As Racke stumbled and staggered down the avenue, knotted handkerchiefs rained down upon him from all sides, till he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels. He was turned at the other end and forced to dash between the lines again, after which he sank down on the grass, utterly spent, and looking like the beaten rascal he was.

"I think he's had enough," said Tom Merry grimly surveying the gasping junior. "And now for Trimble!"

"Yarough! Keep off, you rotters!" howled Trimble, taken quite by surprise.

He had joined in the ragging of Racke with keen enjoyment, paying off a number of old scores against his "pal" Aubrey, but he had not expected his turn to come after.

"Let him off, you chaps," grunted Manners. "He's more fool than rogue, and I don't think he was a member of the Black Gang—was he, Hill?"

"No; I should have known him again if he had been. Even a robe couldn't hide that waist measurement!" grinned Charlie Hill. "Better let him go!"

"A bumping for blackmailing won't do him any harm!" said Tom Merry. "We can let him off the rest if you like."

"Leggo! Yah! Yow-wow-woop! Fire! Murder!"

Trimble let off a series of ear-splitting roars as he was seized and subjected to a severe bumping—which was intended to teach him the evil of blackmailing, though it is doubtful if it succeeded in its object. After the half-dozen had been administered, Baggy was allowed to sprawl on the grass and roar, which he did with great vehemence.

"Well, that's that!" gasped Tom Merry, grinning at Hill. "I don't think you'll be troubled with the Black Gang again, and I hope this won't affect your game to-morrow!"

"Oh, rot!" grinned Hill, as he strolled back to the School House with the rest. "I'm glad the mystery's cleared up. Now we can play our hardest to-morrow, and do our best to land Racke in the mess he was speaking about!"

"And he deserves it, too!" said Tom Merry warmly. "Still, you can rely on us to put a spoke in your wheel if it's humanly possible!"

And, after exchanging cheery chaff on the subject of the morrow's encounter, the juniors dispersed to their respective studies.

CHAPTER 11.

The Fight for the Ashes!

THE morning was warm and sunny when the two teams turned up for the big event.

Dr. Holmes strolled on the ground with Lord Eastwood, who had come down unexpectedly, having put off business for the occasion. His lordship shook hands with each of the Australians, and then with the St. Jim's team. He smiled to find his second son in their ranks.

"Hallo, patah!" said Arthur Augustus cheerily. "This is an unexpected pleasuah, bai Jove! You'll p'robably see me make a centuwy—"

"Ahem! Quite so, Arthur!" observed Lord Eastwood, stifling a chuckle. "I shall see you after the match, my boy!"

"I wondah if Cousin Ethel has turned up?" asked Gussy breathlessly. "I forgot to ask the patah. Quite possibly she came down with him in the cah, you know. Can any of you fellows spot her?"

"There she is!" said Figgins suddenly.

The juniors turned to where Cousin Ethel sat, looking very pleased, in a deck-chair, and as they looked, she waved. They waved back, and Figgins, apparently for no reason, blushed deeply. He determined on the spot that he would do something worth doing that day. With Cousin Ethel's eye to behold his deeds, Figgie felt that he could easily beat the Australians off his own bat.

But the preliminaries were over at last, and Tom Merry spun the coin.

"Heads!"

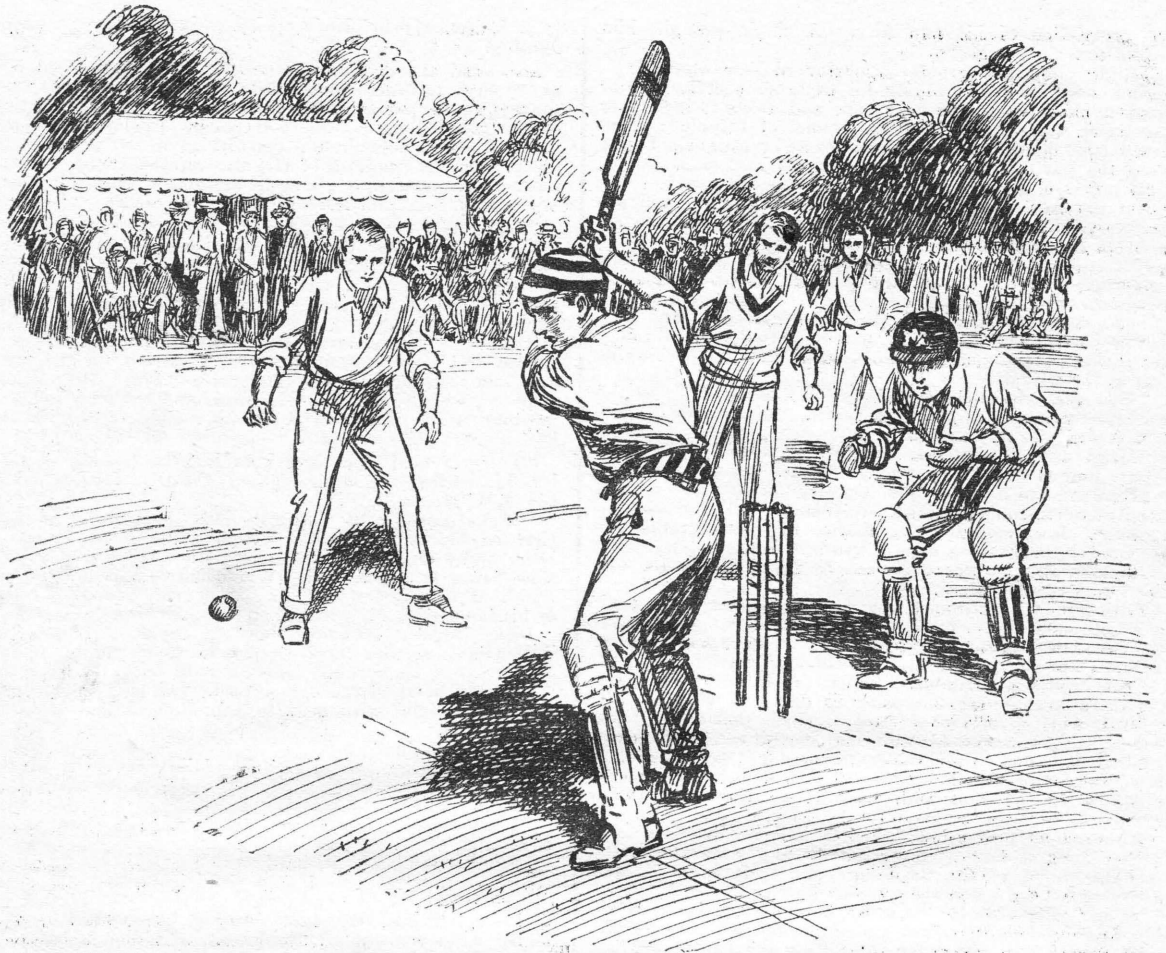
"Hard lines, Hill!" grinned Tom Merry. "It's tails. We bat. Get your pads on, Talbot!"

The St. Jim's team repaired to the pavilion, and Charlie Hill led his men into the field.

There was a roar of cheering and a storm of hand-clapping as Tom Merry and Talbot, looking very trim in their flannels, strode out to the wickets.

Tom Merry took the first over, and Hill tossed the ball to McLean. With a lightning delivery from the latter the game commenced.

During the first few overs the batsmen were extremely



George Figgins had got his eye in, and the Australians were treated to a display of batting that filled them with alarm, and gave them more leather-hunting than they had had for weeks. The New House junior, his eyes gleaming and his mouth set grimly, wielded his bat like a flail amongst the bowlers! (See Chapter 11.)

wary, expecting all sorts of traps and wiles from their opponents, but after a while they began to treat the bowling with less respect. Tom Merry opened the scoring with a slashing drive to the boundary off Dicky Steele, and there was a round of applause.

Talbot began to hit, and the runs piled up at quite a merry rate. The bowling appeared to be feeling the strain, and when a loose ball came down from Dicky Steele, Talbot fairly slogged it into the deep. But he gave a gasp to see a white-clad figure trotting, without effort, to meet the ball, and bring off a difficult catch with a quick leap.

"S'that?"

Talbot grinned ruefully and left the crease. Blake succeeded him, and opened with caution. It was evident that he could not take liberties with the Australian bowling, unless he wanted to be caught napping as Talbot had been. For all his care, however, a ball from Michael McLean curled round his bat, and there was an ominous crash from the rear.

Jack Blake did not need to be informed that he had been clean bowled for 3. He passed Kangaroo on his way back to the pavilion.

"Keep your eyes peeled, Kangy! They're as full of tricks as a lot of monkeys!"

"Trust me!" responded Kangaroo grimly.

The Shell fellow kept his end up easily enough at first, and was tempted to begin hitting. His very first effort was snapped at slip by Charlie Hill, and Kangaroo left with a very glum expression on his face.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, swinging his bat elegantly, arrived at the crease and took centre. He grinned reassuringly at Tom Merry as he prepared to take his first ball. Michael McLean, his slow smile in evidence, sent the ball down, and there was an immediate crash.

"How's that?"

"Out!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, miserably surveying the wreckage behind him. "Bai Jove, I'm awfully sowwy, Tom Merry! I—I had weally no ideeah wheeah that ball went!"

"Hard luck, old chap!" said Tom manfully. "Tell Figgins to be careful, for goodness' sake!"

"Yaas, wathah! Wely on me, deah hoy!"

If Figgins had come in to bat with the eyes of the whole world upon him, he would not have felt half so nervous as he did now, in the knowledge that Cousin Ethel's glance was fixed on his lanky figure. But he backed up his skipper resolutely through the over, and determinedly refused to hit the most tempting deliveries of Dicky Steele.

Steele specialised in a ball which fairly howled to be hit, but seemed bound to travel in one direction—where a pair of "carpet-bag" hands were waiting for it. Figgy played himself in coolly, and then took his opportunity. Tom Merry had been adding runs slowly, and the total stood at 32 for four. When the bowling came to Figgins again, the New House junior opened his broad shoulders and drove it straight to the boundary.

"Good man, Figgy!" gasped Tom Merry, his face lighting up.

Figgins had got his eye in now, and during the next few minutes the Australians were treated to a display of batting that filled them with alarm, and gave them more leather-hunting than they had had for weeks.

Figgins, his eyes gleaming and his mouth set grimly, wielded his bat like a flail amongst the bowlers.

He lifted the ball out of the ground for 6, and cut it away immediately after for 4. He snicked it past the wicket-keeper, in spite of Georgie Horton's vigilance. Hill changed the bowling, but all was grist that came to George Figgins' mill at that moment. There was scarcely a ball sent down but what he smote it hard in one direction or another—and always where there was no fieldsmen placed to retrieve it.

The sweat was pouring off the batsmen when the fifty and then sixty were passed, but Tom Merry's face was jubilant.

"Good old Figgy!" he gasped. "You're batting like Hobbs himself!"

Figgins was enjoying himself, and rapidly approaching

the completion of his own fifty. A single brought him within six.

"Right out of the ground!" murmured Tom Merry.

And, as if he were obeying his captain's orders, Figgins stepped coolly up to the next ball, and drove it high over the ropes. He blushed at the round of clapping which greeted his effort, but his face lit up as he caught a flutter from the pavilion steps. Cousin Ethel's face was radiant with pleasure.

But the Australians pulled up their socks now, and the very next ball took Figgy's off-stump as clean as a whistle; whereat Figgy grinned and departed.

Redfern and Levison fell speedily to Michael McLean's deliveries, and the rest of the batsmen could make little headway.

The last wicket fell with the total at exactly 100; and Tom Merry carried his bat for 23, having batted right through the innings, playing second fiddle, so to speak, while Figgins was at the wicket.

"You chaps have done well!" said Charlie Hill, as the cricketers adjourned for a light lunch. "Your man Figgins is a terror, and no mistake!"

"Hear, hear!" chortled Fatty Wynn; and the School House juniors were in hearty agreement.

Lockwood and Andrews, looking very business-like, opened the Australian innings, and Fatty Wynn and Talbot went on to bowl. Lockwood speedily showed his form, getting his runs with exasperating ease. Andrews, however, was soon in difficulties, and was dismissed by Fatty Wynn for two runs.

With Michael McLean at the wickets, the score mounted, and 20 rattled up. Thirty followed it at a good speed. Lockwood was fairly going, but McLean gave a chance off Talbot's bowling, and Lowther held it safely.

Then ensued a partnership which, try as they might, the St. Jim's bowlers were powerless to dissolve. Charlie Hill, with a wide repertory of strokes which defied the traps which Tom Merry set for him, batted with calm confidence, while Lockwood, with his elegant, care-free style, accumulated runs with almost ridiculous ease. The bowlers toiled manfully in the sun, and, with 91 on the board, were rewarded.

Kerr put up a slow ball, which Hill left a little too late, with the result that he played it on to his wicket, to the ineffable relief of the fieldsmen. He had made 30, and appeared set for as many more as he liked.

"Tim" Richardson's sprightly play increased the total; but Lockwood had the bowling again, and this time, Kerr, with a cool grin, succeeded in shifting the bails.

"Well bowled, Kerr!"

There was a whole-hearted roar as Lockwood left the crease, and hope was reborn in the home side.

Kerr bowled a little longer, but without further success; and then the regular bowlers took charge again. Without doubt, however, the breaking-up of the innings was due to the Scottish junior. The Australians demonstrated that their "tail" was non-existent, but the innings closed at last for 132.

"Not bad!" remarked Blake. "But there's not a great deal of time left, you fellows. If we make anything like a decent score, the match will be drawn!"

"Fraid so," said Tom Merry. "Still, there's time if we play up. Come on, Talbot!"

Tom Merry and Talbot commenced the St. Jim's second innings with the intention of making runs, and making them quickly. At 20 the Shell captain was bowled by Michael McLean; and Blake came in, and the runs accumulated swiftly.

Kangaroo had a bright innings, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, joining him, made ample amends for the "duck" he had collected in the first innings.

Kangaroo left at forty, and then Gussy and Figgins took the score to sixty-five before the latter was out to a brilliant catch on the boundary. The bowling was maintained at a deadly level, and the last few batsmen scraped and floundered in trying to keep up their ends. It was left for Gussy to pass the eighty mark for the side with a really exquisite late cut—and with the very next ball, Torrance took Fatty Wynn's wicket and closed the innings.

Gussy was cheered warmly for his valiant stand, but Tom Merry looked a little glum as he surveyed the total during the interval for tea.

"A hundred and eighty-two makes us exactly fifty ahead!" he remarked. "We've got to get them out for under that, and inside an hour, too!"

Charlie Hill was in a mood of pronounced optimism, feeling that his team was more than capable of knocking off the required fifty runs in an hour. The St. Jim's bowlers, however, cherished other notions. On the face of it, a victory for the Australians, possibly for the loss of only half their wickets, seemed very probable. But if they were

to be beaten, the St. Jim's cricketers intended to go under fighting.

Lockwood and Andrews, "the long and the short of it," as Monty Lowther humorously remarked, opened the innings again, but this time there was a startling variation in the proceedings. Lockwood completely misjudged the flight of Fatty Wynn's first delivery, and the wicket went down. One for nothing! McLean refused to be bowled, but was tempted into giving Kangaroo a catch off Fatty Wynn's bowling, and left with five to his credit.

Charlie Hill came in, and Fatty's Wynn's eyes gleamed as he watched the Australian take centre. He took the ball in his podgy palm, and came trotting grimly up to the crease. His arm swung over, and the ball curled round the bat and neatly removed the middle stump, leaving the wicket with a gap-toothed look.

"By Jove!" ejaculated Hill. "Well bowled, Wynn!" And, still looking a little dazed, he strode off the pitch and was succeeded by the diminutive "Tim" Richardson. Andrews was disposed of soon after, and batsman followed batsman, Fatty Wynn being in irresistible form with the ball, though the score rose.

"Thirty!" said Tom Merry at last, as the eighth man lost his wicket, the stumps going down in a heap before the New House bowler.

"Richardson's still batting; but there goes Drew!" chortled Monty Lowther a few moments later. Laurance Drew had a reputation as a stone-waller, but a particularly slow "swerver" from Fatty Wynn had caught him in two minds as to whether to come out or not, and as a result of his indecision, his wicket had crashed over.

Dicky Steele, the slow bowler, replaced him. The Australians seemed now to be in a desperate plight. Steele hit a single, but he was soon back facing Fatty Wynn, and he appeared mesmerised. The ball came tamely off the bat, and with a swift leap, Figgins had it safely in his palm.

"Last man in!"

Georgie Horton, rotund and cheerful as ever, with his cap perched jauntily in the midst of his auburn curls, took his stand coolly at the crease.

"Back you up, Tim!" he said to the batsman at the other end.

"Good man!" said Richardson.

Seventeen were needed, and the batsmen set out determined to get them. Richardson refused to be bottled up, and he punished the best bowling heavily. Ten were added amid tremendous excitement, and then a boundary put on 4 more.

"Two to tie, and 3 to win!" said Monty Lowther breathlessly.

"And five minutes to go!" said Blake, glancing at the clock.

Fatty Wynn gripped the ball and put all he knew into the next delivery. Georgie Horton coolly snicked it away, and the batsmen ran once desperately.

Fatty Wynn, his face set, sent down the ball. "Tim" Richardson, with a quiet grin, got his bat to it, and placed it beautifully into Figgins' waiting hands. The New House leader went down on the ground after it, but his hand was held high above his head. Richardson had fallen into the trap!

Fatty Wynn dashed forth exuberantly, and slapped Figgins hard on his bony back.

"Good old Figgy!" he roared. "You did it, old man!"

"Hurrah for the New House!" shouted Monty Lowther.

"Give Fatty a bit of the credit, you chaps!" grinned Figgins happily. "We've often worked that little stunt on you School House bouncers!"

Amid a thunder of cheering, the two New House juniors were hoisted on their comrades' shoulders and borne in triumph round the cricket field. The Australians joined in the cheering with a will.

"Congratulations, Merry!" grinned Charlie Hill. "You licked us fair and square; I never saw such bowling! Where did you get that chap Wynn from?"

"Wales!" gasped Tom, as he led the visitors to the pavilion, where Lord Eastwood awaited them. "But I thought you chaps had us taped at tea-time, by jingo!"

"So did we!" observed Hill, ruefully.

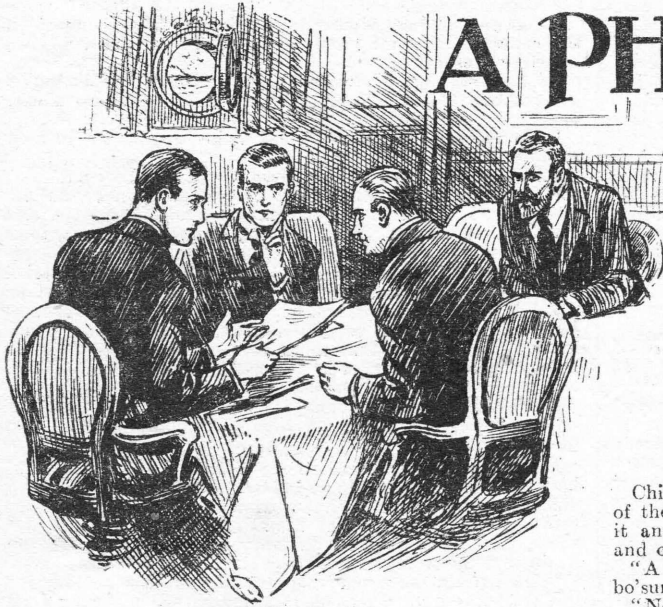
"Three cheers for the Australians, you fellows!" shouted Tom Merry, as the rest of the St. Jim's team foregathered by the pavilion. "As fine a lot of sportsmen as we wish to meet! Hip, pip—"

"Hurrah!"

Dr. Holmes' kindly old face was alight with joy, for he keenly appreciated the honour that the St. Jim's team had brought on themselves. He shook hands cordially with Charlie Hill and Tom Merry, but his words were drowned by the shouting. He held up his hand at last, and there was a hush.

(Continued on page 28.)

Although the Kaiser is in exile, he and his plotting ministers are powerful enough to plunge Europe into war again. But a gallant little band of Englishmen have something to say in the matter! Ferrers Lord is on the watch!



A PHANTOM THRONE

By Sidney Drew

An Amazing Story of Breathless Adventure and International Intrigue.

A Mysterious Voice!

"DOWN with her there!"

Val gave the order calmly enough. Over his shoulder he saw the burning blanket fall and catch on the ladder and the flames leap upwards towards the steel door as the trickle of petrol from above took fire.

"If Ching keeps up to time it's the first bit of luck we've had yet," he added.

There did not seem to be much luck about it, but it struck Val that the besiegers would not be on the watch yet. They knew that the underground chamber had a sea outlet and that would give them a good idea as to its size. If they could not guess it they had the baron there to tell them that they would have to burn a good deal of petrol before they made the place hot enough to drive out the invaders of Klarsparfen.

The channel was full of water to within two feet of its edge, for the water rose and fell with the tide, and this was in their favour as it meant that the sea-gate had not to be lowered so far. Barry O'Rooney saturated a blanket and tried to throw it over the flames to mask the glare from shining out above the descending door.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SO FAR!

FERRERS LORD, millionaire and world traveller, entertains the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary aboard his yacht, the *Lord of the Deep*. In the privacy of Ferrers Lord's cabin these Ministers of H.M. Government discuss informally with the millionaire and Rupert Thurston the activities of the Royalist party in Germany. Lord declares that the plot to restore the Kaiser to the throne is likely to be put into operation at any moment, and adds that should Germany be plunged into civil war, the whole of Europe would be involved in consequences too horrible to contemplate. So strong is the proof the millionaire submits to support his statement that the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary are convinced that swift action must be taken to avert this calamity. Ferrers Lord then suggests a way out of the trouble, and, although it is fraught with much risk to those who throw in their lot with him, the millionaire answers for the loyalty and patriotism of all aboard the *Lord of the Deep*, and offers to take that risk.

Under the command of Midshipman Val Hilton, Prince Ching Lung, David Ap Rees, Benjamin Maddock, Barry O'Rooney, and a number of ordinary seamen proceed to an island named Klarsparfen, where, in accordance with the orders of Ferrers Lord, they meet James Wigland, an interpreter and ex-spy, who leads them to a rectangular underground chamber—a one-time German submarine base—built below an old mill.

They are investigating its inner secrets when the mill is blown sky-high by Baron von Stolzenburg, who, it transpires, owns the island. The baron is made prisoner and taken into the underground chamber.

Later, Val and his companions are discovered by a party of Royalists who have forgathered on the island to meet the ex-Kaiser, and in consequence are forced to beat a hurried retreat to their underground stronghold. The baron pleads neutrality and Val releases him. The Germans, however, make a desperate attempt to roast the caged-up party with burning petrol, what time Ching Lung is absent, endeavouring to find out the lie of the land.

(Now read on.)

Ching Lung was there, and at the very instant the top of the door dipped beneath the surface, he scrambled over it and swam in. Very slowly the weighty mass of steel and concrete went up again.

"A remarkably dirty trick, Ben," said the prince, as the bo'sun helped him up. "No sand in the place, eh?"

"Not enough to fill an egg-boiler, sir, and that's the cussedness of things, souse me, for there's enough of it on top to start another Sahara desert."

"And no fire extinguishers?"

"Only salt water, sir," said Prout, "and it's not much good giving that stuff to petrol."

Round the foot of the ladder it was like a furnace, and the heat was already growing intense. Val saw a two-fold danger, and the first was the more pressing.

"Get some boards and wrap wet blankets around them," he said. "We must try to keep the stuff off the water or we shall be on fire from end to end. I wonder if the brutes are bargaining for that?"

O'Rooney, Maddock, and Wigland were quick to obey. They had plenty of spare planks and a good supply of blankets. Using the dinghy they made a little barricade.

"I say, Ching," said Val, "I'm getting a bit nervous. The lifting gadget is electric, as you know, and the accumulators are well away from the man-hole, but supposing the heat fused something? Would the gate stay jammed where it is, or would it go down with a run?"

"That's a jolly important question, son, but you're asking a novice," said the prince. "I know a little about electricity, but only enough to astonish me that the Huns who designed this place could ever get the thing to work at all with so little power. If something fuses and it doesn't drop, it will be the very nastiest thing that ever happened to us. Give me a German fortress any day in preference."

This was the second danger Val had foreseen. Fire can only live, like human beings and everything that breathes air, where there is oxygen, and the underground chamber contained only a limited supply of that life-giving gas which the blazing petrol was swiftly exhausting. They could only obtain fresh air by opening the sea-gate, and if anything occurred to render that impossible, they would not have the chance of a dog in a lethal chamber.

"Good egg," cried Dave, "we're not roasted out of our dungeon yet, boys, and I've got a cheerful hope that the pigs are running out of juice!"

The flames were not leaping so high. Ching Lung did not share Dave's hopes, for he guessed that the steel door and the concrete round it had grown too hot for the men to approach it with tins of petrol without risking an explosion. But he felt sure that if they intended to persevere, they were brainy enough to overcome such a trifling difficulty.

The fire and the heat had certainly diminished, and O'Rooney and the bo'sun seized the opportunity to push the dinghy forward and empty several pails of sea-water over the barricade of planks and blankets.

"Phew! This is a jolly hot job, bhoy," said Barry O'Rooney, "but they're an addled-brained pack of rogues after all, Ben, unless they don't mean to frizzle us to cinders, for they could have done it in wance or sent us scuttling to the dure wid our hair afire to surrender."

The bo'sun nodded.

"Absolutely, souse me," he said, wiping his hot forehead. "They lighted the stuff too soon. If they'd sluiced

down fifty or sixty gallons before they chucked down the light, we'd have been a sight warmer than we are. Somehow, I can't think they mean to murder us out and out, souze me!"

"Perhaps not, bedad, but ut looks loike a deliberate attempt," said Barry O'Rooney. "Oi hope for Misther Val's sake ut won't finish in having to throw up the sponge, for he's a grand lad and a fighter. A big mess and a moighty bad mess ut looks to me, though Oi wouldn't tell him so for a bushel of bank-notes!"

Wigland began to cough, and all of them began to feel an unpleasant dryness at the back of their throats. The flames sank still lower, but the heat and the stench of petrol was becoming intolerable. It was difficult to breathe, and the air they did breathe had lost much of its oxygen.

"We can't stand much of this, Ching," said Val. "We shall have to open up or stifle."

"What do you expect then, son?"

"Help," said Val. "That's why I mean to hang on until the last. If the dinghy would carry us all, I would make a dash for it, but she's too small. Besides, we should come under their fire at once!"

"Perhaps they haven't any fire—but I'm talking nonsense, for they sent a bullet through the hole they bored. It's a fact that the dinghy won't hold half of us. Even if it would, unless we got away without being seen, I don't think that would help us very much. They have wireless on their 'plane, and they'd coon have a boat out after us. Phew! I must have a drink of water, for this atmosphere is getting vile!"

Wigland brought a pail of fresh water and a cup, and they all drank greedily. The air was filled with little black flakes, greasy and evil-smelling. To get away from the heat they had retreated towards the sea-gate, and the black flakes falling on their hands and faces gave them the appearance of negroes.

No more petrol was poured through, and at last they heard three sullen knocks on the steel-door of the man-hole.

"Herr Midshipman," called Von Stolzenburg's powerful voice.

Val went forward.

"I hear you, baron," he shouted.

"Goot, and I am glad to hear you, Herr Midshipman," answered the baron. "I gif you my word as a gentleman that I am keeping my word and taking in this no active part. Again I offer you honourable surrender. You enough haf done for the sake of honour and gallantry. My comrades here tell me it is the last dime the offer will be made. Better to come out, Herr Midshipman. For you it is hopeless, hopeless!"

"Will you grant a truce of five minutes?" asked Val.

There were faint mutterings and growlings above, and then Von Stolzenburg's voice was heard again.

"The truce is given if the Herr Midshipman will promise in those five minutes not to attempt to escape."

"It's a promise," said Val, and then took a drink of water. "What's to be done? If they send down more petrol we shall either have to open up or stifle. We weren't sent here to die, so what's to be done?"

He looked at his grimy companions, and all were silent except Barry O'Rooney.

"Bedad, there's nobody here to say that but your honour's own self," he answered, with a salute.

"Even if we open up a foot or two it needn't mean they've got us, chum," said Dave. "They need a boat for that. Let's stick it out for a bit longer. Never give in until you're done, old son, and the referee has counted you out."

"That's just what I intended to do," said Val. "I've got one other flimsy plan. The dinghy won't take us, but the raft will. If it's more petrol, the place won't be habitable in another ten minutes, and you all know what must happen if we open up a foot or two. There'll be a tremendous rush of hot air towards the gap, and that will pull the flames towards us, and the brutes are sure to give us plenty of petrol this time. The moment I speak to the baron, work like mad. Bring the dinghy round to the front, and tie her to the raft, and put some grub and water aboard."

With only three minutes to go, no one suggested that they should break the brief truce, though those three minutes might have been more precious than diamonds. Val knew that what Von Stolzenburg had said was perfectly true, and that their position was a hopeless one, and the Germans knew it.

The tide was beginning to ebb, but only slowly. In another hour it would be racing down the channel swiftly enough to carry the raft and the dinghy rapidly past the island; but the first attack of petrol, though only a mild

one, told Val that they could not hold out a third of that time.

"Now," he said.

As he moved towards the ladder he saw a wide crack in the concrete caused by the great heat.

"Herr Baron!"

"I am listening, Herr Midshipman Hilton," replied Von Stolzenburg; "and I hope that your answer will be a wise one."

"We refuse to surrender," said Val—"any terms, in fact, so do your best or your worst."

"I am sorry, Herr Midshipman," said the baron. "You are brave and generous, Herr Midshipman, but you are not wise. I have told you it is hopeless and impossible, and also it is so useless. With regrets, then, I wish you farewell."

Val clenched his hands and turned away. Had he tried to aid the others he would only have impeded them, so he stood still. He could scarcely believe now that Ferrer's Lord had forsaken or forgotten them, for their very silence must have told him that there was something amiss badly. His black-faced comrades were working with desperate speed, and every vestige of flame had gone.

Suddenly the midshipman gave a start and looked round. "I'm losing my wits," he thought, "going crazy. I'm going as mad as a hatter!"

He had almost expected to see Ferrer's Lord standing at his elbow, for he seemed to have heard the millionaire's deep voice as clearly and distinctly as if the speaker had been standing within a yard of him. Of course, no one was there, and it was only a wild fancy born of an overwrought brain, but the words so strangely clear still ran in his ears:

"The bale in the green wrapping, if you have not lost it."

Val hesitated for a second, thinking he was suffering from a momentary fit of insanity, and then ran under the archway where the lighter bales and boxes had been placed. There was one bale there covered with waterproof canvas and secured by leather straps.

"Hi, Dave!" he shouted. "Give me a hand with this! Get hold and help me to drag it out!"

"What is it? What do you want it for? Unless it's something to eat or drink, it won't be any good!"

"Never mind that, but give me a hand," said Val.

The bale, which was weighty, was hauled out, and Val unfastened the straps and threw back the covering. Dave opened his mouth and stared as if he had seen a spectre.

"Why—why, there's nothing in it," he gasped, "and it seemed to weigh a ton!"

The canvas wrapping and straps lay on the concrete floor, but Dave's astounded eyes saw nothing else, but Val understood and knew. He leaned forward, his outstretched hands resting apparently on air, and shouted:

"Ching, Prout, O'Rooney—here, quick!"

And then his hands clutched something, and then, by some astounding magic or juggling trick, Dave saw his chum hold up a long grey cloak, which he pitched at Dave.

"We're not beaten yet!" cried Val. "Here's the invisible stuff, lads, bales of it, cloaks for all, gloves and stockings, and enough cloth, I think, to cover up the dinghy and the raft and camouflage them. Pull it out and see!"

It was the bottom roll of cloth that had caused the bale to feel so heavy. The underside was grey, but the upper surface was treated with some curious dye or paint that had no visible effect on the human eye, or only a very slight one. It was not perfectly invisible, for when he had recovered a little from his astonishment Dave could see it faintly but quite clearly enough to make him wonder why he had not seen it before.

"Well, that's the limit!" he said. "The last and absolute one!"

"That's what I thought when I first hit up against it," said Ching Lung. "But when the chief and our pal Hal Honour put their heads together, there are no limits. If they'll give us time, we might squeeze out of this, Val; but I don't know where we shall squeeze to. Why didn't you think of it before? If I'd had one of these cloaks I could have heard every word the ex-Kaiser and the other plotters said."

"I didn't know what was in the bales. Give the others a hand, and I'll see what's happening."

Nothing was happening at the moment, except that Prout and O'Rooney were stretching the cloth over the dinghy and the raft. Three strips had been cut off, and Wigland was wrapping them round the skulls. The attack had not been resumed, and Val guessed the reason of the delay. The Germans were waiting for the place to cool, having discovered their first mistake. They wanted to get enough petrol down before igniting it, to make certain of a quick

surrender, unless the stubborn British pig-dogs preferred to be roasted to death.

Suddenly came a gush of strong-smelling liquid, and then a steady stream of it, and Val could hear a clattering of cans above. Though he did not know it, the aeroplane had just returned to the island with a further supply of spirit, for she had not brought much with her when she had carried the plotters over to Klarspargen to meet their exiled Kaiser.

They were using it lavishly now, and the barriers could not keep it much longer from trickling under the barricades and into the channel, and then when the light was applied the whole chamber, from the water-gate to the ladder, would be ablaze.

"All ready, sir?" said Wigland.

"Right," said Val. "You pull, Mr. O'Rooney, and I'll come in the dinghy with you and the prince. The raft will take the rest. Are you ready?"

"We're ready, but can you see us?" asked Dave.

"Of course I can see you, so pull the hood over your face. Keep yours up till I'm in the boat, Mr. O'Rooney."

"An' then, sor?"

"As soon as we're out, keep under the bank."

Val put his hand on the lever. He could see the shapeless outlines of both the raft and the dinghy, and the black and greasy face of O'Rooney, who seemed to have lost both ears, and also the top of his head. He almost wished he could not see them so clearly; but then he remembered he knew they were there, and that the very fact that, with the exception of O'Rooney's face, they were so dim and hazy under the electric light, made the invention the very last miracle of human skill.

As the sea-gate began to descend, Val switched off the lights. The petrol was still splashing down, and all felt certain that the opening would be watched. Val put on a cloak and gloves, and used his flash-lamp to guide himself to the dinghy.

"Begging your pardon, your honour," said Barry O'Rooney, "but were the orders to pull up under the bank, or down under the toide? Oi'm just thinking that when the bastes set foire to all the juice they're after spilling, there'll be some hot stuff drifting down!"

"Up and then out," said Val. "If we could get round and down the other channel, we'd be a lot safer, for they'll never expect us to go that way. That's too much to ask, for you'll find the raft a dead weight!"

"Bedad, Oi can thry, sor," said Barry. "Oi've got two arms, bless the pigs; and they carry a bit of decent muscle."

"Sssh!" said Ching Lung, warningly. "She's down! Don't make a splash, Barry, but take her out gently!"

"As aisy as a soft-boiled egg," said Barry O'Rooney, glancing over his shoulder. "Purty dark, too, so we'd better lave before the illuminations start. Good-boie, you horrible-smelling cellar, you black, ugly petrol tank!"

Barry O'Rooney dipped the oars and they felt the jerk of the tightening hawser. He had to make several strokes before he moved the raft, but once in motion it came easily enough and slid into the open water behind the dinghy.

And Barry O'Rooney let it slide. It was a tense moment for all and especially for O'Rooney, for when he raised his hooded head he saw a man standing on the bank exactly above the water-gate. Unless he had been lying flat and leaning over dangerously, the watcher could not tell whether the gate was open or closed, for he could not see it and the mechanism worked so silently that his ears would not have warned him that it was being opened.

He seemed to be looking straight down at them, and that

is why Barry O'Rooney sat without stirring a finger, afraid that a single splash or the creaking of a rowlock would betray them.

The raft scraped against the side of the gate and stuck there, and with the swing of the tide the dinghy drifted to starboard and came up alongside the bank. The German dropped on hands and knees and looked over.

The very fact that the sculls were not moving warned the others that something serious was the matter. Only O'Rooney could see the watcher, and O'Rooney was almost certain that if the Hun could not see them he could see something that was puzzling him and making him suspicious.

Ching Lung had expected the wind to blow stronger as the night advanced, but instead of that, it sunk to a light breeze that scarcely rippled the water near the bank though it was choppy enough further out. Prout had his hand on the edge of the groove into which the gate fitted, and could have pushed the raft clear if he had known what was wanted.

"Bedad, the ould moon will be out in a minute and shoining as bright as day," thought Barry O'Rooney with an inward groan, "and then the old sour-krauter will spot something afloat. That busts the orders on me, for Oi can't pull up or down ayther for the matter of that. You wool-gathering blatherskites astarn, why can't you use a bit of common sense and aise her off? For the love of Moike, give her wan little push."

Luckily, the raft eased off on her own account and every instant, as the slackening of the hawser told Barry she was in motion, he expected her to bump down on the dinghy with a sound that must convince the puzzled German that there was something afloat.

There was a hoarse shout and Barry thought it was all over, for the watcher jumped to his feet and pulled something that glistened out of the side pocket of his wide-skirted cloak. He turned and vanished, and Barry dug in the oars, made a couple of hefty pulls and rested again. The air smelt strongly of petrol.

Two men were on the bank now, and as their voices could be heard as they talked, it was plain to the others why their oarsman had been taking his time. Ching Lung alone caught a few snatches of the conversation.

"Can you see the boat yet?"

"No, I can't make her out," was the answer.

"The general's orders are that as soon as you sight her, flash your lamp. We'll free the petrol then. Bolt the swine-pigs. Only a dinghy—some planks—bound to go against the current—our men will sail wide of it and get the pig-dogs. No danger they'll suffocate? Ach, no! They'll bolt—bolt like scorched rabbits!"

Raft and dinghy were drifting, but with almost painful slowness. Ching Lung almost dislocated his neck in trying to see behind and upwards. The meaning of what he had heard was perfectly obvious to him. The Germans knew they had a dinghy and a raft. Only Von Stolzenburg could have told them so, and probably the baron did not think he was straining his promise to Val in giving them this information.

They had wirelessly for a boat, and as soon as she was seen, the signal would be given to drop the lighted match through the hole. It was to catch sight of that signal that the prince was straining his neck. He relieved the strain while he whispered the news to Val.

(The intrepid Britishers are in a tight place — but they are not done yet! Don't miss next week's extra-exciting instalment of this grand Sidney Drew serial, chums!)



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"FIGHTING FOR THE ASHES!"

(Continued from page 24.)

"I have an announcement to make, my boys!" he commenced. "As you are all excited over your victory, I will be brief. Lord Eastwood, who is present, as you see, has suggested that to celebrate the visit of our Australian friends, a kind of Rodeo shall be held here next Saturday, in which, his lordship suggests, there will be races for all kinds of mounts—even donkeys! Lord Eastwood has very kindly offered to place at our disposal several horses from his stable, and I am sure that the proposal will meet with your approval!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Cheers for Lord Eastwood!"

"Rather!"

There was no doubt but that the idea appealed to the St. Jim's juniors and their guests.

"I am aware that several of the Australians are skilled horsemen, and all can ride," continued the Head. "Most of you boys, too, can manage a horse, and I suppose you can all sit on a donkey—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the juniors, dutifully.

"I will announce further details later—and there is another announcement that I should like to make now, as well. You have all heard of Sir John Maxwell, who is a member of the board of governors, and who used to be captain of cricket while a boy at this school. He has decided to present a cup and shield to the victors in the match a fortnight hence between yourselves and Greyfriars, whom, I believe, you regard as your most formidable rivals. This is, so I understand, the hundredth encounter between Greyfriars' and St. Jim's juniors, and I hope to see my own boys as successful as they were to-day! I think that is all, excepting to express our approval of the sporting spirit shown by our opponents to-day in the usual manner—"

"Good old Australia!" roared Monty Lowther.

And the crowd of St. Jim's supporters roared their

satisfaction with the match and their adversaries until they were hoarse.

After the cheering had subsided a little, the two teams adjourned to the junior Common-room, where a stupendous spread was awaiting them. Cricketers and supporters fell to with great enjoyment, and Lord Eastwood dropped in unexpectedly to make a few remarks about the Rodeo. His remarks were greeted with shouts of satisfaction on all sides.

"Can I have my favourite—Silvahpoint?" asked Arthur Augustus, excitedly. "I'd like to wide him against the Australians, bai Jove!"

"Of course, Arthur," said Lord Eastwood, smiling. "You will all hear more about this from the Head. And now I must go—"

"I'll come to the gates, patah!" said Gussy, leaping up from his seat and upsetting a glass of ginger pop over Gore's trousers, whereupon Gore emitted a ferocious roar of rage, and only Lord Eastwood's presence saved Gussy from a mortal combat on the spot.

Blake, Herries, and Digby accompanied Gussy with his "patah" to the car, after which they returned to the Common-room in time to hear the speeches and drink the toasts.

"The Australians will leave us after the Rodeo, then," said Herries, as they walked to Study No. 6 later that evening.

"They've got to go on to Greyfriars," said Digby. "We shall have to run over and see that match, you fellows!"

"Hear, hear!" said Blake heartily.

"Hark!" said Herries.

And from the Common-room, where the festivities were still being kept up, came a roar:

"For they are jolly good fellows—"

And so ended the day of the great Test match, in excited anticipation of the events which were to be enacted during the following week, as a fitting culmination to Fighting For The Ashes!

THE END.

(Look out for the grand sequel to this yarn next week, entitled: "THE SCHOOLBOY SPORTSMEN!" By Martin Clifford. It's a ripper, chums, and no mistake!



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