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No. 1,093.
Vol. XXXV.
March 2nd, 1929.

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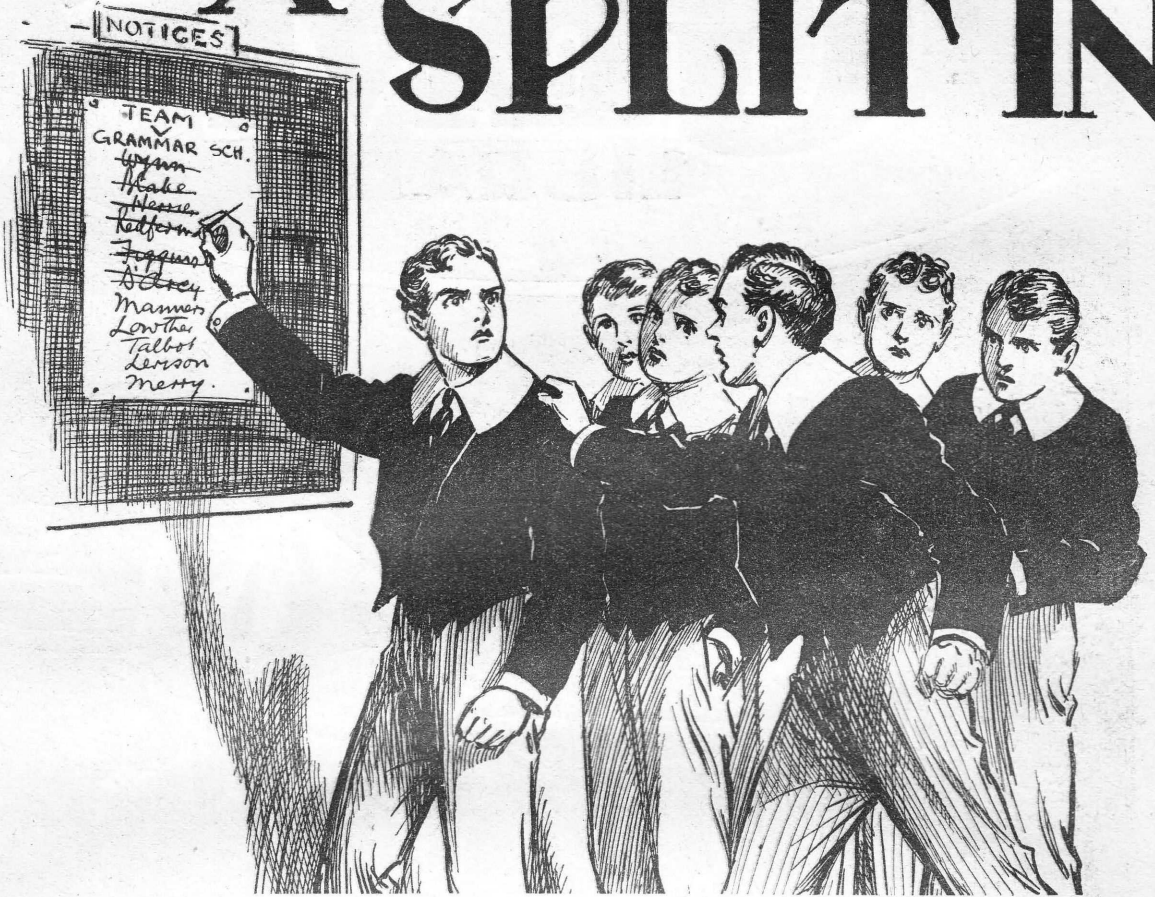


**"ANY OLD RAGS
AND BONES?"**

*(A lively incident from this week's fine school
story of Tom Merry & Co. at St. Jim's.)*

A STIRRING LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL STORY OF ST. JIM'S—

A SPLIT IN



The crafty schemers who are responsible for the split between the Shell and Fourth-Formers at St. Jim's might well congratulate themselves on the success of their plot. But the best-laid plans often go wrong, as the schemers at St. Jim's find out to their cost!

CHAPTER 1.

Rather Quer!

"HE, he, he!" Baggie Trimble emerged from Study No. 7 in the Shell passage at St. Jim's, and closed the door carefully after him. Then he drew from his pocket a crumpled slip of coloured paper, glanced at it, and gave vent to that gleeful snigger.

Evidently the sight of that scrap of paper gave Trimble great joy and satisfaction.

Three Shell fellows who happened to be coming along the passage, stopped and stared at him.

"Hallo! What's the joke, Trimble?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh!"

Baggie Trimble jumped.

He gave the Terrible Three a startled blink, and hurriedly shoved the slip of paper behind him.

Naturally the suspicions of Tom Merry and his chums were aroused at once. They knew Baggie Trimble.

"What's the joke, Trimble?" repeated Tom Merry, eyeing the fat youth keenly. "You've been up to something, you fat frog!"

"Oh, really, Merry—"

"What's he doing in a Shell study, anyway?" demanded Manners. "After what's happened I should think any Fourth cad would give this passage a wide berth—especially a fat funk like Trimble."

"Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!" grinned Lowther. "But what's that he's got— My hat! It's a Treasury note!"

And with a playful jerk Lowther relieved Baggie Trimble of the Treasury note.

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Trimble roared.

"Here, gimme my ten bob back!" he roared, making a vain clutch at it. "Why, you rotten beast—"

"Hold on!" said Lowther, putting the ten-shilling note behind him with one hand and holding the furious Trimble off with the other. "This wants investigating!"

"Phew! Yes, rather!" agreed Manners, frowning. "Trimble, where did you get that from? It was only this afternoon I heard you trying to squeeze a bob out of Mellish."

"Yah! Mind your own rotten business!" hooted Trimble. "Gimme my ten-bob note back!"

"But is it yours?" asked Lowther, shaking his head severely. "Your motto about findings being keepings has got you into trouble before to-day, my lad!"

"But it's mine, I tell you!" howled Trimble. "It came by post this tea-time—"

"You fat fibber! There was no letter for you—"

"I mean, Racke's just given it me," corrected Trimble hastily. "It's all right, I tell you—Racke gave it me!"

"Racke did?" yelled Lowther.

"Ye-es," gasped Trimble, eyeing the three rather uneasily. "So—so just hand it over, you cheeky rotters!"

"My hat!"

The Terrible Three regarded Trimble somewhat grimly now.

Though they knew that Trimble's ideas of right and wrong were a trifle hazy at times, it seemed as if the fat Fourth-Former had gone a little too far this time.

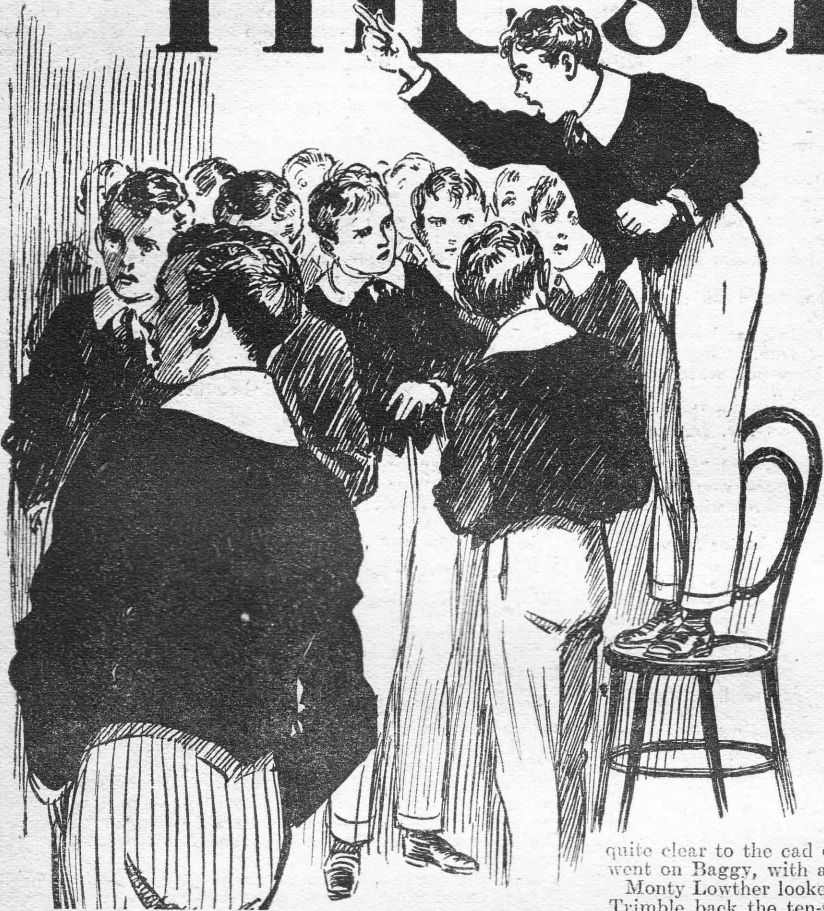
Being the most impecunious fellow in the Fourth, Baggie did not usually "sport" Treasury notes. In fact, he had never been known to have received one from home. Trimble's pater did not believe in supplying his hopeful son with limitless cash; a shilling or half-a-crown was the

—DEALING WITH THE WAR BETWEEN THE FOURTH AND SHELL!

THE SCHOOL!

By

Martin Clifford



Tom Merry looked astonished. "Of course you can!" he ejaculated. "But—well, you know what Trimble is, Racke. And we thought—"

"I don't want to know what you dashed well think!" snapped Aubrey Racke. "I gave Trimble the money, and I don't see how it concerns you!"

"That's right, Aubrey!" grinned Trimble. "Put the cheeky cads in their place! Nice thing if a chap can't lend a pal ten bob without interfering rotters chipping in, what?"

"You shut up, you fat fool!" hissed Racke.

"Oh, really, Aubrey, that's not the way to speak to a pal!" said Trimble loftily. "I'll thank you to be a bit more civil or—" He left the rest of that significant sentence unfinished, but it was evident from the look on Racke's face, that he had made his meaning

quite clear to the cad of the Shell. "Now then, Lowther," went on Baggy, with a smirk. "What about my ten bob?"

Monty Lowther looked at Tom Merry, and silently handed Trimble back the ten-shilling note.

Trimble sniggered. "He, he, he!" Trimble was a fellow who never could let well alone. He felt he had made the Terrible Three look small, and he wanted to rub it in.

"Oh, dry up!"

"Taken down a peg or two, what?" grinned Trimble, pocketing the note. "I say, you do look three beauties, I must say! You've got a prize nose, Tom Merry; you'll have a black eye to-morrow, Lowther, old man; and as for you, Manners, your chivvy looks as if it's slipped to one side. I say, better not let Ralton see— Here, leggo!"

Trimble ended with a roar as the Terrible Three, not being at all in the mood for his pleasant remarks, laid violent hands on him.

"Yarrooogh!"

"Up again!" gasped Tom Merry. "We'll teach the fat rotter to cheek the Shell!"

"Yoop!" howled Trimble. "Help! Leggo! I was only jo-joking! Ow-yow! Make 'em leggo, Racke! Make 'em leggo, or I'll—I'll— Yooop!"

Bump!

Racke was withdrawing into his study, but at Trimble's last words he paused.

"Help!" yelled Baggy frantically. "Help, Racke, you rotter, or I'll jolly well tell—"

"Let Trimble go, you cads!" snapped Racke, with a glare of fury at the Terrible Three. "Like your cheek to come here bullyin' and interferin'! Let Trimble go, and—"

Aubrey Racke got no farther. As one man the Terrible Three released Trimble and grasped the cad of the Shell. He yelled in sudden alarm, but he yelled in vain. He was grabbed and lifted, and then he was bundled unceremoniously on top of the sprawling Baggy Trimble.

"As you seem to be so thumping fond of Fourth-Formers," said Tom Merry grimly, "you can join him, Racke! Come on, chaps!"

extent of Trimble's usual remittances. Therefore, knowing the fat Fourth-Former as they did, the Terrible Three were not a little suspicious—especially in view of Baggy's attitude.

But he had now added to their suspicions by stating first that the note had come from home, and then that Racke—the wealthiest, but meanest, fellow in the Shell—had given it to him.

"Racke gave it you!" echoed Tom Merry, frowning. "Well, that's a bigger fib than the other, Baggy! I can see Racke giving ten bob away—especially to you!"

"I—I mean it's a loan!" said Baggy, glowering at Lowther furiously. "You see, I lent Racke ten bob last week—"

"You did? Oh, my hat!"

"Yes, I jolly well did!" hooted Baggy. "Why can't you mind your own rotten business! Gimme my note, you rotters! If you don't, I'll call Racke—"

"You needn't!" snapped Tom Merry. "We'll do that for you! In a way it isn't our business, but knowing you as we do—well, we'll make it our business."

Tom knocked sharply on the door of Racke's study, opened it swiftly, and glanced inside.

He had expected to find the room unoccupied, but to his surprise he found Racke standing close by the door—in fact, the door almost knocked Racke spinning as it opened.

Obviously the cad of the Shell had been listening to their discussion with Trimble. His face flushed crimson, and he glared at the surprised Terrible Three.

"Hallo! So you are in, Racke?" exclaimed Tom Merry, eyeing him curiously. "Look here, we've just caught this fat clump coming out of your study with a ten-bob note in his fist. He says you gave it him, Racke. Did you?"

"Mind your own business!" hissed Racke.

"What?"

"I did give it him!" snarled Racke, looking furiously at Trimble, who was grinning now. "Can't I please myself what I do with my money, Tom Merry?"

"Yoooop! You rotten cads!"

Leaving Aubrey Racke to waste his sweetness on the desert air, so to speak, the Terrible Three strolled on. But Tom Merry was frowning.

"What's the meaning of that, I wonder?" he said. "It isn't like Racke to hand out cash to anyone—much less Baggy Trimble. Nor is it like Racke to back up anyone, let alone that fat ass!"

"Just what I was thinking!" said Manners, nodding. "It looks queer! If Trimble's got Racke under his thumb in some way—"

"It's possible. Trimble's an unscrupulous young rotter!" agreed Tom. "He hasn't the sense to know right from wrong. Racke certainly appeared to be afraid of Trimble letting something out."

"Phew! You think those rotters may be responsible for all this trouble, Tom?"

Tom frowned again, and then he shook his head.

"Hardly. The Fourth think—or pretend to think—that we believe Lathom did burn those chess records, just to spite old Linton. Well, most of the Shell do; but I don't, for one. I think some fellow in the Fourth did it—someone with a grudge against Lathom."

"Trimble might—just the thing he would do to get his own back on Lathom," said Lowther.

"Yes, and the same applies to Mellish, and one or two other beauties in the Fourth" agreed Tom. "But as far as I can see Racke has no motive—he could scarcely have guessed it would lead to all this trouble."

"You think there's some connection between the burning of those silly records and that attack on Mr. Lathom this afternoon?" asked Manners, staring.

"No—scarcely that! But if the Fourth and Shell hadn't been at loggerheads Blake and his pals wouldn't have jumped to the conclusion that it was us three who assaulted Lathom in the woods."

"Cheeky cads! They ought to know us better than that!" grunted Manners indignantly.

"I know. But, after all, Lathom got us a licking all round, and they take that as the motive," went on the captain of the Shell, his eyes gleaming. "And—well, they themselves found my scarf and Lowther's cap on the spot where Lathom was assaulted. The evidence is pretty strong against us."

"Someone planted them there to get us into trouble!" said Manners.

"Of course they did!" said Tom grimly. "And it doesn't take much thinking over to see who it was. What about Lacy and his pals from the Grammar School?"

CHAPTER 2.

No Go!

"OH!"

"Phew!"

Both Manners and Lowther started.

It was only a short time since the assault on Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth, in Rylcombe Wood—the assault with which the Terrible Three had been charged by Jack Blake & Co. and their fellow Fourth-Formers. That accusation, needless to say, had not been received quietly. With the Shell and Fourth already in a state of antagonism, it had been quite sufficient to start a battle royal between the two Forms. Since then the combatants had been chiefly occupied with attending injuries they had received in the conflict; there had been no time to run over the events of the afternoon.

But now Tom Merry's suggestion brought the happenings back to his chums with a rush.

They remembered in a flash just where Lowther had lost his cap and Tom Merry his scarf. It was after their

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encounter with Lacy & Co., the rotters' brigade of the Grammar School, when Gordon Gay had unexpectedly arrived on the scene and turned the tables on the Saints. Escaping by the skin of their teeth, Tom Merry & Co. had fled, leaving Lacy and his study pals in possession of the stricken field.

"Phew! That's it for a pension, Tom!" exclaimed Manners, his eyes gleaming suddenly. "You must have dropped those things when Gay and his pals turned up."

"I remember dropping my cap quite well," said Lowther. "Even losing a cap's better than a ragging from those Grammar School bounders!"

"I don't remember losing my scarf," said Tom Merry grimly. "But it must have been then, of course. Lacy and those other rotters picked them up. If they did—"

"Then they were the chaps who bowled Lathom over in the woods!"

"I won't go so far as to swear that," said Tom. "But it looks jolly well like it. Though why they should—"

"To get even with us, of course!" sniffed Manners.

"They're rotters enough, I'll admit," said Tom Merry. "But—but it's queer. It's a big risk to take just to get their own back on us. Anyway, we've got our explanation, and Blake's got to hear it. The rotters wouldn't listen before, but they've got to now."

"Let 'em go to pot!" said Manners angrily. "I'm hanged if I'm going on my knees to them! If they choose to believe us guilty, let them!"

"That's my view," assented Lowther grimly. "Let the Fourth go and chop chips!"

Tom Merry shook his head.

"That's all very well," he said quietly. "But this sort of thing can't go on—there's been quite enough trouble and bad blood between the Shell and Fourth over it. It's going to upset the footer and everything else if it's allowed to go on."

"Well, how can you stop it? Blake won't listen to reason."

"He's got to!" said Tom, his eyes glinting. "We'll see if they're going to charge us with a rotten trick like that and never give us the chance to defend ourselves. Look here, I'm going to see Blake now—at once!"

"Better not!" said Lowther, with a rueful grin. "You've got a beauty of a nose already. It'll only end in trouble again."

"I'll chance that. You fellows had better not come. If we go in force it's bound to end in a scrap. I'll go alone, and I fancy I can make Blake listen to reason."

"But look here—"

"I'm going!" said Tom, in a tone of determination. "I'm going to put a stop to this somehow. Kildare's been jawing me already about it, and I've got to do something. I'm junior skipper, and it's my job, as Kildare says, to keep order and stop this sort of thing."

And with a nod to his chums Tom left them to enter Study No. 10 while he went along to visit Blake & Co.

He tapped firmly at the door of Study No. 6 and glanced inside. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy were there—each of them nursing various and numerous injuries. They stared at the junior skipper of St. Jim's.

Tom entered quietly, and closing the door again, he stood with his back to it, despite the glowering, astonished looks of the chums of the Fourth.

"Well, my hat!" said Blake angrily. "Here, get out, you rotten Shell-fish!"

"Outside!" snapped Herries.

"I'll go when I've said what I've come to say," said Tom Merry quietly. "You refused to listen to me this afternoon, but perhaps you will now you're a bit cooler."

"We've heard all we want to hear," said Blake, his lip curling. "Get out before we throw you out!"

"There's such a thing as fair play," said Tom. "You've apparently overlooked it, Blake. You've charged us with a rotten trick without even troubling to hear any defence. You say that Lowther, Manners, and myself, with other Shell fellows, attacked Lathom this afternoon, Blake."

"We do, and so you jolly well did!" snorted Herries. "The evidence is clear, and so is the motive. You did it out of revenge on Lathom for getting you all that licking—and to spite us as well, I expect. You can't explain how that cap and scarf came to be there, can you?"

"That's just what I can do," said Tom Merry, keeping his temper with an effort. "And that's what I'm here for now. Those things were planted there purposely, Blake—to get us into trouble."

Blake sniffed.

"That's just what we expected you to say!" he snapped. "But it won't wash! You say someone planted them there. Well, if you can prove someone did, and who that someone was—"

"I can't prove that, but—"

"Then get out of this study!" said Blake, his eyes gleaming. "We've heard all we want to hear!"

"Like his cheek to come here after what's happened!"

little chance, despite his determination not to be thrown out.

Herries hurled the door open, and the next moment Tom Merry went flying out, all arms and legs. He fell in the passage with a bump and a gasp, almost at the very feet of Eric Kildare, who happened to be passing at that moment.



"Back up!" yelled Lacy. "Back up, Grammar School! Clear these St. Jim's rotters out of here!" He closed with Tom Merry, and there was a rush of Grammarians from the gateway. Despite their struggles, the Terrible Three were very soon overpowered and held fast. (See Chapter 3.)

said Herries heatedly. "Let's pitch him out on his neck!"

"Bai Jove! Hold on, you fellows!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, whose face was uneasy and distressed. "Aftah all, until wecently we were gweat fwinds with Tom Mewwy, and I wathah think we ought to give nim ewevy chance to explain if he can."

"Rot! You dry up, Gussy!"

"I wefuse to dwy up, Blake," said Gussy, with dignity. "I weward this twouble as vewy unfortunate indeed, you fellows. But there is no weason why things should go fwom bad to worse. I'm quite sure that if Tom Mewwy is asked in a quiet, weasonable mannah to explain, he will do so, and own up to his w'ong."

"You silly chump—"

"I wefuse to be wferred to as a silly chump, Blake!" retorted Arthur Augustus. "I am just pointin' out that Tom Mewwy and his fwinds are wathah thoughtless youngstahs, and doubtless they attacked Lathom without weahsin' what a vewy sewious thing they were doin', you know."

"But we didn't do it, you burbling owl!" hooted Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! I am afwaid I cannot believe that, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head severely. "Howevah, I am quite weady to believe that you did not weahse—"

"Oh, dry up, you footling ass!" snorted Blake. "Just like you to start making excuses for the cads—"

"Weally, Blake—"

"The cads did it, and they knew perfectly well what they were doing!" snapped Blake. "You've just got three seconds to get out of this study, Merry!"

"But listen to me—"

"We've heard enough! Out with him, chaps!"

"Look here—hold on—" began Tom, but the Fourth-Formers did not heed. They made a rush at the captain of the Shell, only Arthur Augustus holding back.

Tom Merry, his temper raised now, put his fists up at once, and the next moment a fierce struggle was in progress in Study No. 6.

But against Blake, Herries, and Digby, Tom Merry stood

The captain of St. Jim's stared, and then his face went grim.

With gasps of dismay, Blake, Herries, and Digby hurriedly backed into the study and closed the door, leaving Tom Merry to it.

"So you're at it again, Merry!" snapped Kildare, as Tom rose to his feet, breathless and furious. "It's less than an hour since I spoke to you about this sort of thing!"

"I—I—"

"You silly young fool!" said Kildare angrily. "You're still looking for trouble, it seems! Nice sort of junior skipper, aren't you? Is this how you keep order in the Junior School?"

Tom said nothing, but his face flushed crimson. It was just his luck that Kildare had happened along just at that unfortunate moment.

The Sixth-Former's face set.

"I'm getting a bit fed-up with this!" he said. "Come along to my study, Merry. We'll have this out!"

"Very well, Kildare."

Tom followed him along to his study. Kildare closed the door and eyed him grimly.

"Now, Merry," he said, "there's been quite enough of this business. The whole school seems to be set by the ears, and there'll be more serious trouble still if this row between Shell and Fourth isn't stopped."

"I know that," said Tom.

"Well, why don't you stop it?" demanded Kildare. "You're the junior skipper, and it's your job to stop it."

"Easier said than done," said Tom. "Goodness knows I don't want it to go on!"

"How did the trouble start in the first place?" asked Kildare.

Tom was silent.

"I think I can guess," said Kildare, eyeing him closely.

"Look here, kid, I'm asking this unofficially—has it anything to do with that—that trouble between Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom?"

Tom nodded, surprised to hear Kildare refer to the quarrel between the two masters.

"I thought so!" exclaimed Kildare grimly. "I suppose

it's a case of the Shell backing up Linton, and the Fourth backing up Lathom. Is that it?"

"Yes," assented Tom. "The Shell—or most of them—back up Linton in thinking that Lathom destroyed those records—"

"Records?" ejaculated Kildare. "What records? I've heard Linton and Lathom have had a row, of course; but I don't know the cause of it. Perhaps it would be as well if I did know, Merry."

Tom Merry smiled grimly.

"They're chess records," he answered.

"Chess?" queried Kildare.

"Yes. You know how keen Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom are on chess. For terms they've spent a lot of their spare time playing chess," said Tom. "They've kept a detailed record of all their games, and Lathom's taken care of the records. They're both frightfully keen, and they both claim to be the better player."

"Yes, I know all about that," said Kildare, smiling. Few fellows at St. Jim's did not know that Messrs. Linton and Lathom were chess "maniacs." "Go on, kid."

"Well, Linton happened to overhear Lathom telling the Head that he nearly always came off best in their games," proceeded Tom, unable to restrain a grin. "Linton was waxy, of course, and he insisted upon going through the records to prove that Lathom wasn't the better man. Lathom agreed; but when they went to his study to get the records, they found only a mass of burnt paper in the fire, and the top sheet of the records half burned in the grate."

"Phew!"

"That did it!" said Tom. "Linton straightway charged Lathom with having burned them."

"Oh, my hat! Did he?"

"Yes. They had a row, and now they're not on speaking terms. Anyway, that started the trouble; the fellows in the Shell say Lathom destroyed the blessed records, and the fellows in the Fourth back their master up, of course."

"Well, of all the piffing rot!" breathed Kildare. "But—but, look here, kid, there's more in it than just that, I fancy. A bit of a quarrel between Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom wasn't the sole cause of all that bitter feeling and fighting this afternoon. Don't tell me that, Merry."

Tom was silent.

"You know what happened this afternoon to Mr. Lathom, Merry," said Kildare, eyeing him closely. "He was attacked in Rylcombe Wood, and, according to his account, he was attacked by a number of juniors."

"That's so, I believe."

"Well, Lathom thinks they may have been juniors from the Grammar School," said Kildare grimly. "But I'm not so sure about that in the circumstances. Had that affair anything to do with the row, Merry?"

"Yes!" said Tom, after a moment's hesitation. "The fact is, those Fourth idiots seem to think we know something about it."

"I thought as much. Well, it's more serious than I'd thought, Merry. Mr. Lathom reported to the Head, of course, and—well, if they were St. Jim's fellows, there's the sack for them if they're discovered. I suppose you can tell me nothing, Merry?"

"I can tell you that it wasn't any of the Shell fellows," said Tom.

"Right!" Kildare nodded. "I'm glad I know now just how things stand with you kids, Merry. But this trouble has got to stop. The footer and everything else will suffer if it isn't stopped. Your job's to stop it, not to make it worse by scrapping. Got that?"

"Yes. I'll do what I can, Kildare."

"That's enough, then. You can cut now, kid."

And Tom Merry left the captain's study. But his face was glum as he made his way back to Study No. 10. It was easy enough to be told to put an end to the trouble. But how was it to be done? Moreover, there was still the matter of the attack on Mr. Lathom. Tom did not care to think what would happen if the authorities heard of the "evidence" against them. He had not told Kildare; but sooner or later he might get to know, and the captain of the Shell realised that he and his chums would then be in a tight corner unless they could prove how they had lost that cap and scarf. It was a disturbing prospect, and that interview with Kildare had left Tom Merry in a still less enviable frame of mind, if that were possible, than before.

CHAPTER 3.

A Grammarian Rag!

"READY, you fellows?"

Tom Merry addressed Monty Lowther and Manners, as he looked in at the door of Study No. 10 the next day. Dinner was just over, and Tom Merry was in a hurry.

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No unusual event had taken place since Tom Merry's stormy visit to Study No. 6. But there were many indications, for all that, that matters were not improved. The Shell and Fourth were not on speaking terms—as was the case with the respective masters of those turbulent Forms, Messrs. Linton and Lathom.

But the bitterness and ill-feeling was shown only too clearly between the fellows of both Forms. For once, House rivalry had been allowed to drop, and in its place now was only Form rivalry—though it was more after the manner of enmity than mere rivalry. Figgins & Co. backed up Blake & Co., as was really only to be expected. Discoloured eyes and swollen noses were numerous, speaking eloquently of the terrific battle that had taken place the day before in the Shell passage.

Naturally, Messrs. Linton and Lathom had been very concerned at the state of their respective flocks, but their questioning had—fortunately for the Terrible Three, perhaps—brought nothing to light concerning the real cause of the battle. Blake & Co., bitter as they felt against the Shell fellows, were not likely to give them away to the authorities.

None the less, as Tom Merry well knew, the danger of anything leaking out about the cap and scarf was very real and acute. And the captain of the Shell was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery at the earliest possible moment. How the cap and scarf had got where they were found was a mystery that Tom Merry, at least, felt certain Lacy & Co. of the Grammar School could solve if they liked. And Tom and his chums meant to tackle those shady youths about it.

Dinner being over there was just time to cycle over to the Grammar School before afternoon classes.

"Buck up!" snapped Tom, as his chums announced that they were ready. "I've got the bikes out all serene, and we'll soon get at the truth."

"Yes, rather!"

The trio left the study, and in a few minutes were cycling hard towards the Grammar School.

"There's to be no trouble, mind!" warned Tom, as they drove at the pedals. "We don't want to be ragged by those Grammarians. We'll just put it quietly to Lacy, and see what he has to say."

"He'll only deny it," said Manners, who hadn't much hope. "If he had a hand in it he's not likely to give himself away."

"That's so," admitted Tom gloomily. "Still, it seems all we can do. And Gay and his friends will support our statement that they chased us after we'd handled Lacy. Hallo, there's Lacy at the gates now! Oh, good!"

They were almost up to the gates of the Grammar School, where several fellows were standing about in groups, chatting. The lanky figure and unwholesome features of Algernon Lacy were soon recognised by the Terrible Three.

The St. Jim's juniors dismounted and stopped before the black sheep of the Grammar School Fourth, eyed curiously by the other fellows.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Lacy, giving the trio rather an uneasy look. "What d'you St. Jim's wasters want here?"

"We want you, my pippin!" said Tom Merry coolly. "Just a bit of information, Lacy."

"Cough it up, then!" said Lacy, with a sneer. "Always ready to oblige a Saint with information."

"Especially about gee-gees," grinned Carker.

"It's about what happened yesterday afternoon," said Tom, eyeing Lacy closely. "When we were chased by Gay and his pals we dropped a cap and scarf, Lacy. Did you find them by any chance?"

Lacy coloured, and gave Carker a quick look. But he recovered himself in an instant.

"Cap and scarf," he repeated. "What the thump should I know about a dashed cap and scarf? Did you see a cap and scarf, Carker?"

"Not to my knowledge," said Carker coolly. "If I did see a cap and scarf belonging to a dashed Saint, I shouldn't be inclined to touch either, anyway."

"Except with a pair of tongs," grinned Lacy. "Any more questions like that, Merry?"

There was cool insolence in the tones of both Lacy and Carker, and Tom gritted his teeth. Their attitude only increased his suspicions.

"It's pretty clear you have seen them," he said, keeping his temper with an effort. "Look here, Lacy, what did you do with that cap and scarf? I want to know, and, what's more, I mean to know!"

"My hat!" said Lacy. "You've got a nerve, haven't you, askin' your dashed questions as if you were a prefect here, Merry?"

"Listen to me," answered Tom calmly. "Yesterday afternoon Mr. Lathom, the master of the Fourth at St. Jim's, was attacked and bowled over in Rylcombe Woods by someone unknown. On the spot they planted a cap

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belonging to Lowther, and a scarf belonging to me. They planted them there to make it look as if we were the fellows who had downed Lathom."

"Very interestin', I'm sure," said Lacy blandly. "But I don't see how that concerns us, Merry."

"I fancy you do," said Tom grimly. "That cap and scarf were dropped by us when scrapping with you fellows, and if I'm not mistaken it was you who picked them up."

"You're takin' a lot for granted, aren't you?" sneered Lacy, though he still looked uneasy. "Like your cheek to come here makin' dashed charges against us!"

"I haven't made any charge yet," said Tom Merry. "I'm only saying that I think you fellows know what happened to that cap and scarf."

"I've already told you I haven't seen any dashed cap and scarf!" snapped Lacy, changing his tone suddenly. "If you can't take my word for it you can clear, and be hanged to you!"

"If all these fellows weren't here, I fancy you'd alter your tone a bit, Lacy," said Tom, his eyes gleaming. "You refuse to tell me anything, then?"

"Yes, of course, I do!" shouted Lacy angrily. "I tell you we know nothin' about any dashed caps or scarves!"

"Right!" said Tom Merry, his tone showing his disappointment. "Is Gordon Gay anywhere about?"

Lacy bit his lip, and a look of alarm appeared in his eyes. He knew if Gordon Gay was brought into it he would want to get to the bottom of the matter, which was the last thing the black sheep of the Fourth desired.

Lying came easily to Algernon Lacy, and, as Tom Merry & Co. had expected, he had denied all knowledge of the caddish scheme in which he and his cronies had been concerned. But he was well aware that, despite his denials, Gordon Gay would be very likely to start investigations, and he feared the possibility of the truth being brought to light.

"No, he thumpin' well isn't!" he snapped angrily. "I'm fed-up with your dashed questionin', Merry. Who the thump are you to come here ridin' the high horse? Clear out!"

"Yes, chuck the rotters out of this!" shouted Carker, as

anxious to get rid of the Terrible Three as was Lacy. "Go for the rotten Saints, chaps!"

Hearing the raised voices several fellows were already approaching, and Lacy saw the moment had come to act. He suddenly grabbed Tom Merry, and gave him a vicious shove.

In the ordinary way Lacy would never have dreamed of touching the captain of the Shell, but he did it deliberately now, knowing Tom Merry would resent the shove and start trouble. And his crafty act succeeded.

In a flash Tom Merry grabbed him by the collar, shook him like a rat, and sent him sprawling, yards away.

"You'd lay your paws on me, would you?" snapped Tom, his eyes blazing.

"Hold on, Tom!" gasped Manners, whose keen wits had grasped Lacy's game. "He's only trying to get us cleared out."

But the warning came too late. Lacy jumped to his feet again and rushed at Tom Merry, while Carker closed instantly with Lowther.

"Back up!" yelled Lacy. "Back up, Grammar School! Clear these St. Jim's rotters out of this!"

Funk as he was Lacy had little fear of getting hurt, knowing the Terrible Three would very soon be rendered helpless. He was right. There was a rush of Grammarians from the gateway, and very soon the struggling St. Jim's trio were overpowered and held fast.

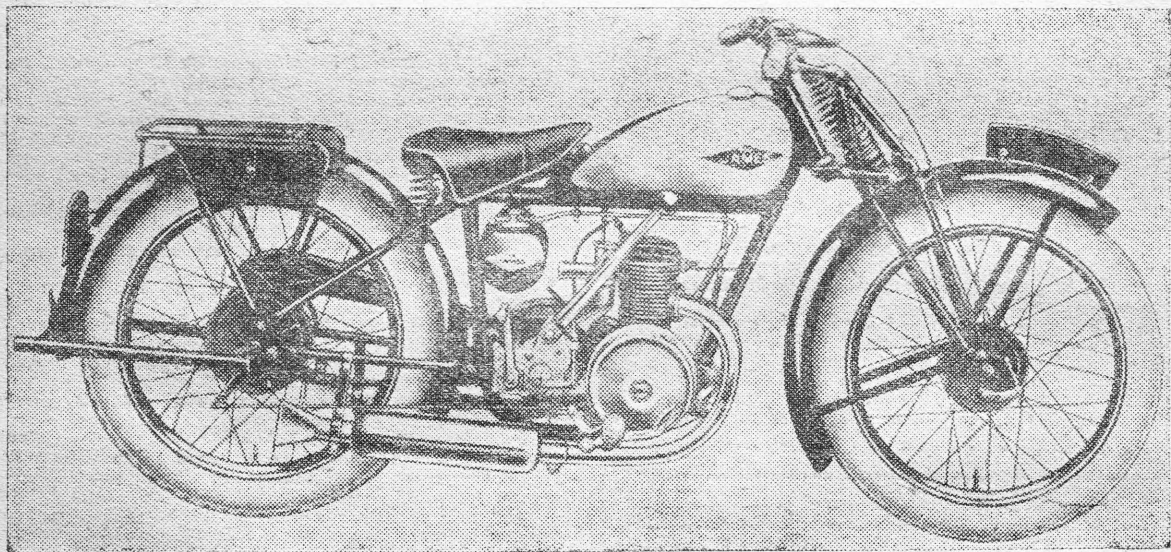
"You—rotter, Lacy!" panted Tom Merry, in the grasp of three Grammarians. "I see your game now! You worked this to get rid of us!"

He looked round, hoping to see the friendly faces of Gordon Gay & Co. But they were not at hand. The faces all round them were decidedly unfriendly. Mason, a Fourth-Former, whom the Terrible Three had had trouble with more than once, grinned as he regarded them.

"Well, you Saints have a nerve, and no mistake!" he remarked. "You must be taught better than to come making trouble at the very gates of the Grammar School. What shall we do with them, chaps?"

(Continued on next page.)

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"Kick the rotters out!" yelled Lacy.
 "That's it!" gasped Carker, who had met Lowther's fist with his nose. "Boot the cads along the lane, chaps!"
 "Not original enough!" said Mason, shaking his head.
 "Duck 'em in the fountain in the quad!" suggested Hirst.
 "Too risky," said Mason. "The beaks would see us from the giddy windows. My hat! I've got it! Stop that donkey-cart, some of you!"
 "Oh crumbs!" groaned Lowther. "We're for it now, Tommy!"

There was little doubt about that. Visiting the Grammar School was always a more or less risky business, but they had banked on getting into touch with Gordon Gay. They certainly hadn't anticipated Lacy making trouble like this.

They soon saw what the humorous and original Mason's idea was. The donkey-cart was a ramshackle vehicle, owned by a rag-and-bone merchant. It was loaded up with rags and bones and bottles and old iron, and seated on the front of the little cart was a big individual with a grimy face and a very red nose.

"Any rags an' bones, young gents?" he asked hopefully.
 "Any old iron or bottles? Best prices given for old clothes, too. Joe Biggs always gives a square deal."

"Going past St. Jim's?" asked Mason.

"I reckon so," said Honest Joe.

"Right!" grinned Mason. "We've no rags and bones or old iron to sell; but we've got some we want delivering at St. Jim's. There's the rags and bones," he added, pointing to the fuming Terrible Three, "and there's the old iron," he continued, with a wave of his hand towards the three bikes. "Well, will you take on the job, old bean?"

Joe Biggs grinned a broad grin. He was a well-known local character, and, like all the Rylcombe inhabitants, he was well aware of the incessant ragging that went on between the two schools.

"I'm on!" he grinned. "Only I ain't in business for me 'ealth, young gents," he hinted.

"There's five bob to pay for the job," grinned Mason. "Is it a go?"

"You jest leave it to me," grinned Joe.

"Look here," began Tom Merry, in great alarm, "none of your silly larks, Mason. We're not going back in that awful cart! Be decent, you chaps!"

But most of the grinning Grammarians had suffered at the hands of the St. Jim's fellows at various times, and they were not inclined to be decent, a fact that was soon made clear to Tom Merry. Despite their frantic struggles, their caps and jackets were turned inside out and their features daubed with mud. When the Grammarians had completed decorating them for the journey they looked weird and wonderful sights.

The japers had not finished yet, however. With lengths of rope supplied by the rag-and-bone merchant, the Terrible Three were trussed up like chickens, and then they were gagged with their own handkerchiefs.

"That's to prevent them boring old Joe with their chatter on the way," grinned Mason. "Up with 'em, chaps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Grammarians howled with laughter as the hapless St. Jim's fellows were lifted on to the piled-up rags in the cart. Then their bikes were heaped up at the back, and Joe Biggs led his donkey and cart away amidst ironical cheers and laughter from the crowd in the Grammar School gateway.

The Terrible Three groaned deeply, their spirits at the lowest ebb. Not only had their visit been a complete failure, but their return would humiliate them before St. Jim's, and give their rivals of the Fourth something else to sneer and crow about. It was a sad home-coming for Tom Merry & Co. Gagged as they were they could not

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plead with Joe Biggs, or offer him a reward to release them, as the crafty Mason had foreseen. And as the ancient donkey-cart rattled on to St. Jim's the unfortunate trio groaned in bitter anguish of spirit.

CHAPTER 4.

Gussy Wonders!

"WOTTEN! Feahfully wotten!"

Once again Arthur Augustus announced that it was "wotten." But this time Arthur Augustus was alone, and he announced it to himself.

Despite the lack of encouragement the Terrible Three had given him in his self-imposed duty as would-be peace-maker, Arthur Augustus was still very distressed at the present state of affairs in the Lower School, and he still had hopes of smoothing things out if given a chance.

As a matter of fact, in his own mind, Arthur Augustus was beginning to doubt even the evidence of the cap and scarf. Loyal as he was to the Fourth, he could not help feeling that they had made a mistake. He hoped that they had, and his one desire was to be able to prove it.

The Terrible Three had vowed that the things had been "planted" to get them into trouble, and the swell of St. Jim's realised that this was possible, if not very probable.

On a seat beneath one of the old elms in the quadrangle, Arthur Augustus was pondering over the problem now.

"Wotten!" he repeated, leaning his back against the trunk of the elm. "I weally cannot believe Tom Mewwy capable of such a wotten twick as to down poor old Lathom. Wathah not! But—"

There was a "but" about it, and Arthur Augustus shook his head sadly. As he reflected on the mystery he heard footsteps behind him, and, glancing carelessly round the trunk, he caught sight of Racke, Crooke, and Mellish coming along the path under the old elms. At the same moment he sighted Baggy Trimble trotting behind them, as if trying to overtake that shady trio.

Arthur Augustus was not interested in the doings of Racke & Co., and he looked the other way. But the next moment, as he heard Trimble's voice, he looked again, his interest aroused now.

"Oh, here you are, Aubrey!" snorted Trimble. "I've been hunting everywhere for you, old chap."

"Oh, cut off, you fat rotter!" snapped Racke.

"Oh, all right!" said Trimble. "Just as you like. If you really want me to pal up with Tom Merry, Racke—"

Trimble was turning away carelessly, but Racke called him back instantly.

"Hold on, Trimble!" he said, his voice hoarse with rage.

"How much d'you want, hang you?"

"Five bob will do—for the present!" grinned the unscrupulous Baggy. "Just a loan, of course, old man. I'll hand you fifteen bob out of my cheque in the morning."

Aubrey Racke gritted his teeth; but he handed some silver over into the greedy palm of Baggy Trimble. That youth pocketed the coins, with a chuckle of satisfaction.

"Thanks, old man!" he purred. "Just time to get some of Mrs. Taggles' tarts before the bell goes. That reminds me, Mellish," he added, turning on the sneak of the Fourth. "What about those lines?"

"I—I haven't had time to do them yet, Trimble," muttered Mellish.

"Well, Lathom wants them before tea!" snapped Trimble in a commanding tone. "I shall get licked if I don't turn them in. If I get licked you'll be sorry, Mellish. It may mean a flogging or the sack for you!"

"I—I'll do them this afternoon, Trimble!" said Percy Mellish thickly.

"You'd better!" grinned Trimble.

"Gad!" breathed Racke, eyeing the fat Fourth-Former with glinting eyes. "Is the fat rotter making you do lines for him, Mellish?"

"Yes," said Mellish, through his teeth.

"Percy knows better than to refuse!" chuckled Baggy.

"I say, Racke, old chap, such a lark! Tom Merry and his pals have gone over to see Lacy and his crowd."

"What?"

Racke almost shouted the word.

"Fact!" grinned Trimble. "I heard 'em talking about it, you know. Supposing Lacy lets it out, what?"

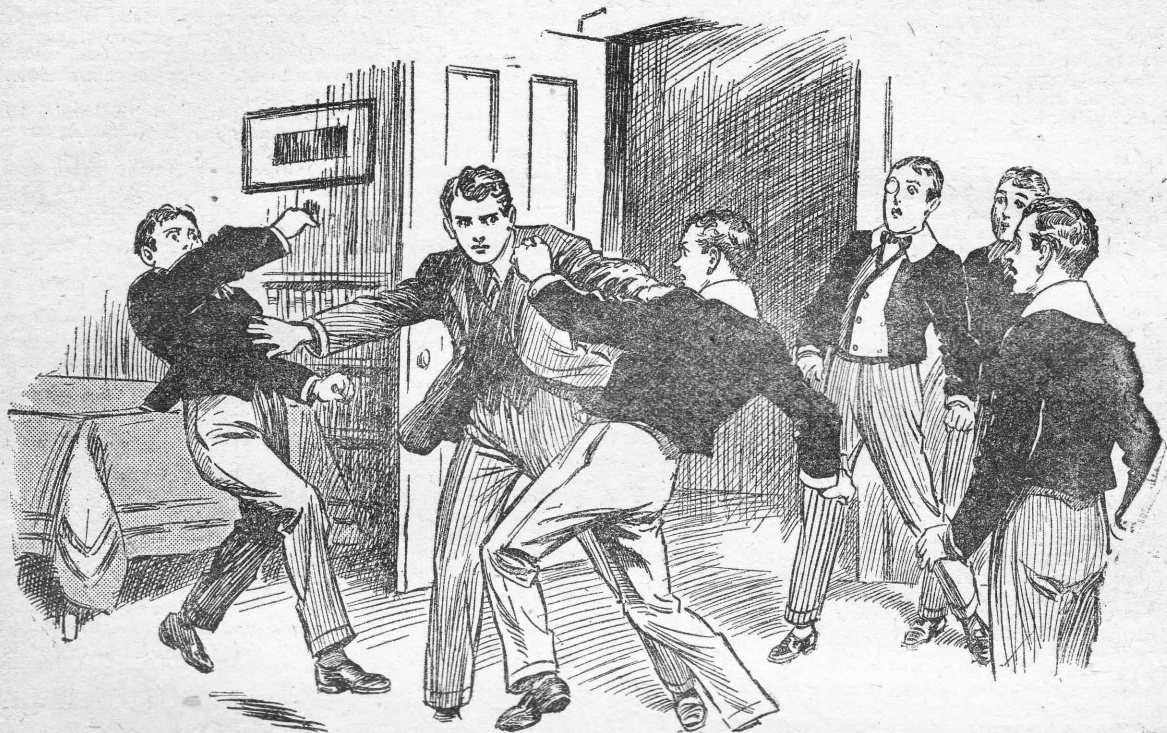
"He—he won't!" breathed Racke. "Lacy knows better than that. But—but is that a fact, Trimble?"

"Yes, I saw 'em. They went off just after dinner on their bikes!" chuckled Baggy.

And, having imparted that information, Trimble rolled away hurriedly towards the tuckshop, having just recollected that it was close on closing-time.

Racke, Crooke, and Mellish looked after him, and then they eyed each other.

"It's—it's all right!" said Crooke uneasily. "Lacy's a bit too cute for them. Safe enough!"



Too late, Reginald Talbot jumped to the door of Study No. 10. Almost before anyone was aware of it, a tall, active form had sprung across the room, and Tom Merry and Blake were wrenched apart and sent staggering back. "That's enough!" snapped Eric Kildare. (See Chapter 7.)

"Gad! Let's hope so!" breathed Racke, his face quite pale. "Better wait at the gates and see how the cads look when they come back. And we'd better run over and warn Lacy this evening."

"Phew! Yes, rather!"

And the trio of black sheep hurried down to the gates—to await Tom Merry's return from the Grammar School.

Behind the shelter of the old elm Arthur Augustus drew a deep breath. On realising the conversation was not for his ears he had withdrawn his head, expecting Racke & Co. to walk on. But the black sheep had not done so, and they had now departed, little dreaming that their curious conversation had been heard.

Distressed as he was at having unwittingly played the eavesdropper, Arthur Augustus could not fail to be impressed by what he had heard. Although his aristocratic brain was not of the keenest, he realised that the conversation was very significant indeed.

"Bai Jove!" he murmured, frowning deeply. "I wish I had not overheard. But—but how vevy queer! That fat wottah has those wottahs undah his thumb without a doubt! Bai Jove! I wondah what it means?"

Arthur Augustus wrinkled his brows, but his mental effort failed to bring any enlightenment. None the less, he was very suspicious indeed.

"I weally ought not to take any notice of it!" he murmured, shaking his noble head. "But it is vevy stwange! I cannot help thinkin' that it is connected in some mannah with all this twouble. I wondah what Tom Mewwy has gone ovah to the Gwammah School for?"

So curious was Arthur Augustus to know that, that he decided to take notice of what he had overheard after all.

"The conversation was not intended for my yahs!" he went on, shaking his head again. "so it would not be quite honahwable to wepeat it to anyone. Wathah not! But—but I'll find out why Tom Mewwy and his chums have gone ovah to see Lacy for all that. Yaas, wathah!"

And Arthur Augustus left his seat under the elm and strolled along towards the gates. He had almost reached them when he heard a sudden yell of laughter. It came from a group of fellows standing round the gates. At that hour there were always a few fellows either strolling in the quad, or chatting in the gateway.

Arthur Augustus soon saw the reason. He almost collapsed as he sighted the ancient and dilapidated donkey-cart, with its load of "rags and bones and old iron."

"Oh, bai Jove!" he gasped.

Blake, Herries, and Digby were among the fellows there, and they also gasped, and then yelled with laughter.

"Oh, my hat!" choked Blake. "Who the thump is it? Great pip! It—it looks like those Shell cads!"

"It is!" yelled Gore. "It's Tom Merry and Lowther and Manners. Oh, great pip!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Both Shell and Fourth fellows were laughing now, and their laughter drew others to the gates—who also roared at the weird sight.

The rag-and-bone cart was soon surrounded.

"Which I bin given the job of deliverin' this 'ere rubbish, young gents!" exclaimed Honest Joe Biggs, indicating the hapless Terrible Three—looking anything but terrible now. "It ain't no good a-glarin' at me, young gents!" he added to Tom Merry & Co. "A man's got to earn a honest penny when he can, ain't he?"

He lifted the hapless trio off the cart in turn, and then the bikes. Then, before anyone could release the Terrible Three from their bonds, he jumped on to his cart, and the next moment the donkey was trotting away at quite a good speed. Possibly, Honest Joe was a little afraid the unfortunate trio might make trouble for him.

He and his rattling vehicle vanished along the lane, and the laughing juniors surrounded the Terrible Three, who gurgled and glared and wriggled frantically.

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Figgins of the Fourth. "And this is our precious junior skipper, eh? Nice disgrace for St. Jim's, I must say."

"Gurgle, gurgle, gurgle!" came from the Terrible Three, and their eyes became eloquent.

Bernard Glyn and Clifton Dane hastily removed their gags and cut their bonds. They realised only too well that the predicament of the Terrible Three would bring down endless scorn and jeers on the Shell in general, and Tom Merry in particular.

"And that's our captain!" said Herries, in an audible voice. "Strikes me it's time we had a skipper out of the Fourth—a fellow who can take care of himself!"

"Hear, hear!"

There was a roar from the Fourth-Formers present. Tom Merry gritted his teeth, and glowered.

"You—you grinning rotters!" he panted. "I—I—I—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With his weird face, and clothes turned inside out, Tom Merry's appearance was too much for the onlookers. His

fury only made his features more ludicrous. He seemed to realise the fact suddenly, and grunted to his chums.

"Come on!" he panted. "Let's get out of this, for goodness' sake! Run for it!"

The three ran for it, pushing their bikes and followed by a howl of ironical laughter. Just then the bell went for afternoon class, and the crowd went indoors, most of them still laughing. But Racke, Crooke, and Mellish were not, though Racke's own face showed deep relief. From the appearance of the Terrible Three it seemed fairly certain their visit had not been a success in any sort of way. But Aubrey Racke would not have felt quite so satisfied had he only known that Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had overheard the conversation with the egregious and unscrupulous Baggy Trimble.

As for the swell of the Fourth, he was looking very thoughtful and disturbed indeed just then. What he had overheard had not been intended for his ears, and being a very particular youth in such matters, Arthur Augustus felt in honour bound not to repeat the conversation to Blake or anyone else. But he realised how very queer it was, and he meant to bend his noble mind to the task of solving the mystery. He was one of the last to make for indoors, and as he started up the School House steps, Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners came running round from the cycledshed.

"Bai Jove!" murmured Arthur Augustus. "I'll ask Tom Mewwy now!"

And he did.

"What's that?" snapped Tom Merry, halting and glowering at the swell of the Fourth.

Arthur Augustus repeated his question very seriously.

"I wish to ask you fellows why you went oval to the Gwammah School!" he exclaimed. "I have a vevy good reason—"

That was as far as Arthur Augustus got.

The Terrible Three did not answer in words—they were not in the mood for words. Gussy's innocent question—far from being innocent to them—was the last straw. With a glare of wrath Tom Merry raised his fist and crushed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's shining silk hat over his eyes. Then, with the aid of his chums, he grabbed the well-meaning but tactless Gussy and rolled him down the School House steps.

"Yawooooogh!"

Bump, bump, bump, bump!

A wild, muffled howl floated across the quad, and leaving the swell of the Fourth lying at the bottom of the steps struggling frantically to release his head from his topper, the Terrible Three rushed on indoors.

It was some moments before Gussy managed to remove his hat, and by that time his thirst for knowledge was quenched, though his question remained unanswered. Which was a pity, for had he only known just why the Terrible Three had gone over to see Lacy & Co., even the noble intellect of Arthur Augustus might have stumbled on the truth.

CHAPTER 5. Shell v. Fourth!

"COMING down?" Tom Merry asked Manners and Lowther the question rather grimly.

Tea was over in Study No. 10, and for some minutes Tom had been busy with pencil and paper, his chums looking on with great interest. Tom, in fact, was making out the list for Saturday's match with Rylcombe Grammar School, and they were very curious indeed to know how the list was made up.

"Going to shove it on the board now?" ventured Manners.

"Yes."

"Any alterations?"

"No; of course not!" said Tom, staring. "You don't think I'd let this row with the Fourth make any difference to the footer? The team's the same as last week."

"You've shoved in Blake and the rest of the Fourth who usually play?"

"Yes, of course!"

"The question is, will they play?" grinned Lowther. "You know what they've said—they'll have nothing to do with us, either on the footer field or anywhere else. Blake's gassed about that more than once!"

Tom Merry set his lips.

"It's gas and nothing else!" he snapped impatiently. "Blake's a sport whatever else he is, and so are the other Fourth fellows in the team. My hat. D'you think they'd dream of letting the school down owing to a potty, private quarrel?"

"H'm! Why should they say what they have said, then?" grunted Manners.

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"More gas!" said Tom, with a grim laugh. "None of them will risk being turned out of the team, either—for good! They're howling cads if they dream of making trouble over footer, anyway. School comes first, and private squabbles must be dropped when it's a case of school footer, and an important match at that."

Tom rose from the table the paper in his hand. His chums looked far from convinced as they followed him down the stairs to Big Hall.

At the moment neither Manners nor Lowther were over-keen to leave the study and venture into public. The manner of their return from the Grammar School had, as they feared, caused hilarity and scorn in the Lower School, and immediately classes were over they had sought seclusion in Study No. 10.

None the less, they were anxious and curious to know how Blake & Co. would deal with the footer list.

The Terrible Three arrived in Hall, and, ignoring the groups of fellows chatting there, Tom Merry walked straight to the notice-board and pinned up his list. Then he stood back to wait the result.

It was not long in coming. Blake was the first to make a move. He walked to the list, ran his eyes down it, and then, taking a pencil from his pocket he calmly crossed out six names on the list.

There was a buzz. Tom Merry's eyes gleamed.

"What's that mean, Blake?" he demanded hotly.

"Look and see!" said Blake curtly.

Tom looked. A dangerous gleam came to his eyes as he saw the names Blake had crossed out. They were all Fourth-Formers—Blake, Herries, D'Arcy of the School House, and Figgins, Wynn, and Redfern of the New House.

"You—you cheeky cad!" Tom Merry's eyes blazed. "Who the thump d'you think you are to interfere with a footer list, Blake?"

"I've a right to cross off my name if I choose!" replied Blake coolly.

"That's so. Who gave you permission to cross the others off?"

"The fellows concerned gave me permission!" retorted Blake. "It means just this, Tom Merry. The Fourth refuse to play under you, or under any other Shell cad! So put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

There was a silence. Tom Merry's face was white, save for a tiny spot of colour in either cheek. Despite the warnings of his chums, he had scarcely expected anything like this.

"So—so that's how matters stand?" he said at last.

"Yes."

"You mean to let the school down, Blake?"

"Not at all. You Shell cads aren't the only pebbles on the beach!"

"You know it's the Grammar School match—an important fixture?"

"We know that!" said Blake.

"You're letting the school down to satisfy your own cad-dish spite!" said Tom, his lip curling.

"I don't see that," said Blake, though he coloured slightly. "You seem to forget that the best men are in the Fourth—or most of them. The two best goalkeepers—Fatty Wynn and Herries—are in the Fourth, to begin with. And Figgins, Redfern, and—"

"Isn't that all the more reason why you should play the game and forget private rows?" snapped Tom heatedly. "But enough of this. I'm junior skipper, and you can either replace those names or take the consequences, Blake."

"What does that mean?"

"It means," said Tom, with glinting eyes, "that any fellow who refuses to play in Saturday's match will be dropped for the rest of the season."

"I'm not so sure of that," answered Blake. "You may be skipper at the moment, Tom Merry; but I fancy you won't be for long!"

"What d'you mean by that?" said Tom, with a start.

"Simply that we're fed-up with you as skipper!" snapped Blake. "The Fourth think you're not fit, after what you've done, to hold the job. They refuse to recognise you as skipper. They're putting up a man from the Fourth for the job—myself!"

"So—so that's the game?" breathed Tom Merry. "You're after my job as skipper, Blake?"

Blake coloured again. To do him justice he was not eager for the job, but he was acting under strong pressure from the Fourth.

"You can put it like that if you like," he said, after a pause. "Anyway, I'm putting up. There's a rule that if a third of the Lower School demand a new election they can have one. We're going to demand one this evening. There are more men in the Fourth than the Shell and I fancy it's pretty certain who will win!"

"Oh, is it?" said a grim voice unexpectedly. It was Eric Kildare, who had approached the crowd unseen. He eyed Blake very grimly.

"So you're putting up as skipper, Blake?" he snapped. "How's that? Isn't Tom Merry good enough for you?"

Blake was taken aback, but he answered coolly enough. "No, he isn't!" he snapped. "The Fourth refuse to recognise him. We demand a new election. Kildare!"

"Oh, do you?" ejaculated Kildare. "And who the thump are you? You young idiot, I suppose this is more Form trouble?"

"There's a rule that if a third of the chaps demand an election, they can have one, Kildare!" said Blake. "The Fourth demand one, and they're putting me up for the job."

"Oh, are they?" said Kildare grimly. "Perhaps you'll allow me to remind you that there's another rule, which states that a new election must meet with the approval of the Housemaster—of Mr. Railton. I shall make it my business to see that Mr. Railton doesn't give that approval, Blake!"

"Oh!" gasped Blake. All the wind was taken out of his sails. He knew only too well that if Kildare put his weight in the scale against them, the Housemaster would never give the required approval. "Oh, but that's not fair, Kildare!" he blurted out.

"Fair!" snorted the captain of St. Jim's wrathfully. "Do you think I don't see what this means! In the ordinary way, if the Lower School were dissatisfied with their skipper, or if he proved a failure at his job, I'd agree at once to an election. But this is nothin, but Form rivalry—idiotic squabbling. And if you think I'm going to help to depose Merry in order to shove a Fourth kid in his place, and make still further trouble, you're thundering well mistaken!"

"But—but—" "That's enough!" snapped Kildare angrily. "This silly rowing has got to stop, and I mean to stop it. Merry is skipper, and he remains skipper. You understand that, Blake? There's going to be no election, if I can prevent it. There's been enough trouble without making more. You young fools! Why can't you drop this silly rot and pull together? Anyway, I warn you here and now that if you don't, I'll step in in earnest, and there'll be trouble!"

With that warning the captain of St. Jim's strode away, his brow grim. There was a murmur from the Fourth fellows as he went. "Well, does that satisfy you, Blake?" rapped out Tom Merry.

"No, it doesn't!" retorted Blake. "You may remain skipper in name, Merry, but you won't be recognised by the Fourth. As for the footer—well, there's our answer on the board!"

"You mean you still refuse to play?" "Yes—under you or any other Shell fellow." "You cads!" breathed Tom Merry. He looked at Levison who was standing near. "Levison, your name's still on the list!" he snapped. "Is it to remain there?"

"Levison knows what to do!" said Blake. Ernest Levison coloured. He disliked the present situation intensely. But as a member of the Fourth there seemed only one course open to him.

After a short hesitation he stepped to the board and crossed out his name—the only Fourth Form name remaining. Tom Merry breathed hard, and his eyes glinted as he took Levison's place before the board. Without hesitation, he started to write the names of Shell fellows in place of the deleted ones.

"There's my answer!" he snapped, turning round abruptly. "I'm hanged if I'm going on my knees to beg you to play, Blake! But if St. Jim's loses—and it's pretty certain we shall—then the school will know who to thank!" "I don't see that," said Blake calmly. "I haven't explained my intentions yet, Merry. If I hadn't thought a team made up of Fourth fellows could lick the Grammar School Fourth I shouldn't act like this."

"What do you mean, you cad?" "I mean just this!" was the cool answer. "I demand that you postpone the Grammar School match until next Wednesday. And to-morrow the Fourth will play the Shell, the winners to play the Grammar School, and to represent St. Jim's in all following matches of importance. That's the scheme, Tom Merry."

Tom Merry jumped. The scheme almost took his breath away. "Well, you—you cheeky rotter!" he gasped. "Are you potty?"

"Far from it! We can get a team from the Fourth that'll lick either the Shell or the best team the Grammar School can put on the field."

"Well, I'm hanged!" stuttered Tom. "And you expect me to agree to that?"

"You've got to." "Got to!" A glint came into the junior skipper's eyes. "So you think you can dictate to me what I can do?" he said between his teeth. He pointed to the notice-board. "There's the team that's going to play the Grammar

School to-morrow, Blake. As long as I'm junior skipper my word goes, and until you come to your senses that's the junior team."

"You refuse to meet us, then?" said Blake. "Just that! I'm not going to be told what I'm to do by the Fourth. The Shell represents the Junior School in future."

With that Tom Merry turned on his heel and strode from Hall. Manners and Lowther and most of the Shell followed him out. Blake drew a deep breath. He had imagined Tom Merry would give in to his demand—would be obliged to give in. It was an unexpected set-back for Blake, but he was a fellow not easily beaten.

"That about puts the tin lid on our game!" grunted Herries. "What will you do now, Blake? We can't allow the school footer to go to pot. You'll have to cave in, old chap."

"Will I?" Blake squared his chin. "I'm not done yet by a long way. Come out a minute!"

Herries and Digby followed him out of Hall. To their surprise Blake led the way without a word to the prefects' room.

"Wait here and keep cave!" he said briefly. "I shan't be a tick!"

"But what—?" "Wait! You'll see!"

A glance inside showed that the room was empty, and the leader of Study No. 6 entered and closed the door. The next moment his chums heard him speaking on the phone. After about a minute's conversation his voice ceased and he came out again, his face flushed.

"What's the game?" demanded Herries uneasily. "You rang up the Grammar School, didn't you?"

Blake nodded. "Yes," he said coolly; "I got on to Gordon Gay and asked him to postpone the match until next Wednesday."

"You—you did! Oh, my hat!" "You've done it now!" said Digby. "Phew! Tom Merry will be furious. But what's the idea, you ass?"

"Simple enough!" said Blake calmly. "When the Shell turn up on the field to-morrow they'll find us waiting for

(Continued on next page.)

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them instead of the Grammarians. With a big crowd there they won't dare to refuse to face us—the crowd would see to that. No, Tom Merry's got to discover that we're in earnest, and that the Fourth is to be reckoned with!"

Herries and Digby did not reply. The nerve and audacity of their leader's cool action had taken their breath away. And they followed in silence as he led the way to Study No. 6. But—knowing Tom Merry as they did—they could not help feeling that Blake's action would lead to something more serious than football.

CHAPTER 6.

Talbot Speaks Out!

"WELL, this is a nice kettle of fish, and no mistake!"

Monty Lowther murmured that remark as the Terrible Three got back to their study. Tom Merry did not answer. His face was still white and his expression showed utter dismay as well as fierce anger.

It was turning out far worse than he had expected. He had anticipated that the quarrel between the two Forms would be bad for footer as well as everything else. But he had not anticipated a move like this on the part of the Fourth. He had been convinced that Blake had the School games too much at heart to risk doing them damage for any personal or purely Form consideration.

He had quite overlooked the fact that Blake might have his own views as to what was playing the game and what was not. To do Blake strict justice, he believed he was doing the right thing. He believed that a team out of the Fourth was as good as, if not better, than a team composed of Fourth and Shell. It was a view not likely to be shared by the Shell, however, much less Tom Merry. Moreover, Blake honestly believed that Tom Merry and his chums were guilty of the attack on Mr. Lathom. Unlike the noble and good-natured Gussy, they had no doubts on that point. Tom Merry and his friends had played a caddish and cowardly trick, and they felt quite justified in refusing to have anything to do with them, either on the sports field or anywhere else.

As regards the strength of a team made up of Fourth-Formers, Blake certainly had some justification for his belief. Fatty Wynn was undoubtedly the best goalkeeper in the Lower School. Herries was the reserve goalkeeper, and the next best. Blake and D'Arcy were first-class forwards, and Herries usually played back when Fatty was in goal. Figgins, Redfern, and Levison, too, were rarely, if ever, absent from the junior team.

Tom Merry knew this only too well—hence his deep dismay now. While he would never admit that a Fourth Form team could beat the Shell, he did admit that a team solely composed of Shell fellows could scarcely hope to stand a chance against the Grammar School eleven or any other team of repute.

It was, as Monty Lowther had remarked, a nice kettle of fish. Yet what, Tom Merry asked himself, could he do? To begin with, he did not need telling that Kildare, as senior skipper, would never allow a battle to be fought on the footer field between Shell and Fourth in the present circumstances. It could only lead to further bitterness and trouble. In any case, Kildare would refuse to sanction the idea at all, knowing the school could only hope to win by playing the best men out of the Shell and the Fourth.

On the other hand, Tom had no intention of weakening his authority as junior skipper by giving way to the demands of the Fourth. It would only be the thin edge of the wedge. Moreover, Tom was not the fellow to be forced into anything against his better judgment, if he could help it.

As he lay back in the easy-chair, his brow black and bitter, the door opened and Talbot, the footer vice-captain, came in. His face was grave.

"I've just heard about the trouble, Tom," he said briefly. "Well, what's to be done?"

"Nothing," said Tom quietly. "Excepting that the Shell meets the Grammar School to-morrow."

"I knew you'd stick to that," said Talbot quietly. "You couldn't give way to the Fourth like that, Tom. You did right, and the only thing is to play up and make the best of a bad job."

"It's almost certain to mean a licking," muttered Tom. "And—well, it's a poor look-out for the future if the cads keep this game up."

"I don't think it will last," said Talbot. "They'll get tired of it, and come round sooner or later—especially when Kildare gets going. He won't stand much of this sort of thing."

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"But it's the match to-morrow!" said Tom Merry gloomily. "If we're licked—and it's ten to one we shall be—then the Fourth will crow and shout no end. It'll be dashed humiliating all round for us. But—but there's one way out!"

"I think so, too," said Talbot, nodding. "You mean to postpone the match, or cancel it? You can easily arrange that with Gordon Gay. We can play them again—when the Fourth have had time to think things over and come round—as I feel certain they will."

"That was what I was thinking of doing," assented Tom.

"It'll be rather a sell for Blake and his lot!" said Lowther, with a faint grin. "Yes, that's the wheeze, Tommy."

Tom Merry rose to his feet.

"I'll do it!" he said, his mind made up. "I'll get on the phone to Gay now! We've an open date next Wednesday, luckily, and let's hope to goodness those cads will have come round by then."

"Let's hope they will," agreed Talbot. "It's a queer business altogether, Tom, and it beats me. Nobody in the Shell believes you had a hand in that wretched affair of the attack on old Lathom. But someone did it."

"It was Lacy and those cads from the Grammar School!" said Tom. "I'm certain it was, and I'll make the cads own up to it sooner or later!"

"Are you sure of that?" asked Talbot quietly and thoughtfully. "I've been thinking things over lately, and—well, I'm wondering if anyone at St. Jim's knows anything about it. In any case, we know certain chaps who're very pally with Lacy."

Tom Merry started.

"Racke!" he breathed. "My hat! I never even thought of him in that connection!"

"I did," said Talbot, "though I don't like being suspicious of a fellow just because he's a cad and capable of any shady scheme, as Racke is. But the motive's there. Have you forgotten that Lathom got Racke thrashed by Railton for cheeking him? It was only the day before, and we know what a vengeful sweep Racke is. And the rotter hates you fellows like poison!"

"Phew!"

The Terrible Three eyed each other, suddenly struck by Talbot's suggestion.

"It's only a theory," said Talbot grimly. "But if you fellows mean to investigate matters, then you'll have that to work on. Lacy may have done it, but it's possible that he was put up to doing it by a St. Jim's fellow. And Racke's as likely a fellow as any."

"Phew! Yes rather! We'll work on that, Talbot!"

"But at the moment, what about Gay?" asked Talbot. "Hadh't you better ring him up right away, Tom? Scarcely fair to leave it until the last moment."

"I'll go now!" said Tom.

He quitted the room, dismissing Talbot's theory from his mind. In a couple of minutes he was in the prefects' room, ringing up the Grammar School. He got through almost at once, and Gordon Gay was soon brought to the phone.

"Hallo! You St. Jim's cripples again?" he called back in answer to Tom. "What's the matter now, Thomas?"

"I wanted to know if you'd mind putting off Saturday's match for a bit, Gay!" exclaimed Tom. "I'm awfully sorry to have to ask, but some of our best men can't play. I know you won't want a walk-over."

"Well, my hat!" answered Gay, with a chuckle. "How many more times d'you want to know that?"

"I don't understand you!" said Tom. "I haven't asked you before, fathead!"

"Well, comrade Blake did, less than ten minutes ago!" chuckled Gay. "How many junior skippers are there at your giddy show? He asked me to postpone the match until next Wednesday, and I agreed, thinking it was on your instructions, old bean."

"What?"

Tom Merry jumped.

"Blake asked you?" he almost yelled back.

"Yes; on the phone less than ten minutes ago," said Gay cheerily. "Why? Anything the matter, kid?"

Tom Merry did not answer for the moment. He couldn't. In a flash he understood Blake's game, and he bit his lip, with sudden fury. But realising it would never do to let Gay know there was trouble at St. Jim's, the captain of the Shell forced himself to speak calmly.

"No; it's all right, old man!" he gasped at last. "I didn't know Blake intended to phone. All serene! Then shall we say next Wednesday?"

"Right-ho! Your licking can keep for a few days, old chap!"

"Sure you don't mind—"

"Not at all! Bye-bye! Mind you wear your chest-

protector and wash your neck before you meet us, Tommy."

And the cheery Grammarian leader rang off. Tom Merry lowered the receiver and stood for a moment, breathing hard.

The news that Blake had played such a trick—had taken it upon himself to postpone a school match filled the junior captain with seething rage.

Good-tempered and forbearing though he was, Tom Merry was white with fury now. He stood thinking for a few moments, and then hurried from the room.

"Oh, the cad!" he muttered. "The howling rotter! Well, he's asked for trouble, and he can have it!"

CHAPTER 7.

Trouble!

REGINALD TALBOT was still in Study No. 10 when Tom Merry arrived back there, and he looked up eagerly.

"Well, what does Gay say?" he demanded. "Does he agree— Why, what's the matter, Tom?"

Lowther and Manners also stared as they saw the look of fury in their leader's face.

"What's up now, Tom?" asked Manners. "You look fairly pipped!" remarked Lowther.

"Matter?" burst out Tom furiously. "I'll soon tell you that. But—come along to Blake's study and you shall hear it there."

He was turning to go out again, when Talbot caught his arm.

"Here, hold on, Tom!" he said quietly. "I can see something's happened. But you don't want to go rushing there in your present mood, old man. Wait a bit and tell us first. What's happened?"

Tom breathed hard, but he did not attempt to drag his arm away.

"I'll tell you," he said, calming himself with an effort. "That cad Blake's gone a bit too far this time. He—he's actually had the cheek to phone Gay and postpone the match—on his own!"

"Phew!" "It's an insult to you as well as me, Talbot!" said Tom fiercely. "You're vice-captain, and if you'll stand being treated as of no account by that rotter, I jolly well won't!"

"But I don't quite—" "Don't you see the game?" shouted Tom. "He's phoned to Gay behind our backs, cancelling the match for Saturday. Were we to turn up on the field to-morrow we should find those Fourth rotters there, instead of the Grammarians. That's the game, of course. Blake knows well enough that with a crowd round the ropes expecting a match we shouldn't dare to refuse to play them. The crowd would call us the biggest funks out, and we should never hear the last of it."

"That's a bit thick!" agreed Talbot gravely. "There'd be trouble if Kildare knew about it, Tom. But—but I'm afraid we shall be called funks, in any case, if we do refuse to face the Fourth."

"Do you think I care what the Fourth think?" hooted Tom. "But I'm going to have this out with Blake right away, Talbot. I'll show him that he can't do things like this behind my back without reckoning with me!"

(Continued on next page.)

500 natural history questions submitted by my young readers.

Q. How many tons of mud are scraped out of London in the course of a week?

A. This somewhat unusual question has been sent in to me by a junior reader, who signs himself "Good at Arithmetick." Including the mud dredged from the Thames, my chum, I should say about 5,000,000 tons. This round figure, however, does not include the amount I dredge out of my inkwell after the office boy has made his usual pretence of cleaning it! By the way, my young reader, I trust when you write to me next, you may be entitled to sign yourself "Good at Spelling!"

Q. What is a sbirro?

A. An Italian policeman.

Q. Who is Old Sol?

A. Sol is the Latin term for sun, which, no doubt, is what you have heard referred to by your elders. "Ill-treated Fag," when the expression "Old Sol" has been used. Our word "solar" is derived from this source, and the solar system refers to the sun and the other heavenly bodies. And, talking of bodies, I hope you have got over the licking which you say the school captain gave you, and that your pet mice have recovered from the distemper.

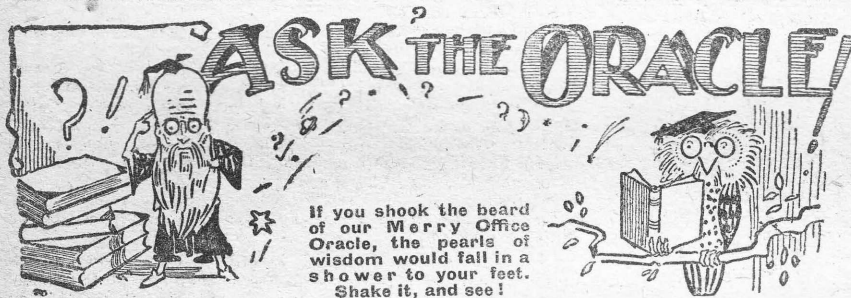


This noble-looking fellow is the secretary bird.

Q. What is a cameo?

A. A relief carving in stone, usually a semi-precious stone such as onyx, agate, turquoise, sardonyx, peridot, etc. Many cameos come from Italy.

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If you shook the beard of our Merry Office Oracle, the pearls of wisdom would fall in a shower to your feet. Shake it, and see!

Q. Are there pockets in a jockey's tunic?

A. No, my young reader who signs himself "Fond of Animals." So if you have a jockey pal, don't choose that time just before a race to try and "touch" him for the nimble bob.

Q. Is it true that Columbus discovered America?

A. Stebbs minor, of Castle St. Elmar Preparatory School, states that his major gave him this piece of information to set down in an exam. paper, but greatly doubts its truth. So far as I know, Stebbs

minor, your brother has told you correctly for once. Others have been named as the first discoverers of America, and quite recently it has been claimed that a Welshman named Owen Gwynedd, of Anglesey, found America no less than 300 years before Columbus landed there. If so, it serves him right!

Q. Where is the Bridge of Sighs?

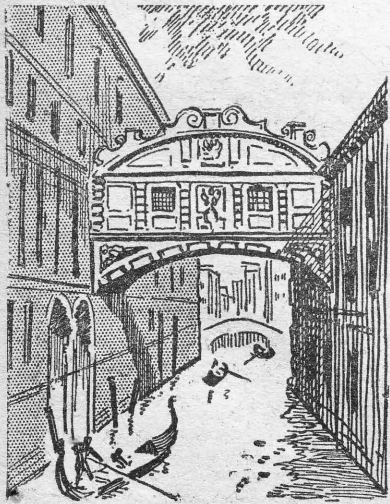
A. A small and graceful bridge that spans one of the many canals in Venice. It is so-called because sentenced prisoners passed over it from the Doge's palace to the State prisons.

Q. What is a secretary bird?

A. A secretary bird, "Lover of Nature," is a resident of Africa. The picture will give you an idea of what this fellow looks like. The bird preys on small animals— notably snakes—which it kills with a swift stamp of one of its powerful legs. The name "secretary" is derived from the tuft of feathers looking like a quill stuck behind its ear.

Q. What is a yak?

A. If, when you come to London, George Smythe, of Birmingham, you pay a visit to the Zoo you will probably see one there. The yak (*Bos grunniens*, as we scientists who dislike short words, call it) is a native chiefly of the high plateaus of Tibet. The average yak is about the height of a man; it lives on what grass it can find, and is useful as a beast of burden. It may be brown in colour, black and white, or even pure white, and as it ambles along, looks rather like an animated hearthrug. Unfortunately, I do not happen to have a pet yak at home, or I would put it up as first prize in a simple competition for the best set of



One of the most famous bridges in the world—the Bridge of Sighs in Venice.

And this time the captain of the Shell snatched away his arm and strode away, his face dark with rage. Talbot looked at the astonished Lowther and Manners, and then all three left the study and hurried after their leader. They realised that in his present mood Tom would very soon be in the thick of trouble, and would need friends to stand by him.

Arrived in the Fourth Form passage, Tom Merry sent the door of Study No. 6 crashing back and strode into the study. Blake, Herries, Digby, and D'Arcy were all at home, and they jumped to their feet as they saw who their visitor was. Obviously the junior captain was out for trouble.

"Hallo! What's this mean?" snapped Blake, colouring a little, as he met Tom's burning look. "Don't they teach you manners in the Shell, Merry?"

Tom strove to keep his temper in check.

"I've come to ask for an explanation, Blake!" he said thickly. "I've just been on the phone to Gay, at the Grammar School."

"Oh! Oh, my hat!"

Blake started violently. He had quite overlooked the possibility of Tom, or any other Shell fellow, ringing up the Grammar School on the phone. He had been quite sure that it was impossible for anyone to get into touch with the Grammarians before the match now, but he had not bargained on anyone else doing as he had done.

"You—you've been on the phone to Gay?" he echoed feebly. "Oh, my hat!"

He was absolutely taken aback for the moment.

"You cad!" hissed Tom. "Who, in thunder, gave you authority to postpone a match, Blake? Gay says you asked him to postpone it. What d'you mean by that, you cheeky cad?"

Blake did not answer for a moment. His great scheme had come unstuck fairly, and he did not know what to say. But he had no intention of denying it.

"Well, it's true enough," he said coolly, after a pause. "You refused to meet us on the field, and that was my plan to make you. No need to come here shouting about it, as far as I can see."

"No need!" shouted Tom angrily. "D'you think I'm going to take this lying down? Your game was to flout me and to make a fool of me! And if I hadn't happened to ring up Gay you'd have succeeded, you howling cad!"

Blake reddened.

"That's enough!" he said, his eyes gleaming. "If you've come here to call me names, Merry, you've come hunting for trouble—and you'll get it quickly enough!"

"I've come for trouble!" snapped Tom. "I've come here to show you, Blake, that you can't treat me just as you like and get away with it. Put your fists up, you rotter! Quick!"

"Bah Jove! Pway do not—"

But Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's words of peace came too late—in fact, they were unavailing, in any case. The next instant Blake had his fists up, and Tom Merry had gone for him with a rush.

He easily knocked aside Blake's hurried guard, and a smashing right-hander sent the leader of the Fourth full length on the carpet.

But he was up in a flash, his eyes blazing now; and the next instant the two were at it hammer and tongs. It was useless to try to stop the scrap, all the juniors saw that now, and they hurriedly moved chairs and the table back out of the way. Then Talbot jumped to the door and grasped the key, intending to lock it.

He was too late, however—it was a precaution that should have been taken at first. Almost before anyone was aware of it a tall, active form had sprung across the room, and the two struggling figures were wrenched apart and sent staggering back.

"That's enough!" snapped Eric Kildare—for it was he. "Looks as if I've arrived just in time. What does this mean?"

He looked at Tom Merry, his eyes hard and angry.

"I'm speaking to you, Merry!" he rapped out. "You've thundering soon forgotten my warning to you, it seems! Evidently you're still looking for trouble!"

Tom Merry was silent. He drew out his handkerchief and dabbed a streaming nose, but he did not reply.

"Well, haven't you anything to say?" demanded Kildare angrily. "I've spoken to you and warned you about this footling rowing. But here you are again, fighting on your own this time. I want to know if you think you're fit to hold the job of junior skipper?"

Tom Merry went scarlet. To be slanged like this before other fellows was far from pleasant, and it was a rare thing for Kildare to do. But the captain of the Shell did not answer. Blake did, however.

He stepped forward grimly, feeling it was up to him to explain matters.

"This wasn't Merry's fault at all, Kildare," he said

coolly. "I suppose I asked for it. Merry only did what any other fellow in his position would have done, I suppose."

Kildare turned on him.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "I was just coming to see you, Blake. I was going to ask you what the dickens you meant by interfering with the junior team list. I suppose you did it—crossing out the names of the Fourth-Formers?"

"Yes, I did," said Blake coolly.

"And I suppose this is the result!" said Kildare, looking at Tom Merry. "You came here rowing Blake about it, Merry!"

"No, he didn't, Kildare," answered Blake swiftly. "He came here on quite a different matter."

"Then what—"

"I'm not afraid to explain," said Blake grimly. "If you want to know, I rang up Gay at the Grammar School and postponed Saturday's match. And I did it on my own without consulting Merry."



There were startled gasps from Tom Merry & Co., as they almost v torch suddenly flashed on, and the light revealed the grinning, triumphant (See

"What?" yelled Kildare.

"Just that!" said Blake recklessly. "That explains this little scrap. Merry came here to ask for an explanation, and this is the result. We were fighting it out."

"Well, I'm dashed!" said Eric Kildare.

He eyed Blake blankly. And then he gave a growl. Kildare was a fellow who took the duties of office very seriously, and he always resented interference from anyone. Blake knew perfectly well that Kildare would look at the matter in a serious light. And he was right.

"You—you cheeky little sweep!" he gasped. "Merry, is that a fact?"

"Yes. I rang up Gay and discovered it a few minutes ago."

"Well, my hat! But what did you do it for, Blake?" snapped Kildare angrily. "Who the dickens gave you permission to postpone a match?"

"I did it on my own. Merry refused to allow the Shell to meet the Fourth to prove which was the better team. I asked him to postpone Saturday's match and play us, the winners to represent the school afterwards."

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Kildare. "Of all the cheek! I should think Merry did refuse, you fooling young idiot! But does that list mean that you Fourth chaps refuse to play in the ordinary team?" he added grimly.

"Yes—we refuse to play under Tom Merry, or any Shell fellow. And nobody can make us play if we don't wish to!" Kildare breathed hard.

"So that's it!" he said curtly. "I might have expected something like this. So you refuse to play under Merry, Blake?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can't make you, as you say," said Kildare in a



into a tall figure in the passage outside the Shell dormitory. A face of Gerald Knox! "Knox!" "Oh, my hat!" "Great pip!"

grim tone. "But I can teach you better than to interfere with the junior skipper as you have done. Merry takes his orders from me, and when you flout his authority you flout mine, Blake. You'll come to my study for a licking in ten minutes, my lad. Merry!"

"Yes, Kildare?"

"You'd better postpone the Grammar School match; get on the phone and postpone it officially."

"I've done that," said Tom Merry.

"Good! We don't want St. Jim's licked to the wide!" said Kildare. "The match can be played when these idiots have come to their senses. As for the Fourth playing the Shell, I absolutely forbid it. You understand, Merry?"

"Yes."

"There's to be no match to-morrow," said Kildare, glaring at the flushed Blake. "I'm not allowing any silly young ass to play his high-handed games here, Blake. Got that?"

"Yes!" grunted Blake.

"Then that's enough. You Shell kids clear out of this—sharp! I'll expect you ten minutes from now, Blake."

He waited until Tom Merry and his chums had departed,

and then he went out himself, giving Blake a grim look as he did so.

"Dished and done!" gasped Blake. "Well, my hat! I have expected the wheeze to come unstuck like this!"

"I stwongly advised you not to do it, Blake—I told you so!" said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "I told you—"

"Oh, you ring off!" snorted Blake. "Well, it can't be helped, and, what's more, I'm not done yet! I'll make Tom Merry toe the line somehow, you see if I don't!"

Arthur Augustus said no more. He knew it was useless to argue with Jack Blake in his present mood. But he shook his head very seriously indeed. Matters seemed to be going from bad to worse, and Arthur Augustus realised that peace was as far off as ever.

CHAPTER 8.

Tom Merry Agrees!

JACK BLAKE duly presented himself at Kildare's study for the promised "licking"—which proved to be "six" from the prefect's ashpant. Kildare laid it on well, and afterwards gave Blake a scathing lecture that made that determined junior see things in a somewhat different light than he had done.

None the less, it did not lessen Blake's resolution. Meeting the Shell on the footer field in public was out of the question now, whether Tom Merry would agree or not. And it was also out of the question to hope that a team solely composed of Fourth fellows would ever represent St. Jim's.

But though Blake's ambition in that respect was quashed for good, his determination to make the Shell fellows meet the Fourth in a trial of skill was as strong as ever. He was determined at all events to prove the superiority of the Fourth.

Blake did little prep that evening. He spent the whole time pondering over the problem of getting Tom Merry to agree to his proposal. At last a plan occurred to him, and he scribbled a note and threw it across the table to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Take that to Tom Merry, Gussy, will you?" he snapped.

"Bai Jove! What is it, Blake?"

"Read it and see!"

Arthur Augustus read it, and jumped. For the note ran as follows:

"To Tom Merry—As the leader of the Fourth, I hereby challenge the Shell to play a Fourth team on Little Side after lights-out to-night by moonlight, time and length of match to be mutually agreed upon. You refused to meet us before, because you feared we might win, and so earn the right to represent St. Jim's. Now Kildare has scotched that possibility, the excuse holds good no longer. It will be a fight to prove only which are the better men. If you refuse to consider this, then we'll know what to think—that you funk meeting us, and we'll see everyone knows it.

"Jack Blake."

"Bai—bai Jove!" stuttered Arthur Augustus. "Are you potty, Blake?"

"Not at all!" said Blake calmly. "It's been as light as day for the last three nights, and to-night's the same—or going to be by the look of things. Run along with that, Gussy, and wait their answer."

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

"Bai Jove!" he said. "I am afraid I do not approve of this, Blake. It will only lead to more trouble, dear boy."

"Rot! If there is any trouble it'll be their making and not mine."

"Vewy well, Blake, I will take it," said Gussy doubtfully.

He left the study and went along to the Shell passage. He found the Terrible Three in Study No. 10 with Talbot. They were talking glumly, and there was no sign of prep being done.

"Blake asked me to bring this, Tom Mewwy," said Arthur Augustus briefly, and he handed over the note.

For a moment Tom hesitated, but with a grunt he decided to read it. He opened the note, and as his eyes scanned it he jumped, as Gussy had done.

"Well, my only hat!" he gasped. "Is that fool Blake going off his chump? Read that, Talbot!"

Talbot read it, and whistled.

"The—the silly fool!" said Tom Merry. "He's still trying his games on, then? But—but—"

He paused. Blake was obviously in earnest, and now the possibility of the Fourth representing the school was out of the question, a match between the two Forms was a somewhat different proposition. Certainly it would be giving way to Blake's demands. But even that, added to the

risk of a licking, was better than being called funks by the whole school.

"What do you think about it, Talbot?" said Tom grimly.

"I think I should consider it," said Talbot slowly. "It sounds weird, but—well, it may result in better relations between us and the Fourth. There's always the risk of it ending in a row, but there's a bigger risk of that if we refuse. We're defying Kildare, of course, if we do accept the challenge."

"I'll risk that," said Tom. "Look here, Talbot, I think perhaps you're right—it may do good. There's nothing like a good tussle on the footer field for shifting bad blood. But I'll only agree on one consideration."

"What's that?"

"That the Fourth agree to play the game afterwards and take their usual places in the team."

"Good man!" said Talbot. "I somehow think Blake will agree to that."

"Come on, then! We'll come with you, Gussy."

"Wight, deah boy!" said Gussy quite cordially. "I weally do trust that it will do good all wound."

But he felt very doubtful. They soon reached Study No. 6, and Blake faced them coolly as they entered.

"I've read your note, Blake," said Tom Merry quietly. "I'll agree to what you ask on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That you Fourth chaps will take your places in the team whatever the result of the match. I'm asking this for the good of St. Jim's, Blake. Kildare's dealt with that phoning matter, and I'll say no more about it. It rests with you whether this feud goes on. But where footer is concerned I claim that it's the job of any decent fellow to play the game and put school first."

Blake said nothing for the moment. As a matter of fact, Kildare had made him see only too clearly that he was in the wrong—that school came first, and that the splitting up of the team was damaging their chances hopelessly.

"Right!" said Blake grudgingly. "I agree to that. But it doesn't mean that we're altering our attitude towards the Shell over what's happened," he added. "For the good of the school we'll play in the team. But outside footer the feud goes on until you've owned up—you know what about."

Tom Merry seemed about to blaze out, but he held himself in check.

"We won't discuss that!" he snapped. "We're not likely to own up to what we didn't do, Blake. So—well, what about starting the game at eleven o'clock?"

"That's good enough!"

"Right! The Shell team will be on Little Side at eleven!" snapped Tom. He nodded to his chums, and they left the study. For good or ill the die was cast and the match would be played—by moonlight.

It was a risky proceeding—doubly so after Kildare's warning. But it was an enticing prospect—a match by moonlight was something out of the ordinary, and the news created great excitement when it became known. It was necessary to acquaint the New House members of the two teams with the arrangement, and this alone was a risky matter. But both Tom and Blake managed to slip out unseen, and the New House footballers, both Shell and Fourth, jumped at the prospect.

Naturally secrecy was necessary, and both Tom and Blake took care that only the players themselves should be told. Yet with all their care the news leaked out, and by bedtime the junior Common-room was buzzing with it.

Aubrey Racke heard it, and scowled. He fancied he saw in the match a change of feeling on both sides, and the possibility of Shell and Fourth becoming reconciled did not suit his book at all.

Yet upon reflection the cad of the Shell also fancied he saw a good chance of bringing about still further trouble between the fellows he hated. And his opportunity to put his rascally plan into effect came sooner than he expected.

As Crooke, Mellish, and he were leaving the Common-room to go up to the dormitory Racke happened to glance behind him, and his eyes glinted evilly as he caught sight of a figure in the passage behind. It was Gerald Knox of the Sixth.

"Slow down, chaps!" he breathed. "Now's our chance of putting a spoke in the wheel of those cads again. Slow down and back me up."

There was no time to explain, for Knox was nearly upon them, and Racke acted swiftly.

"It's a fact, you fellows," he said in a cool voice. "Tom Merry and his pals mean to slip out after lights out. I heard them talking about it myself. Just before eleven, I believe."

"What a nerve! If they're copped—oh!"

Racke stopped speaking with a well-assumed gasp of alarm as Knox brushed past them. The prefect looked shrewdly at Racke, but he did not stop. It was obvious that he had heard, however—the cad of the Shell had made

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sure of that. And Knox more than suspected that Racke had intended him to hear.

"All serene!" grinned Racke. "I fancy that's the first step towards cooking their goose. The next job is yours, Mellish."

"Mine?" gasped Mellish in alarm.

"Yes, dear man! Blake, and his lot will get out all right, and when they're gone you're going to slip from the dorm and fasten the lower box-room window. That's how they're going to get out, to-night, of course."

"But—but it's awfully risky, Racke. If I'm caught—"

"It'll be your own look-out," returned Racke coolly. "But you're going to do it, or you'll have me to deal with, old bean. Got that?"

"Y-e-es, Racke!" mumbled the sneak of the Fourth.

And Racke went up to bed smiling. He knew Mellish would obey his instructions, and that his scheme was as good as worked. But Aubrey Racke little dreamed that that cunningly-engineered plot was to prove but the beginning of the end—for him!

CHAPTER 9.

Caught!

"READY, you fellows?"

Tom Merry whispered the question.

It was long after lights-out—nearly eleven o'clock to be exact. As Blake had anticipated it was nearly as light as day outside—bright moonlight came through the tall windows of the dormitory, and fell in silvery patches on the floor. It was an ideal night for the juniors' purpose, strange as that purpose was at that hour of the winter's night.

As a matter of fact Tom Merry himself was quite keen on it now. Playing footer by moonlight was an enticing prospect, and he slipped from bed eagerly as he gave the word.

In a very few moments half the fellows in the room were hurriedly dressing, whispering together excitedly as they did so.

"This is rather a lark!" chuckled Monty Lowther.

"It won't be a lark if we're collared though!" said Manners grimly. "Still, there's really little chance of that. The playing fields won't be visible even in this light, from the school windows, and the only risk is the sound of the ball—though that's scarcely likely to be heard."

"We've got to play up," said Tom Merry warningly.

"We've got to play as we've never played before, you chaps. If those Fourth bouncers beat us—well, we shan't be allowed to forget it in a hurry. Ready? Then come on!"

All were soon ready, and with whispered good wishes from the other fellows who were awake, they crept from the room. To get their footer things from the changing-room was out of the question at that hour of the night, though most of the juniors had hidden spare pairs of footer boots in the box-room. For the rest they intended to play in their ordinary clothes.

Tom Merry led the way out of the Shell dormitory, and as he did so, he almost walked into a tall figure in the passage outside.

The junior captain gave a startled gasp that was echoed an instant later by the fellows behind him.

It was dark in the passage, but dark as it was they soon realised who the tall form was.

"Knox!" breathed Lowther. "Oh, my hat!"

"Great pip!"

It was Gerald Knox right enough. A light suddenly flashed as, almost involuntarily, Wilkins switched on the torch in his hand. It revealed Knox's grinning triumphant face.

"Caught, my pippins!" he exclaimed grimly. "Railton will be very interested to hear about this in the morning. What's the game, kids?"

Tom Merry did not reply, nor did any of the other juniors. They were too startled and taken aback for that.

"Some more of this footling rowing with the Fourth, what?" smiled Knox, calmly relieving Wilkins of his torch. "Going to raid them, eh? I was just waiting for you to come out, kids."

"You—you were waiting!" breathed Tom Merry.

"Exactly," said the unpopular prefect, with a grin. "A little bird told me I should make a catch, if I came along here at eleven. I didn't expect to make such a big catch, though." He flashed his light over the little crowd. "I'll remember you all," he went on grimly. "You'll all have a nice little interview with Railton in the morning."

Tom Merry drew a deep breath of relief. It was obvious that Knox had no idea what their game was—he obviously did not dream they had intended to break out of the school. Yet, though deeply relieved, Tom felt a sudden surge of anger. Knox's words made it clear that he had received some information, at least, of what was to take

place after lights-out that night. It could only mean that someone had played traitor—that someone had given them away.

Who was it? Knox did not enlighten them. He suddenly changed his mocking, triumphant tone.

"Get back to bed—sharp!" he snapped. "And no more of this, mind. I'll make it my business to keep a close eye on this dormitory to-night. And in case you happen to feel like straying out again I'll lock you in, my pippins. In you go!"

There was nothing else for it, and the eleven Shell fellows crowded back into the dormitory.

"Well, my hat!" breathed Tom Merry, looking round at the scared faces. "Diddled and dished fairly! This means trouble for us in the morning."

"Some cad's given us away!" snapped Bernard Glyn. "That's pretty clear," said Wilkins, with a grunt. "My hat! It can't have been the Fourth? They wouldn't—"

"That's rot!" said Tom. "Why should they have wanted to play us, then? No, there's something thumping fishy about this business, chaps. But—my hat! Those Fourth chaps will be waiting for us on Little Side—if they've got out safely."

"What's to be done?" asked Talbot. "Nothing we can do," said Tom glumly, "except to get back to bed. We're locked in and couldn't get out if we wanted to. Besides, Knox is sure to be prowling about for a long time yet. We don't want to bag a flogging or the sack! We're already booked for a good licking by the look of things."

And as it seemed to be the only thing to do, the Shell footballers undressed and got into bed again. It was a dismal ending to the adventure they had looked forward to—though it wasn't ended yet had they known it.

For Blake and his followers had managed to get out safely enough. And even at that moment they were making their way cautiously towards Little Side, taking advantage of the shadows of buildings and hedges. In the quadrangle they had been joined by Figgins & Co. and also by three Shell fellows—French, Jimson, and Thompson, of the New House.

"Nobody there yet," announced Jimson, as the playing fields came in sight.

"There was no sign of them when we left the School House," said Blake briefly. "I shouldn't be surprised if they let us down after all. It's just what you Shell rotters would do."

"Well, we're here anyway," said Jimson. "And the rest of our chaps out of the Shell will turn up, never fear! We're not afraid of you Fourth cripples anyway."

"One of you get a ball," said Blake. "We'll be ready, at all events."

It was easy to get into the pavilion where spare footballs were always kept. One of the side windows was wide open, and Arthur Augustus, being the slimmest fellow present, slipped through and got one. In a few moments the daring juniors were busy at work, punting the ball about to keep themselves warm.

The minutes passed slowly, but Blake soon began to get impatient.

"Hanged if I don't begin to wonder if they are going to turn up," he snapped. "Jimson, did Tom Merry tell you eleven prompt?"

"Yes; he said he'd be here sharp to time!"

"Well, it's ten minutes past," said Blake curtly. "I'm getting fed-up with this!"

All the footballers did as the ten minutes lengthened to fifteen and then twenty. But they did not give up hope until twelve had chimed across the fields from the school clock-tower. Then they stopped punting the ball about and drew together.

"Midnight!" said Blake, his eyes glinting with anger. "We've been done, you fellows! The howling cads never meant to come—that's pretty clear! We've been made fools of!"

Furious faces surrounded Blake—even the three Shell fellows from the New House were angry. They had enjoyed the punting about, but they were furious at the thought of being tricked.

"Bai Jove! This is weally the limit, deah boys!" said Arthur Augustus. "I am uttably surprisid at Tom Mewwy playin' such a twick!"

"Surprised!" echoed Blake scornfully. "What can you expect from fellows who'd attack an old chap like Lathom—a decent old bird, who's worth a dozen of old Linton. Well, we might as well get back. But we'll have an explanation from that howling cad Merry in the morning!"

"Yes, rather!"

Fairly simmering with fury, the juniors returned to the school. Parting from the Shell fellows and Figgins & Co. in the quad, Blake and the others made their way in silence towards the School House. They reached the out-house, and, keeping well in the shadows of the building, clambered cautiously on to the leads. Then they crept, one after the other, towards the box-room window. It was Blake who made the startling discovery—a discovery that almost made his followers faint with horror.

The window was fastened!

It had been left partly open—Blake was certain of that. Moreover, when he tried to raise the sash with his fingers, it did not move. He tried his pocket-knife, but the only result was to break both blades in an effort to raise the sash.

"It's no good!" he panted. "We're locked out—locked out for the night!"

It was a terrible discovery, and the juniors looked at each other in the shadows with white faces.

"Those cads!" breathed Blake. "They've tricked us and—and fastened the window—locked us out! Who'd have believed it of the rotters?"

Certainly none of the Fourth-Formers would have believed it but for the seeming proof. Arthur Augustus, however, suddenly offered another theory.

"They may have been caught coming out," he said. "Possibly Waitton caught them and fastened the window, not knowin' we were out, deah boys."

"I don't believe it!" said Blake savagely. "The cads have tricked us and played traitor. This means a flogging or the sack, if we can't get in!"

"There's only one thing for it," said Levison quietly. "We'll have to wake someone up in the Fourth, somehow, and risk waking a beak. Nothing else for it."

It was certainly the only thing to do, risky as it was. The juniors were already cold and shivering, and they couldn't stay out all night. They had to take the risk.

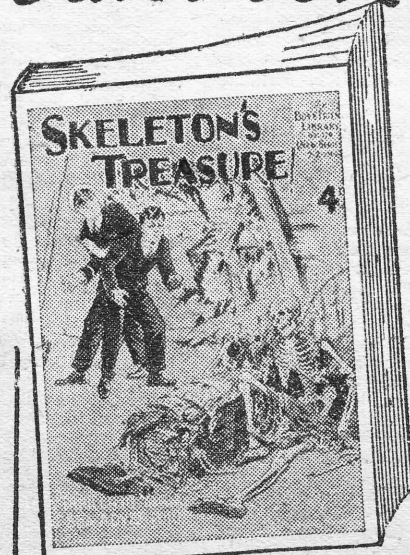
A moment later they were hurrying round to where the windows of the Fourth Form dormitory overlooked the quad. Very cautiously Blake threw up a handful of gravel from the path at the nearest window.

His first aim missed, and the gravel struck the wall. But his next attempt was successful, and the gravel rattled on the glass with a noise that made the Fourth-Formers jump with fear.

But nothing happened; and, after a minute's painful suspense, Blake tried again.

(Continued on next page.)

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This time the noise of the gravel was heard from within—fortunately, from the dormitory. The face of Tompkins suddenly appeared, pressed against the pane. Then they heard the sash softly raised and Clarence York Tompkins poked his head out. He blinked down at the little group huddled below in amazement.

"Hallo, you fellows! What's the matter?" he called down. "Can't you get in?"

"No!" snapped Blake. "Someone's fastened the box-room window. Hurry round and open it, Tompkins. Buck up, for goodness' sake!"

"Oh dear! Oh crumbs! All right," gasped Clarence York.

He vanished from the window, and in heartfelt relief Blake and his companions hurried back to the leads above the outhouse. They had scarcely been there a few moments when Tompkins appeared, and he soon had the window open. The juniors clambered through thankfully, one after the other. Blake closed the window and fastened it.

"Thank goodness for that!" he panted. "Good man, Tompy! If you hadn't heard us—"

"I've been awake since you chaps left," smiled Tompkins, as pleased as punch at having been of use for once. "But how did you fellows get locked out?"

"That's what we mean to find out, Tompy!" said Blake, in tones of concentrated anger.

"Bai Jove! Why not leave it until mornin', deah boys?"

"Rot! I'm not waiting until morning for one!" snapped Blake. "Come on! It's the Shell dormitory for us!"

"Yes, rather!"

All of the Fourth-Formers were seething with rage, and they followed Blake as he left the box-room, grim resolution in his face. At the door of the Fourth Form dormitory Tompkins left them, and they hurried on to the passage where the Shell dormitory was situated. But Blake got his first surprise when he reached the door, turned the handle, and discovered that it was locked!

What did that mean?

CHAPTER 10.

Suspicion!

"My hat!" breathed Blake. "Have the cowards locked it?"

The next moment he realised that the fellows in the dormitory couldn't have done, as he found that the key was in the lock on the outside. Knox, as it happened, had contented himself with doing that.

"Well, my hat!" said Herries, in a whisper. "That looks queer!"

Blake turned the key quietly, opened the door, and entered the shadowy room. As he did so a Shell fellow sat up in bed.

"Who's that?" he exclaimed. "Oh, it's you, Knox!"

"No, it isn't Knox!" snapped Blake. "It's Blake and the rest of the fellows you've tricked and played the traitor to, Tom Merry!"

The captain of the Shell did not answer for the moment. He lit a candle; and, roused by the voices, several other fellows sat up in bed. Tom himself had been dozing, and the opening of the door had startled him until he suddenly remembered Knox.

Tom Merry slipped out of bed.

"I half-expected you to make some such charge, though I'm blessed if I know why you should call me a traitor, Blake. But doesn't the locked door tell you anything—locked on the outside?"

"I don't pretend to understand that," said Blake.

"I'll explain it, then," said Tom quickly before he could go on. "Knox caught us just as we were leaving the dorm to-night. Someone had sneaked—given us away to him. He was good as told us that."

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"He ordered us back to bed, and told us he'd be on the prowl," said Tom curtly. "He's going to report us to Railton in the morning. Was it likely we'd leave the dorm after that? But that isn't all, as you can see. Knox locked us in, though we didn't know the key was still in the lock."

Blake was taken aback. He had been about to burst into a furious tirade—to make his charge against the Shell. But he hardly knew what to say now.

"Is that a fact, Tom Merry?" asked Levison quietly.

"Yes. If you don't believe me," said Tom bitterly, "you've only got to ask Talbot and these other fellows. We didn't let you down purposely."

Blake breathed hard. There was no doubting the truth of Tom's words now.

"But—but didn't any of you leave the dormitory at all?" he stammered.

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"Of course not. How could we with the dashed door locked?"

"Then," said Blake, slowly and deliberately, "there's some dirty work going on somewhere. When we got back to the box-room window we found it fastened against us."

"What?"

"I left it open a few inches," said Blake. "It was fastened securely when we got back. We were locked out. And if Tompkins hadn't happened to be awake we should have been outside yet—perhaps locked out for the night!"

"Phew!"

It was the turn of Tom Merry & Co. to show amazement.

"Then it looks as if the fellow who gave us away to Knox was the fellow who locked you out!" breathed Tom Merry. "I suppose you're not going to suggest now that it was a Shell fellow?"

"I see it couldn't have been," said Blake quietly.

"But—"

"It must have been a fellow out of the Fourth," said Levison, looking startled. "No good blinking at that, Blake!"

"I'm not," said Blake, biting his lip. "But we'll soon prove that. Tompkins says he was awake from the time we left until we came back."

There was a sudden gasp from a bed in the corner of the Shell dormitory, but nobody seemed to hear it. The gasp came from Racke's bed. The bed was in the shadows, which was just as well for Racke, for his face was white now. He saw that his scheme was tumbling about his ears. Knox's action in locking the door had utterly ruined his cunning plot. Instead of resulting in widening the breach between Shell and Fourth, it looked as if it was going to bring the rival Forms together somewhat. More, it was beginning also to look as if the scheme might recoil upon his own head, unless he or Mellish was very careful!

Blake turned to Arthur Augustus.

"Fetch Tompkins here, Gussy!" he ordered briefly.

"We'll look into this here and now."

Gussy vanished, and soon he reappeared with Tompkins. That youth looked a trifle scared.

"Did anyone leave the Fourth Form dormitory between the time we left and the time we returned?" asked Blake. "You told us you were awake—"

"I was awake all the time—couldn't sleep," said Clarence York, blushing self-consciously as he felt all eyes upon him. "Yes, of course. Mellish left the dorm!"

"What?"

"Bai Jove!"

"So Mellish left the dorm, did he?" said Blake, a curious gleam appearing in his eyes. "Fetch Mellish here, some of you."

"My hat, yes!"

Percy Mellish was very soon brought, and he looked at the grim faces of the footballers with scared eyes. He had not wanted to come, but several slippers had persuaded him.

"What d'you fellows want me for?" he stammered.

"Only to know if you left the dormitory after we'd gone, Mellish?" asked Blake carelessly. "Did you?"

"Of course not!" said Mellish promptly.

"But Tompkins here says you did?" said Blake grimly.

Mellish jumped, and his eyes seemed to glitter as he looked at the startled Clarence York.

"He—he's lying!" he stammered. "I didn't! I know nothing about the—" He pulled up abruptly.

"About what?" asked Blake. "Go on, Mellish!"

Mellish was silent—he had very nearly given himself away. "Did Mellish know you'd seen him leave the dorm, Tompkins?" demanded Levison.

"No—I don't think so!" said Tompkins. "I was lying half asleep really, and I didn't trouble to move or speak. But I did see Mellish—at least, someone left Mellish's bed and went out. I saw him—I did, really."

"I fancy we know who to believe," said Tom Merry quietly, eyeing Mellish's shrinking form scornfully. "Tompkins may be a bit of a duffer, but I've never known him tell a lie yet. But Mellish—"

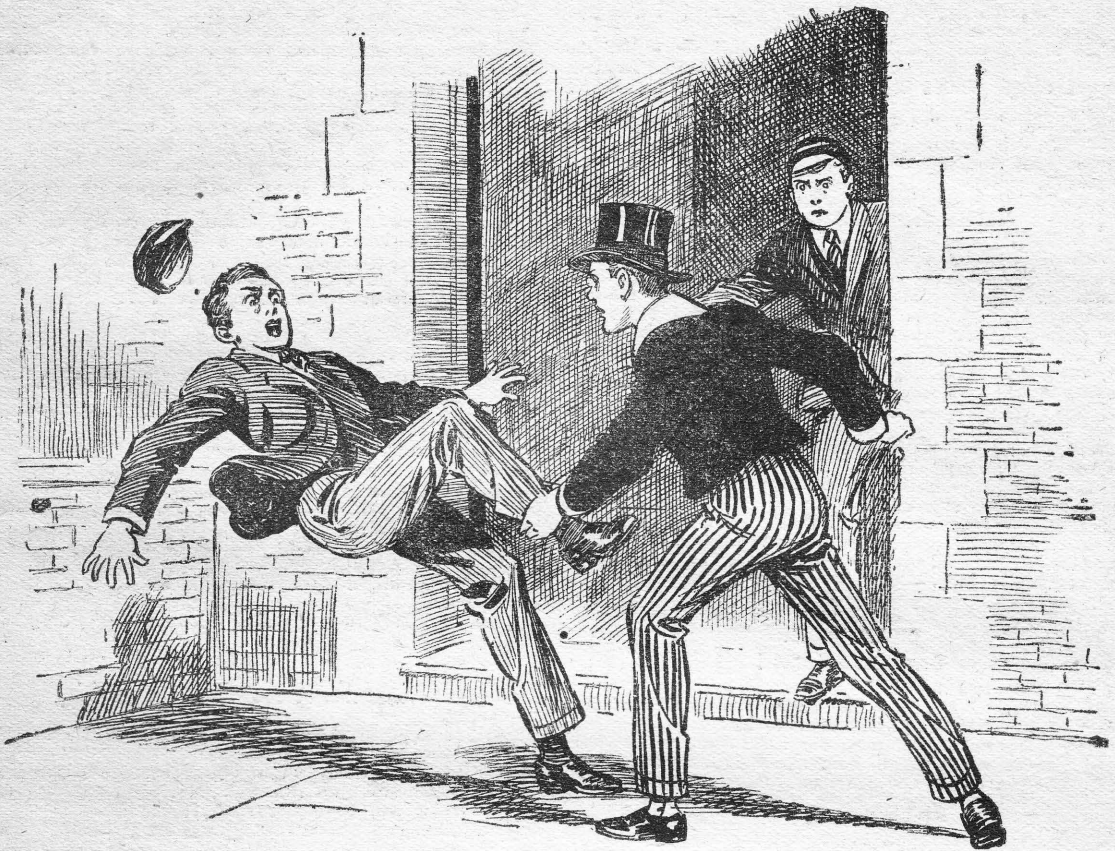
"I tell you I didn't!" gasped Mellish. "Tompkins is mistaken, or trying to get me into trouble. I never left my bed."

"You seem to be pretty scared, considering you're not supposed to know what's wrong," said Levison curtly. "But one thing's pretty clear, and that is that if you fastened us out, then you was the fellow to split to Knox."

"That doesn't follow," said Talbot, who had been listening quietly. "I think there's more behind this than appears on the surface, you fellows. If Mellish did it, then there's someone else behind him—he'd never dare to do such a thing on his own."

And almost unconsciously Talbot glanced across at Racke's bed. The glance was not lost on the rest, and Racke gritted his teeth as he felt their eyes upon him. But he said nothing—he dared not.

"I've suspected for some time," went on Talbot grimly,



"You wottah!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy wrathfully, as he received a hearty kick from Hake. "Release me at once!" As Hake landed out again, Gussy grabbed his foot, and the Grammarian staggered back with a roar. "Yooooop!!!"
(See Chapter 11.)

"that there was some underhand work going on somewhere. I think the time's come for someone to speak out, Blake. There's somebody doing dirty work—someone who's up against you, Blake, as well as Tom Merry—someone who's out to cause all the trouble he can."

Blake started.

"Go on, Talbot!" he muttered. "I—I'm beginning to think you're right!"

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus. "I also have had my suspicions, deah boys."

"I think it's up to you to go on now, Tom Merry," said Talbot. "I think Blake will listen to you now. You didn't explain to him how and when you lost that hat and scarf, but—"

"I tried to explain to Blake more than once," said Tom gruffly. "He refused to hear me. I got fed-up and refused to try again—I wasn't going to go on my knees to him. But if he'll listen I'll tell him now."

"Go ahead!" said Blake, flushing.

"It's soon told," said Tom. "If you want proof you've only got to ask Gordon Gay."

"Gordon Gay?"

"Yes. And Skimpole will also bear out what I say," said Tom. "Nobody could suspect Skimmy of telling fibs. Anyway, the afternoon Lathom was attacked, we were walking through the meadows when we came on Lacy and his pals from the Grammar School. They were bullying poor old Skimmy. We chipped in and were dealing with the cads when Gay and his friends turned up. We scrapped for a bit, but when we saw we stood no chance against the lot of them we bolted, and we left the cap and scarf behind."

"Oh!" exclaimed Blake.

"It was better to lose a cap and a scarf than be ragged by the Grammarians," said Tom. "Gay and the others rushed after us, at all events, and chased us for about a mile. Lacy and his pals stayed behind. If you want to know what happened to my scarf and Lowther's cap, I fancy Lacy could tell if he wanted."

"Oh!" repeated Blake, light breaking in on him. "So that's it!"

"I expect Gay noticed we'd lost our things, and will support us in that, if necessary," said Tom grimly. "Anyway,

if anyone can say how they came to be found on the spot where Lathom was attacked, Lacy and his pals can."

"But haven't you tackled the cads about it?" demanded Levison blankly.

"That's just what we went over for to-day," said Tom. "But Lacy spotted what we wanted, and he managed to get the fellows there to chuck us out, and send us home as they did."

There was a silence as Tom finished. Blake was looking flushed, but his eyes were gleaming now. It was clear that he was impressed—indeed, he was more than impressed. And he was not particular about making charges without clear evidence as Talbot was. He looked straight across at Aubrey Racke as Tom finished.

"So Lacy knows something about that affair?" he snapped. "Then if Lacy knows something about it, it's a penny to a pound that Racke does, too."

"Yaas, wathah!" said Arthur Augustus excitedly. "So that was what Twim—"

He halted. Even now Arthur Augustus remembered his strict code of honour, and he did not finish.

"You dry up a bit, Gussy!" said Blake. "Racke—"

"What do you mean, Blake, you rotter?" snapped Racke. He had not been unprepared for this, and was cool enough now. "How the thump should I know anything about it? Of all the cheek! I don't believe Lacy knows anything at all about it, either. It's just a yarn of Merry's to throw dust in your eyes."

"Is it?" said Talbot, his lip curling. "I fancy all the fellows here have their own ideas about that now, Racke, if they'll remember there's more than one motive in your case. Lathom got you a sound thrashing to begin with, for calling him names."

"Phew! I'd forgotten that for one!" said Digby.

"And for another thing both Tom Merry and Blake have dealt with you more than once—you've got your knife into them both."

"I'm beginning to see a lot now," said Blake, as Talbot halted. "If Lacy did do it, then Racke was behind him, and I bet Racke was behind Mellish if Mellish did fasten us out to-night."

"I tell you I didn't!" panted Mellish.

"It's all lies!" hissed Racke savagely. "You haven't got
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an atom of proof against Lacy, never mind me! I defy you to prove anything, and be hanged to you!"

With that Aubrey Racke lay down in bed and pulled the clothes over him. Blake gave a growl and stepped towards the cad of the Shell's bed as if to wrench the clothes off again.

"Hold on, Blake!" said Tom Merry. "No good doing that! We can do nothing without proof. And if there's a rumpus here to-night, Knox will soon be on the spot. Besides it must be jolly late—or early in the morning. I vote we let things rest here for now and get to sleep."

"Right!" said Blake. "But I don't mean to let things stop at this."

With which ominous remark Blake led his followers from the room. Ten minutes later quietness reigned in the Shell dormitory. Like Tom Merry, Talbot and the others realised how useless it was to tackle Racke further, and, tired out, they turned in and were soon asleep. But it was a long time before Aubrey Racke slept. His sins were finding him out, and for hours he lay awake, wondering savagely what the future held for him. He had little fear of either Crooke or Lacy giving the game away, and without proof he was ready to defy the lot of them. But there were two weak spots in his armour—very weak spots. And those were Percy Mellish and Baggy Trimble. The secret was safe with Mellish, certainly—until that crafty youth was cornered. But no secret was ever safe with the fat and fatuous Baggy, and Aubrey Racke lay in bed and shivered. He would have shivered still more had he known that the noble Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had already found one of his weak spots, and was on his track.

CHAPTER 11.

Gussy Investigates!

"**B**AI Jove! I'll do it!"

Arthur Augustus had come to a resolution after much mental toil and deliberation.

It was the following day after dinner—the afternoon when St. Jim's should have met the Grammar School on Little Side. Since the previous evening there had been peace in the Lower School at St. Jim's, though there was still likely to be bitterness on both sides until the truth was finally known. Knox had kept his word and Tom Merry and his chums had had a very unpleasant interview with Mr. Railton. Fortunately, the Sixth-Former had apparently told him the juniors had left their dormitories intending only to rag the Fourth dormitory, and Mr. Railton had neither asked them to deny it nor admit it. He had given them six strokes each with his cane, and added five hundred lines as make-weight for each of the hapless culprits.

Naturally, Tom Merry & Co. were feeling very sore about it in more ways than one. Though they believed now that Mellish—backed by Racke—was responsible for their capture, they could prove nothing, and do nothing. Warned by Racke, Mellish had stuck stoutly to his denial, and they had been obliged to let it go at that.

But though the two factions were by no means on friendly terms yet, they agreed that Racke was at the bottom of all the trouble—Racke and his toadies. And they meant to prove it somehow. In the meantime, the hatchet of open warfare was buried.

To prove Racke and Lacy guilty seemed a pretty hopeless task. That morning a deputation of Fourth and Shell had interviewed the defiant Aubrey Racke in his study. They had made it clear to that rascally junior what their views were. But they had got nothing out of him. And without proof they were helpless.

Only Arthur Augustus cherished hopes, and he kept them to himself. Until actual proof was forthcoming, the noble and quixotic Gussy did not feel justified in making known the interesting conversation he had so unwittingly heard between Racke & Co. and Trimble.

But while he said nothing on the matter, Gussy was resolved not to be idle. He fancied himself very much in the role of a detective, and he meant to make investigations on his own. It would be a feather in his cap if he, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, could succeed in bringing the guilty to book.

All that morning Gussy pondered the problem, and now he had come to a definite resolution. He would go over to the Grammar School on his own, and interview Messrs. Lacy & Co. With due exercise of his celebrated tact and

judgment, he hoped to get the truth out of Lacy. It was a vain hope—unless an accident favoured Arthur Augustus. The trusting and innocent swell of St. Jim's was scarcely a match for the crafty and cunning Algernon Lacy.

But an accident was fated to favour Arthur Augustus. Reaching the Grammar School in safety, he walked serenely across the quadrangle and made for the open doorway. He was rushing in where angels feared to tread, but his very coolness saved him from molestation. Fellows stared at him in the quad, but they did not attempt to detain him.

In the doorway, however, Arthur Augustus struck a snag. It was in the form of Hake, a Grammar School prefect. Hake was an unpleasant fellow who had more than one rub with the St. Jim's fellows—and come off worst. He stared at Arthur Augustus now in a far from friendly manner.

"Hallo! What the thump d'you want here, you young sweep?" he snapped. "Our of this—sharp!"

Arthur Augustus eyed him haughtily and tried to pass on. Hake promptly caught him by the shoulder. Then he raised his boot and bestowed a hearty kick on the swell of St. Jim's.

"Bai Jove!" gasped Gussy wrathfully. "Welease me at once, you wude wottah! If you do no: welease me I shall have no othah resource but to punch your nose, Hake!"

"What!" snorted Hake. "Why, I'll skin you, you little sweep!"

He landed out at Gussy again. Instead of punching his nose, Arthur Augustus grabbed his foot, and Hake sat down with a bump and a roar. Just then, Hake's crony, Hagget, came out.

"Collar him!" roared Hake. "Collar that young hound, Hagget!"

He scrambled up, and Hagget obediently made a grab at Arthur Augustus. But by now that youth had realised what he had done, and that he was booked for a rough handling—if caught.

Arthur Augustus determined not to be caught. Hake was still in the gateway—there was no escape that way. So Gussy took to his heels into the House. The two seniors went after him with a rush.

But Gussy was desperate now. He had been to the rival school often enough, and he knew his way about. He tore up the stairs and fairly flew along the passage beyond. In a matter of seconds he reached the Fourth Form passage, intending to take refuge in Gordon Gay's study, in the hope that the friendly Grammarian leader was there. But the door was closed, and in sheer desperation Gussy dived into the nearest room. It proved to be Lacy's study—his intended destination, in fact. Gussy had been there before, and he knew it at a glance.

There was nobody at home, and, glancing swiftly round, Arthur Augustus dived beneath the table, the long cloth fortunately hiding him completely.

The next moment, glancing into every study as they hurried along, Hake and his friend appeared. Hake opened the door of Lacy's study, and Gussy breathed freely as he went on again.

But the swell of St. Jim's remained where he was until sounds of pursuit had died away. He was just on the point of crawling out of hiding when footsteps sounded outside again, and three or four fellows entered the study.

Peering out, Arthur Augustus saw that it was Lacy & Co., and with the trio was a fat and familiar figure.

It was Baggy Trimble.

Arthur Augustus was astonished. But he decided it was just as well to remain where he was until he was quite certain Hake and Hagget had given up the chase after him. He knew that Lacy would be only too glad to hand him over to their tender mercies.

No thought of eavesdropping entered Gussy's mind. It was the last thing he would have attempted to do. He simply didn't think about it. Considerations of safety kept him there. He had no fear whatever of Algernon Lacy or his pals. He was ready to deal with them—when Hake was out of the way.

Lacy was talking as he entered the study, and his voice was savage.

"Now, you fat worm!" he was saying. "We can talk in here, my pippin. Now, what's your game? What the thump did you mean by shouting out in open quad like you did?"

"He, he, he!" grinned Trimble, though there was a rather uneasy note in his voice. "I didn't shout, Lacy. Besides, nobody would understand. Trust me to keep it quiet, old chap!"

"You fat idiot!" snapped Lacy. "What do you mean?"

"He, he, he! I think you know what I mean! The fact is, I'm rather worried, Lacy. My conscience is troubling me, old chap. I think I'd better go back after all, and tell Latham the truth."

"I tell you I know nothing at all about that dashed

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master of yours!" hissed Lacy. "How the thump should I know who assaulted Lathom—or whatever his dashed name is! Did that cad Racke put you up to this—comin' to me, you fat fool!"

Trimble chuckled. He could see the fear in Lacy's eyes well enough. And Racke had certainly not sent him. Trimble had had quite an unpleasant tiff with the cad of the Shell. He had happened to mention to Racke that he was rather hard up, and would be glad of a small loan until his delayed cheque came. But for once Racke had refused—more, he had kicked Trimble from his study in his temper. Racke's temper was an uncertain element at any time, and he had allowed it to get the better of his prudence.

But he need not have feared. Trimble was furious, but he was too crafty to kill the goose that laid his golden eggs. Aubrey Racke having failed to come up to scratch, Trimble had rolled over to the Grammar School, hoping to have better luck with Lacy & Co. Trimble wondered why he

Seething with indignation and horror at what he had overheard, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy made his appearance from under the table. "Twimble, you fat wottah!" he panted. "You feahful little worm!" "M-mum-my hat!" stammered Trimble. "It's G-gussy!" (See Chapter 11.)



hadn't "tried it on" with them before. After all, it was only a matter of a loan, and wasn't he justified in getting compensation for being so good-natured as to keep their guilty secret?

Trimble thought so, and he grinned at Lacy now. "No, of course, Racke didn't send me!" he chuckled. "But I really can't stay longer, Lacy. I've an appointment with Tom Merry this afternoon. He wants me to help him discover the guilty scoundrels who assaulted Lathom. I expect they'll get shoved in prison for it, or sacked, at least. I believe Lathom means to insist upon prison, Lacy! Luckily, I can help! You see, I happened to overhear the rascals plotting the attack."

Lacy eyed Trimble fiercely. "You—you overheard that?" he said. "Yes—little me!" grinned Trimble. "You see, I followed the plotters from St. Jim's and heard them arranging to plant the cap and scarf near the scene of the assault. Isn't it lucky I can help Tom Merry, and see justice done?" "You—you fat rotter!" hissed Lacy. "What do you want from me? Out with it!"

"Nothing at all!" said Trimble, adopting a dignified tone. "I hope you don't think I'm asking anything, Lacy? Still, now I'm here, and as Racke happens to be tight, perhaps you won't mind changing a cheque for me—or loaning me a few bob on account of it. Mind, it's just a loan. I shall insist—"

Trimble got no further than that. For Arthur Augustus D'Arcy could stand no more of it. Indeed he was wondering rather dizzily how he had stood as much as he had. Sheer astonishment and excitement had prevented him showing himself before this.

But at that point he realised that once again he was actually eavesdropping, and the thought of that and Trimble's unscrupulous chatter, brought him from under the table, seething with indignation and horror.

"Twimble, you fat wottah!" he panted. "That is enough! You feahful little worm!"

"Good gad!"

"M-mum-my hat!" stammered Trimble.

That fat youth almost fainted at the sight of Arthur Augustus, appearing like an apparition in the study. Lacy, too, nearly collapsed in sheer and utter dismay.

And at that interesting moment newcomers appeared on the scene. The tramp of feet sounded, and in the doorway appeared Gordon Gay. Behind him were his chums, Frank Monk and Carboy. Behind those again showed the Terrible Three and Talbot, and Blake, Herries, and Digby.

All roads seemed to be leading to the Grammar School that afternoon.

CHAPTER 12.

The Truth at Last!

"G USSY!" ejaculated Blake. "Dear old Gussy!" exclaimed Gordon Gay. "Are you calling on our friend Lacy this afternoon, too? What a popular chap Algernon is to be sure! And Trimble, too! Shall we call again, Lacy, if this is your busy afternoon?"

"We're not calling again!" snapped Blake. "We've come here to talk to Lacy, and we're not going until we've got a satisfactory answer from him!"

Lacy went white. He seemed to know well enough what Blake and his companions wanted to know. Baggy Trimble also appeared to guess. He started to move carelessly towards the door. But Arthur Augustus spotted him at once.

"Don't let that fat wottah go!" he exclaimed. "I have just made an amazin' discovery, deah boys—a discovery that poves my suspicions to be cowwect."

"What do you mean, Gussy? What the dickens are you doing here, anyway?"

Before Gussy could answer, Lacy gave a gasp of rage.

"Get out of my study!" he said thickly. "Clear out the lot of you! Like your dashed cheek to come bargain' in here as if you owned the place, you pushin' St. Jim's cads."

"Hold on, Lacy!" grinned Gordon Gay. "Don't be rude to your giddy visitors. They've some questions to ask you, old top. Go ahead, Tom Merry!"

"Let's hear what Gussy has to say first!" said Tom grimly, his eyes on Arthur Augustus. "What were you saying, Gussy? We've come here to ask Lacy about that Lathom bizney. If it's anything about that——"

"Yaas, wathah! It jolly well is, Tom Mewwy!" said Gussy. "But I'd bethah tell you what led me to suspect this wascal and Wacke——"

"Racke!"

"Yaas, that feahful wottah Wacke!" said Gussy indignantly. "I did not tell you fellows before because I ovaheard it by accident, and did not feel justified in wepatin' it. Now, howevah, I have no compunction in exposin' the wascals!"

And he related what he had overheard between Racke & Co. and Trimble under the elms in the quad at St. Jim's.

"Oh, what awful whoppers, Gussy!" gasped Baggy Trimble, fairly shaking at the knees as he saw the looks directed at him. "I—I say, you fellows, don't you believe him? I never even spoke to Racke at all. Besides, it was only a loan—I told Racke plainly it was only a loan. You can ask him."

"Oh, my hat!" said Gordon Gay, staring at Trimble. "Have you any more at home like him, Merry?"

"It's pretty clear now," said Blake. "Go on, Gussy! You shut up, Trimble. You'll have your chance to speak presently."

"Oh, dear! I say, you fellows, I promised to meet a chap at four at St. Jim's! Lemme out, or——"

"Shut up!" hooted Blake.

"Ow!"

"I saw at once that that feahful fat wottah was demandin' hush-money fwom Wacke!" resumed Gussy. "But I didn't realise what it meant quite until I heard last night how Tom Mewwy and Lowthah had lost the cap and scarf. I resolved then to see Lacy himself and try to force him to own up, or get him to give himself away by tactful questionin', you know."

"Well, you silly owl!" gasped Blake. "Why the thump didn't you tell us?"

"I have already told you that, Jack Blake. Howevah, that is why I came heah this aftahnoon. Unfortunately, I met that wottah Hake, and he chased me up the stairs, and I was obliged to take wefuge undah the table beah. And while hidin' undah the table Lacy and Twimble came in, and I was obliged to listen to their conversation."

"You—you sneakin' cad!" hissed Lacy. "I deny it all—deny everythin'!"

"But I have velated nothin' yet, Lacy!" said Arthur Augustus calmly. "You can deny it if you like when I have done so."

And he proceeded to repeat the conversation.

Lacy and Trimble tried to interrupt him more than once, but Gussy soon made matters clear for all that.

Lacy's face was livid when he had finished.

"It's all lies!" he snarled. "I admitted nothin' to that fat worm, and I admit nothin' now."

"Right-ho!" said Gordon Gay coolly. "Then you won't object to having the matter taken before the Head of St. Jim's, or before our Head, Lacy, if you are innocent, old bean. Come along!"

"Hold on!" gasped Lacy, the yellow streak in him coming out at once. "I—I say, you're mistaken. I——"

"Come along to the Head, then!" said Gay grimly. "If we're mistaken, then you've nothing to fear. The Head will be pleased to know that no Grammar School chap was such a cowardly cad as to attack a master from another school. Come on! Yank hold of the funk, Carboy!"

"Hold on!" panted Lacy. "I—I own up! Be decent, Gay—keep it from the Head! It was only a lark. And—Racke forced me into it—I swear he did—and these fellows will tell you the same. I owe him money, and——"

"That's enough!" said Tom Merry quietly. "We've finished here, and we'll leave you to deal with Lacy and his pals, Gay. Come along, Trimble—you're coming with us, my pippin!"

"Oh, dear! I say, you fellows, I'm not coming—I've an important appointment in Rylcombe. With the dentist it is—I mean with a titled relative at the station. Yow! Leggo!"

"Come on!" roared Blake. "You fat rotter!"

"I tell you it wasn't me—I know nothing about this rotten affair!" gasped Trimble. "Ask Lacy. I never followed Racke that afternoon, and I never heard them

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plotting it, and as for trying to squeeze money out of Racke and Lacy, it's all rot. D'Awg's an awful fibber. I'm really surprised at him, you know."

"Weally, Twimble——"

"Tell the truth, Gussy!" urged Trimble pathetically. "I only came to discuss footer with Lacy, honour bright! I know absolutely nothing about that rotten affair. If you ask me, Gussy knows more about it than he'll admit."

"What?"

"Ye-es. As for those rotten chess records, I haven't even seen them!" gasped Trimble, blinking about him apprehensively. "It was all Mellish's doing—he had it in for Lathom, and he hid them on the bookshelves, not me. If he says I found them there and hid them again, don't you believe him. You know what an awful fibber Mellish is."

"Well, I'm hanged!" gasped Tom Merry. "You hear that, you fellows? Trimble, you fat ass, what are you saying? The chess records were burnt, you fat babbler!"

Trimble jumped.

"Eh? Oh, yes, of course they were! Mellish burned them to get his own back. If he says he didn't, and that I found them on the bookshelves in our study, don't you believe the cad! He's only trying to shove the blame on me!"

There was a silence. Gay and his chums looked on, perplexed. They knew nothing of the chess records—the original cause of the trouble. But the St. Jim's juniors did, and they looked at the egregious Baggy in blank amazement.

But suddenly Blake stepped forward and shook the terrified and obtuse Baggy violently.

"Listen, you fat ass!" he snapped. "Weren't those records burnt after all, then?"

"Ow! No, I mean yes! Stop shaking me, you beast! I tell you, I know nothing at all about the rotten things. Mellish did it—he only burnt the first sheet and hid the rest. Yow! Leggo, Blake! Wharrer you asking me about the rotten things for? Like your cheek! If anybody's found the rotten things under that loose floorboard in the top box-room then Mellish must have hidden them there. I mean—Yow! Stop shaking me!"

Blake stopped shaking him. There was no need to shake Trimble any longer—much as he deserved to be shaken. The party from St. Jim's felt they had the truth now—the whole truth. Racke, aided by the equally rascally Lacy & Co., had attacked Mr. Lathom, and had panted the cap and scarf to throw the blame on Tom Merry & Co. That much was certain now. And it was also fairly certain now that the chess records—the cause of the whole trouble; of the quarrel between Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom, and the split in the Lower School—had never been burned at all. They had been hidden under a loose floorboard in the box-room by Baggy Trimble. And, leaving the Grammar School, Tom Merry & Co. started back for St. Jim's, feeling that the mystery was solved at last. And with them went Baggy Trimble—despite his appointment with a titled relative at the station!

CHAPTER 13.

All Serene!

"YOU shouldn't have done it, Racke," said Crooke uneasily. "Dash it all, what's a few shillings to you? The fat ass will give you away as sure as fate for kicking him out like that."

"He won't!" snapped Racke. "He knows better—at least, he won't if he can help it. The danger is that the fat fool might let it all out by accident. Anyway, I couldn't stand him this afternoon. I had to kick him—hard! I'm dashed worried, Crooke!"

"You've need to be!" said Crooke glumly. "Now those cads are on the scent you'll have to look out!"

"I notice you're not sayin' 'we' now, you rotten funk!" hissed Racke, with a sneer. "I suppose you're goin' to pretend you had nothin' to do with it, if it does come out?"

"I—I warned you it was a risky game," said Crooke uneasily. "I wanted to have no hand in it. If only that little worm, Mellish, hadn't collared those footling chess records all this wouldn't have happened, Racke."

"Don't talk like a fool!" said Racke. "What's the good of sayin' that now? In any case, we're not done yet, by a long chalk. If only Trimble will keep his mouth shut we're safe as houses. Where's Mellish this afternoon?"

"Blessed if I know!" grunted Crooke. "He's got the wind up badly. Those cads have been tackling him again about last night's affair. I hope the little funk doesn't cave in."

"He won't, for his own sake," said Racke. "I've told him what to expect from me if he does, any—Hallo, here he is!"

Percy Mellish came into the study, his shoulders hunched dejectedly now.

"Oh, here you are, Mellish!" sniffed Racke. "I say, have you seen Trimble about? I want him."

Mellish scowled, and nodded. "He's gone over to the Grammar School, I believe, Racke," he said. "And I say, those Shell and Fourth cads are up to something. I spotted them going towards the Grammar School, too. I believe they're going there, anyway."

"Trimble's gone to try to squeeze something out of Lacy, I bet!" said Croke, in alarm. "You should have paid up and closed his mouth, Racke."

"Oh, shut up!" snarled Racke. He paced the study, watched by his toadies, who were as alarmed as he was. If only he had gone over to see Lacy after all. That was the thought that persisted in Racke's brain. He could then have warned him that danger threatened. But he had feared to do so, lest his visit there made his enemies more suspicious still. Yet Racke felt now that it would have been wiser had he gone.

The cad of the Shell was still pacing the study like a tiger when numerous footsteps sounded outside and a sharp knock came to the door. To the startled ears of the three black sheep came Trimble's voice, protesting volubly and indignantly.

"Good gad!" breathed Racke. He knew—he felt certain he knew what was coming. His fears were only too correct. Into the study marched Tom Merry & Co., with Trimble in their midst. Trimble shivered as he met Racke's glinting eyes.

"Oh dear! Lemme go, you beasts! I tell you I don't know anything about it, Tom Merry! I shall report your bullying conduct to Railton."

"Oh, bai Jove! Twimble, you feahful wottah—"

"Never mind Trimble!" snapped Tom Merry, closing the door when all were inside, and placing his back to it.

"Now, Racke, my beauty, the game's up!"

"What the thump do you mean?" snapped Racke.

"We've just been to the Grammar School, Racke," continued Tom Merry. "Lacy has owned up to everything. He has admitted before several Grammar School witnesses that it was he and his pals who attacked Lathom at your instigation, and with your aid. He also admitted that my scarf and Lowther's cap were purposely planted on the spot to get us into a row, and to cause trouble in the Lower School. You've been just a little too clever, Racke."

Aubrey Racke staggered back, pale to the lips. He did not answer, and Tom went on:

"Lacy has owned up. He had to own up rather than go before Dr. Monk and face it out," he said steadily. "It's now your turn to own up, Racke, or else face an inquiry before Dr. Holmes. Unless you do own up here and now we're going to yank you along to Railton by the scruff of your neck. That's the position. Take your choice."

Racke gritted his teeth, and gave Baggy Trimble a bitter, fierce look. But the sight of that shivering youth was enough for him. He knew that one keen question from a master would reduce the hapless Baggy to a flabby jelly, and all would come out then in any case. He nodded, his face black with baffled rage.

"I—I own up!" he gulped. "Hang the lot of you! But I'll make Lacy and that fat cad sit up for this!"

"Right! But the less of that sort of talk the better, you vengeful cad!" said Tom. "Now, there's the matter of those chess records, Racke. If you know where they are I'd advise you to tell us."

"I had nothing to do with them," said Racke thickly. "That's between Mellish and Trimble. Mellish took them from Lathom's desk, and hid them on the bookshelves in his study. Trimble found them there, and he's hidden them somewhere else, and has been holding them over Mellish's head, the blackmailin' little worm!"

"You don't know where they are, Mellish?" asked Tom. Mellish trembled.

"I don't!" he panted. "Trimble knows, though."

"And I fancy we do, now you've backed up Trimble's own yarn," said Blake grimly. "I fancy we'll find them under the floorboards in the box-room. Is that so, Trimble?"

"Ow! I say, you fellows, it was all Mellish, really—"

"Yes, or no!" rapped Tom Merry.

"Ow! Yes! I say I'll run and fetch them now, if you like!" gasped Baggy eagerly.

"No, you jolly well won't!" grinned Tom Merry. "We'll do that, and we'll see Lathom gets the footling things safely. He'll get the biggest shock of his life when he finds them on his study table this evening, safe and sound. You'll stay here, Baggy, and taste the business end of a cricket-stump—after Racke and his pals have had their turn. One of you chaps run and get one. And remember that the more you yell the more likely you are to fetch a master on the scene. And that might be serious for you. So—"

Tom Merry did not have to finish. Racke, Croke, Mellish, and Baggy Trimble knew what he meant well enough.

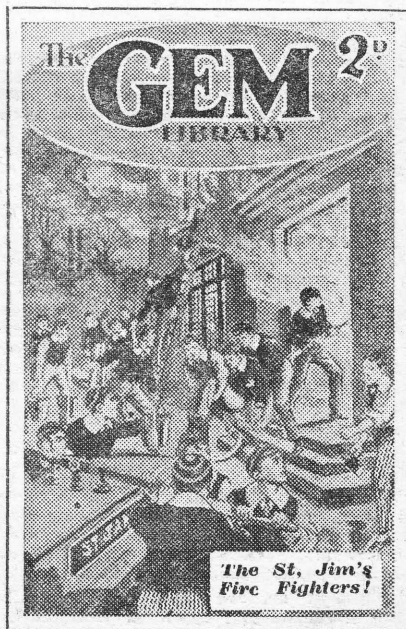
Racke & Co. took their medicine like men for once—at least, they did not allow their voices to penetrate much beyond the study. They did not want a master investigating. But it was a licking they were none of them likely to forget in a hurry. Baggy Trimble did yell, however. He yelled and yelled as the stump rose and fell vigorously. It was felt that he needed a very severe lesson, and he certainly got one. But, fortunately, nobody heard him, or, if the authorities did they were so used to Trimble's unmusical voice that they ignored the howls of woe.

The precious chess records were found, sure enough, in the box-room under a loose board, and that evening Tom Merry watched his chance and laid the parcel on Mr. Lathom's table in his absence. Within an hour the school was buzzing with the amazing news, and very shortly afterwards Messrs. Lathom and Linton were seen together, arm in arm. Evidently, the two old friends were friends once again, and Tom Merry & Co. were glad to see it—just as Messrs. Linton and Lathom themselves were glad to see Shell and Fourth fellows on the best of terms again. Probably the remarkable cheerfulness of the masters of the Shell and Fourth, now that everything was calm and bright, accounted for the fact that no inquiry was made into the mysterious and amazing reappearance of the chess papers. At any rate, whatever the reason, it soon became evident that the authorities had decided to let matters rest where they were—at which there were no more heartfelt sighs of relief than those of Aubrey Racke & Co.

The clouds had rolled away, the rift in the lute was healed, and that evening the Terrible Three and Blake & Co., with numerous friends, met together in Study No. 10 after prep for a supper to celebrate the reunion. And Arthur Augustus was the guest of honour—all admitted it was his detective ability that had brought about the happy ending—whether by accident or design they cared not.

THE END.

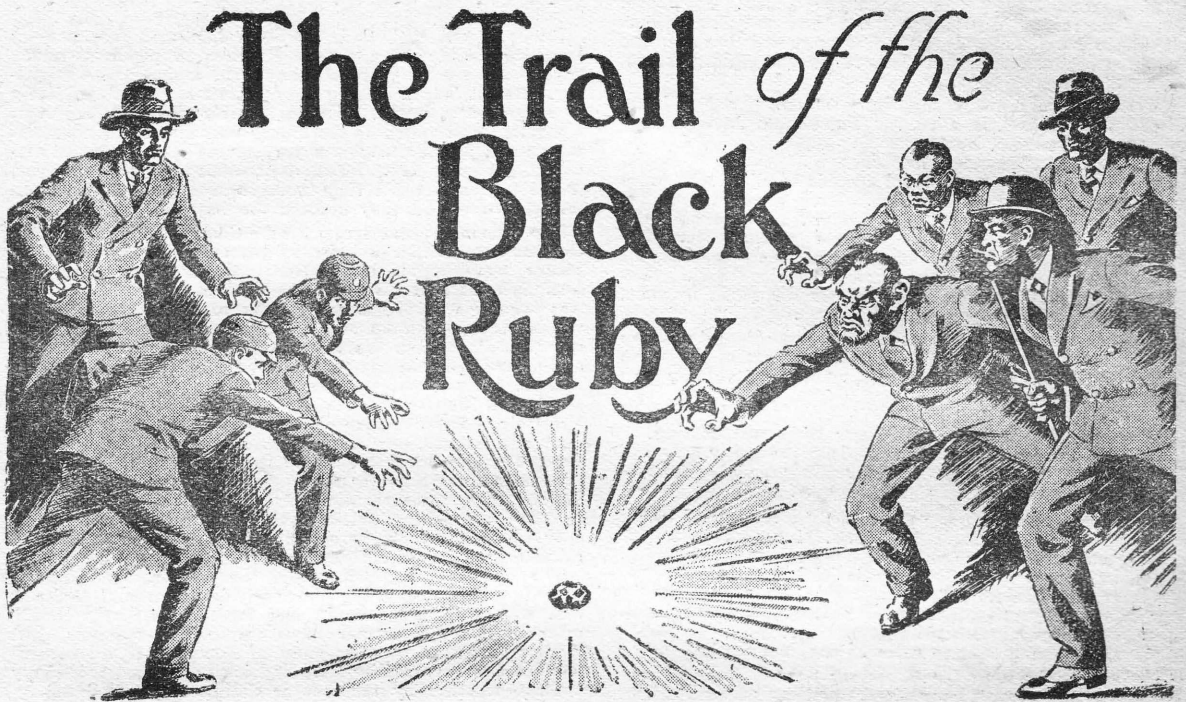
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Martin Clifford is seen at his best in this story of Tom Merry & Co., and on no account should any of you chaps miss it. By the way, what about introducing your non-reader pal to the "GEM"? He'll thank you afterwards.—Ed.

TROUBLE ON THE HIGH SEAS!

Passengers on the same liner sailing to Australia as our Adventurous Trio are their enemies Karl Sweetman & Co. In the confined spaces of the ship the two parties cannot help but meet—and they do in several riotous encounters!



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By PERCY A. CLARKE.

INTRODUCTION.

Trailed across two continents by a gang of cunning crooks, Steve Barrett in possession of a Black Ruby, eventually reaches England. With the aid of this Black Ruby, Steve has hopes of making his fortune, for the ruby is the key to a claim of land in Queensland rich in precious stones. The crooks, however, succeed in gaining possession of the Black Ruby and make good their escape. Steve enlists the services of Bob Crompton and Syd Dyson, two plucky, athletic fellows, with whom he sets off in a wild dash south on the trail of the Black Ruby. After a series of exciting adventures the chums retrieve the precious stone. Their efforts to shake off Sweetman and his gang by boarding a fast boat bound for Egypt prove of little avail, however, for just as they are nearing Alexandria the crooks sneak the ruby again and get clear in a native boat. Aided by the son of an old Arab named Mustapha the chums discover the hiding-place of the gang. During the fierce fight that ensues Steve succeeds in wresting the precious stone from Twisty Baker. The victorious trio are speeding for the quay when they bump into a Swedish vegetarian crank named Svenskhem, whose acquaintance they had previously made, jabbering to a military-looking man about the Black Ruby. "You keep your mouth shut about that ruby," hisses Steve, "or you'll get into trouble—big trouble!"

(Now read on.)

SVENSKHEM was about to retort, when there came a rush of raggie-taggle natives. Some were grimy urchins, who screamed shrilly for backsheesh; others were hawkers. Some thrust trays of gaudy trifles under their noses; others had baskets of fruit.

"Out of the way!" ordered Steve. "We're in a hurry!" But a big negress had stopped in front of Svenskhem with a basket of luscious pineapples, and the big Swede's mouth was watering. He stopped, his eyes goggling delight through his big spectacles. The military man, stopped also; but Steve called to them.

"Come on! We're late as it is!"

He grabbed Svenskhem's arm and hauled him along. The fat Swede protested volubly.

"Poet there time ist. Ja! Der bineabble for der voyage I vant, ain't it? Meine arm you hurt vos. Donnervetter!" "Pack it up, you fat idiot!" rasped Steve. "D'you want to lose the boat? I'll leave you to it in a minute! Come on!"

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He raced ahead, dragging Svenskhem along with him. And as if to emphasize his own warning, the tender's siren shrilled a summons to the belated passengers.

Whee-ee-ew! Wheew! Whee-ee-ew!

"Come on!" shouted Steve. For Svenskhem was gazing back over his shoulder at the negress with the pineapples. Steve felt him lagging and jerked the arm he gripped.

Svenskhem stumbled and tripped.

"Blitzen!" he screamed. "Der earthquake, ain't it?"

Over he went like a shot rabbit! And, clutching out frantically to save himself, he seized Steve's leg and brought him down, too.

"Idiot!" yelled Steve, and crashed on the quay, sprawling in the direct path of Syd, who came a cropper over his prostrate form, rolled helplessly, and fetched the military-looking man down on top of Steve.

Natives, fellaheen, hawkers with their miscellaneous wares, came rushing to the rescue, hoping for backsheesh. But the number of them only rendered the confusion worse. Svenskhem was shrilly screaming.

"Donnervetter! Meine face! Murdered I vos! Ja!"

Suddenly Steve felt hands in his pockets. The military-looking man was beside him, floundering on the quay, and Steve was sure that this man was trying to pick his pockets—and he had the Black Ruby on his person!

Steve scrambled to his feet. The military man, grinning slightly, rose at the same time. Steve glared at him for a split second, then with stunning force his fist shot out.

"Dirty thief!" he snarled. "Hold that!"

It was too swift a blow to be accurate. Steve's fist landed on the military gent's chest. The man recoiled, with a gasp, from the impact, staggered back, upset a native boy, whose gaudy ornaments were sent flying in all directions, and sat down violently in a crate of dates with an ominous squeak. A mass of sticky fruit shot through the air and finished up on Svenskhem's face, stifling his yelps.

"I don't know who you are," snarled Steve to the military gent; "but you try picking my pockets again and—"

"You forget yourself, sir!" snapped the stranger haughtily, rising from his uncomfortable seat. "You struck me, and I—"

"You were picking my pockets!" roared Steve.

"On the contrary, sir!" retorted the man angrily. "I saw a rogue of a native with his hand in your pocket. I came up behind you to catch him in the act, and you turned and hit me."

That took the wind out of Steve's sails. He flushed, then scowled. Bob and Syd both grinned at him.

"Better say you're sorry," suggested Bob.

"By George!" exclaimed Steve. "It's my old trouble all over again. I hit first and think afterwards. And if that's true what you say, sir, I'm sorry. I was mistaken. I'll pay for your suit if it's damaged. I'm real sorry. Can't say more than that."

"We won't quarrel over it," said the stranger. "My name is Faulkner. I'm travelling for a Hutton Garden firm of jewellers. And I particularly want to be friendly with you, so—"

Whce-ee-ew!

The tender's siren shrieked.

"Here! Come on!" snapped Steve. "Let's talk on the tender. Mustn't lose the boat."

He tossed a handful of small coin to the outraged natives on the quay and hustled the party aboard the tender. Ropes were cast off and the fussy tender moved off into the morning mist en route for the liner that waited out in the roads.

Bob and Syd were frowning now. On the other side of the tender's deck sat three men—Twisty Baker, Bully Mahon, and Ah Wong. Of Karl Sweetman there was no sign.

Svenskhem sat down beside the pals, grumbling to himself in his native tongue about the pineapples he had lost. Faulkner, the stranger, sat by Steve, still talking.

"Yes," he was saying, "I particularly want to be friendly with you, Mr.—"

"My name's Barrett," said Steve.

"Thank you. I want to get to know you, Mr. Barrett. Herr Svenskhem said something about you having a Black Ruby, and naturally, being in the trade, I am interested. I'd like to see that Black Ruby, Mr. Barrett."

Steve scowled darkly and sat very rigid. "But you don't believe all that fat Swede tells you, do you?" he queried.

"Well," replied Faulkner, "I see no reason why he should lie to me. You have this Black Ruby, and—"

"Wait a bit!" snapped Steve. "Have you ever seen a Black Ruby?"

"No-o," smiled Faulkner mysteriously.

"And I doubt if you ever will," retorted Steve, just as mysteriously. "If I were you I should forget all about it."

Faulkner still smiled. Apparently he realised he was on dangerous ground, and changed the subject. He referred to Syd and Bob.

"Your sons?" he asked.

"No," replied Steve. "Though I'd be proud if they were. They're my partners."

"Travelling on business or for health?" asked Faulkner.

"A bit of both," retorted Steve.

"Apparently," said Faulkner. "We shall be fellow-passengers aboard the Maharance. We ought to get on well together. This is my first trip to Australia. What's it like?"

Steve was always fond of talking about Australia, and the whole party joined in, and Faulkner was soon on friendly terms with Syd and Bob. By the time the tender had drawn alongside the big liner the boys had promised to spend the evening in Faulkner's cabin.

That invitation had been accepted by Syd and Bob, not by Steve. He shut up like a clam when it was made and scowled at the boys when they accepted.

In the privacy of their own cabin he told the boys just what he thought.

"In a business like ours," he said, "you can't be too cunning. Only a few moments before that guy was pumping me about the ruby, and now you've pledged yourselves to go to his cabin. Faulkner may be the genuine article, but we ought to look on everybody with suspicion now."

"And knock 'em into crates of dates for nothing," jeered Bob. "I'm hanged if I can see anything suspicious about him. On the other hand, the best way to find out who and what he is, is to make him believe how friendly we are with him."

"Exactly," chimed in Syd. "I'm still suspicious of old Svenskhem, and I reckon our best way of meeting cunning is with cunning. Even if we go to Faulkner's cabin that doesn't mean to say we're going to be easily hoodwinked."

The Strange Whistle!

THE well-dressed figure of John Faulkner paced the boat deck. A cigar was in his mouth. He seemed quite at his ease and enjoying his surroundings.

For the best part of that day, as the big liner headed for Ismailia and the Suez Canal, he had reclined in a deck-chair talking with Steve and the boys. And during those conversations he talked all the time of Australia, and

the chances there for a man who was tired of the Old World and had a bit of capital behind him.

That subject had interested Steve quite a lot, and the boys as well. All arrangements had been made for a pleasant hour to be spent after dusk in Faulkner's cabin.

Faulkner paced to and fro, somewhat idly. He gazed over the rail and was not at all perturbed by the dense mist that clung low to the heaving sea. He halted in the shadow of a lifeboat, and eyed the after-funnel listlessly. To the casual observer he was alone, but crouching in the black shadow of the lifeboat was a Chinaman.

"All clear?" snapped Faulkner.

The yellow man nodded affirmatively.

"You no spotted?" he queried.

"No!" sneered Faulkner. "I told them I was a dealer in precious stones, and that sort of guff, and they swallowed it whole. Where are the others?"

"In Mahon's cabin," said the Chinaman. "You coming?"

"Go on," ordered Faulkner.

The Chinaman led the way, keeping well in the shadows. Faulkner followed, striding along openly, as if he had not a care in the world. He went down to the promenade deck. The Chinaman bolted into a cabin. Faulkner followed, and the door closed.

Faulkner unbent. In a flash he became his real self—Karl Sweetman.

"It's working like a charm," he said, sitting down.

"Attaboy!" exclaimed Bully Mahon. "You'd make a fortune down Hollywood, boss. You did ought to be an actor."

"It was pretty slick, I'll admit," remarked Twisty Baker.

"Velly clever!" grinned Ah Wong. "And I thought of it!"

"Cut out the flattery!" said Sweetman. "They're coming to my cabin after dark. You boys know what to do. You got that gas-cylinder ready, Ah Wong?"

"Yes, boss."

"But suppose that sparkler isn't on 'em?" queried Mahon. "Doesn't matter," grinned Twisty Baker. "That gas will put 'em to sleep and we'll have time to search their cabin."

"Exactly," said Sweetman. "But I'd better not stay here too long. It's getting late. And don't you boys let me down!"

Sweetman went out and made his way to the saloon, where he met Steve and the boys. They yarned there for a time and took no notice of the passing of time.

Eventually Faulkner reminded the chums of their promise to visit him in his cabin, and the party left the saloon. Sweetman, cleverly acting his part, led them to his cabin, chatting away pleasantly.

"I've done a lot of travelling across the Atlantic," he said, "but never this way before. And I like to make friends on board ship. It helps to break the monotony of ship life, you know. Come in. This is my cabin."

They found Svenskhem already there, sitting at the little table chewing an apple.

"Tis I found here vos. Ja? Und hongry I vos—so hongry! I eat heem for der ability, ain't it. You not mind? He in?"

"Oh, no! Quite all right!" declared Faulkner. "Help yourself, my dear fellow!"

He got all his visitors inside and closed the door. He chatted away blithely, suggested a friendly game of cards, and tossed a pack on to the table. Steve frowned slightly, but Faulkner soon put him at his ease.

"A friendly game I said," he rattled on. "I don't believe in playing for money. That is not a friendly game."

"Right," said Steve. "In that case you can count me in. What's it to be? You playing, Svenskhem?"

The Swede shook his head.

"Der abbles for der ability to be eaten haf," he declared.

"Then that makes four of us," said Faulkner. "What about a hand of whist?"

"I'm game," said Bob and Syd together.

Steve pulled up to the table and grabbed the cards. With experienced hands he shuffled them, while Faulkner lit a cigarette.

Steve was about to deal, when suddenly Faulkner rose to his feet.

"If you'll excuse me a moment," he said. "That crate of dates didn't improve my clothes. I must have another suit from my trunk in the hold. I'll let the steward have the keys while I think of it. You get on dealing. I shan't be a minute."

He took a bundle of keys from his pocket and jangled them as he left the cabin. He closed the door, and Steve went on dealing. The boys sat in silence, quietly awaiting the enjoyment of the game. Svenskhem sat munching apples as hard as he could go.

But something was happening. Steve's hands moved slower, slower. He stared about him vacantly. Bob's head sunk on his chest. Syd slumped back in his chair. A blue

haze was filling the cabin. Svenskhem paused, a half-eaten apple raised half-way to his great mouth, his head sagged back helplessly, his eyes still open.

Then, with a stifled groan, more of helplessness than pain, Steve went down on the table, his head resting on the scattered cards. He was senseless. So were the others. The cabin was filled with an overpowering gas—harmless, but inducing complete unconsciousness for a time. Svenskhem and the boys were out to the wide and knew nothing.

Then gradually the door opened slightly. A handkerchief held to his mouth, Sweetman peered in through the aperture. He grinned, and closed the door again. He whistled, not over loud, but loud enough. And out of the shadows came three men—Ah Wong, Twisty Baker, and Bully Mahon.

They knew their parts. Quietly Ah Wong seized a small gas cylinder from the deck. Its work was done, and he lowered it into the water by a rope and let it sink without so much as a splash to alarm anyone.

Then they tied handkerchiefs over their mouths. Karl Sweetman grinned at Twisty Baker.

"Barrett reckoned he was smart grabbing that ruby from us," he said. "But this is where we are a whole heap cleverer than he ever will be. This is where we get it back. Come on! Search them thoroughly."

And silently the crooks entered the cabin where the chums sat—unconscious, helpless.

Ah Wong Gets It!

KARL SWEETMAN, alias Faulkner, was well pleased with himself. A clean white handkerchief covered the lower portion of his face, protecting his mouth and nose from the fumes of the gas. He grinned at the spectacle in his cabin—of Steve, and Syd, and Bob, unconscious, drooping in various attitudes over the card-strown table.

Svenskhem was there, too. His fat head was sunk on his fat chest. He snored terrifically. The half-eaten apple that once had been gripped in his fat hand was now on the floor under the table. But Johan Svenskhem was of no account to Karl Sweetman. He regarded the fat Swede as an interloper who had blundered in where he was not wanted.

Sweetman sidled cautiously into the cabin and motioned to his gang to follow. They did not open the door an inch wider than was necessary in case the gas escaped and the pals recovered too soon. One by one they slipped into the cabin, grinning. All of them had their mouths and noses masked.

Grimly they approached the unconscious pals. Already Karl Sweetman was unbuttoning Steve's jacket to get at the leather belt that encircled his waist. Ah Wong was skillfully searching Syd, and Bully Mahon was advancing towards Bob.

Crash!

Like an earthquake, the whole world seemed capsized. The liner seemed to recoil sideways, drunkenly. She heeled over. To the crooks that cabin seemed to shoot up, then cant over. They were flung in a heap in the corner. The door banged open violently, wrenched its hinges, and stayed open. The fresh air came flooding in amongst the gas-fumes. The pals were rolled from their chairs to the floor.

Sickeningly, the big ship rolled back again clumsily. Men were yelling hoarsely.

"All hands on deck! All hands on deck!"

Crash!

She struck again, or something struck the ship. No one quite knew which. The liner trembled from stem to stern. Over to port she canted, her passengers screaming with terror, the lascars howling, and the officers bawling orders. Down went her port weather rail almost to the level of the gurgling, hissing water, and out through the cabin door to the deck shot Steve and the pals, their senses slowly returning as the gas-fumes were blown away. Svenskhem came shooting out of the cabin. He slid across the promenade deck and hit a stanchion with a soft thud. He grunted, only half-conscious that he was hurt.

The liner recovered, struggling to regain her equilibrium. She groaned and complained in all her plates. Slowly she righted, drunkenly. Her port side rose, and the starboard rail went down. The fresh air fanned the pals back to life, driving the gas-fumes from their over-charged lungs.

Syd sat up, holding his throbbing head.

"What the dickens!" he snapped. "Somethin's happened, and—"

"Dingoes!" growled Steve.

And then down went the liner's port bulwarks again, dropping sheer to the surging sea, as if never to rise again.

And out of the cabin tumbled the crooks, panic-stricken, scared to death, and furious of having been cheated of their prey.

Syd saw the face of Faulkner in the light that streamed from the cabin. The handkerchief still masked his face, but that glare in his eyes—Syd had seen it before. He sensed dirty work and treachery. In a flash he was on his feet, and the next moment had flown at Faulkner. The boss crook tried to avoid him, but slipped on the sloping deck. Syd grabbed that handkerchief and tore it from the man's face, and with it he took also the black moustache.

"Sweetman!" snarled Steve. "By George! He's ditched us again! It's Sweetman and his mob!"

That realisation completely restored Steve's scattered senses. The gas-fumes seemed to leave him and he was normal again, in the twinkling of an eye. He was up on his feet, slithering about the sloping deck, and going for Sweetman like a man possessed.

Bob said nothing. He saw Bully Mahon trying to hit at Steve from behind, and he went for the man bald-headed, while Syd drove his fist into Ah Wong's yellow face and shot him back against Twisty Baker, who, having gulped a quantity of gas, was still looking green. He looked greener still when Ah Wong sat on him. He gasped, his mouth opened and shut like a goldfish wanting a change of water. Then, in a rage, he brushed the Chinaman off his body and sprang to his feet.

Steve was pummelling Sweetman unmercifully.

"You crook!" he bellowed. "Thought to gas us and then frisk us for the sparkler! But we hadn't got it, see! So you've had your trouble for— Take that!" Smack! "I'll teach you to try double-crossing—"

Bully Mahon and Twisty Baker came with a rush. Syd and Bob had their backs to the weather rail and fought madly. Seeing that they had not had the ruby on them when gassed and that Sweetman had failed, the pals reckoned Steve ought to have got away smartly rather than have attempted to punish the crooks. But there was no telling what Steve would do when he saw red.

And now they just had to fight. There was nothing else to do. Syd sent Bully Mahon recoiling with a straight left to his ugly face. Bob ducked neatly to miss Twisty Baker's wire-like hands that clawed at his throat. He brought up his right in a vicious upper-cut that had the crook gasping.

But the scrap was a long way from over. Sweetman was giving Steve a rough house, even if he was suffering himself. And the other crooks were coming back for more. It looked as if the pals were due for a licking this time. That gas they had absorbed wasn't helping them to endure too much.

Smack! Biff! The pals kept their end up as best they could, when suddenly the fight was ended for them. Pell-mell, helter-skelter, men came rushing along the deck. Lascars, Chinamen, renegade whites in a weird, terrified assortment, their eyes bulging with fear, knives gleaming here and there, shouting hoarsely as they came.

"To the boats! She's sinking! To the boats!"

Like a great wave they surged forward and separated the crooks from Steve and his pals. The trio fought to stay where they were.

"Hang on!" roared Steve. "It's a panic! Don't get swept up amongst that cattle! Hold on, boys!"

They grabbed the rails and held on grimly while the mob surged past and up the ladder to the boat deck. Revolver shots cracked out. The officers were defending the lifeboats from the mob.

Steve gazed about the littered, deserted promenade deck. Even Sweetman and his gangsters had gone. He frowned, perplexed.

"Seems like something has happened to this bateau," he said.

"She's canting a lot," said Bob.

"And where did you leave the ruby?" asked Syd tersely.

"In my bunk," said Steve.

"Then we'd better get it quickly, before this ship takes it to the bottom."

"We'll get it! Like Lucifer, we will!" said Steve. "Come on, boys!"

The stokehold squad came up from below like a lot of frenzied demons, fighting and jostling their way to the boats, howling in terror, not a European amongst the lot of them.

Steve and the pals had to fight their way through that howling rabble to reach their cabin, and then they were a split second too late, for as they approached the cabin door Ah Wong came out, smirking with satisfaction, something clutched tightly in his claw-like hand.

Steve let rip a roar of rage. He bounded forward, but Ah Wong saw him coming and leapt clean over the weather rail!

Syd rushed to the rail and peered down at the sea. In the dim light he thought he saw a dark shape clamber inboard on the lower deck rail.

Steve was in the cabin rummaging in his bunk like a raving lunatic, flinging the blankets about, and hurling pillows over his head.

"It's gone!" he moaned. "That yellow cur's got the ruby!"

The liner heeled over, flinging Steve away from the bunk and reminding him of their danger, for it certainly seemed as if the ship was sinking.

"All our work to do over again!" he growled. "But if we stop here we won't get a chance to do it all over again. Come on, boys, up to the boats!"

Rapidly they gathered together what stuff they could and made their way to the boat deck. The moon was slowly emerging from behind a fog-bank and lighting up the scene.

"You and the boys were great!" said the chief-officer. "Don't mench!" grinned Steve. "But tell me, mister—what's the matter with this ship, anyway?"

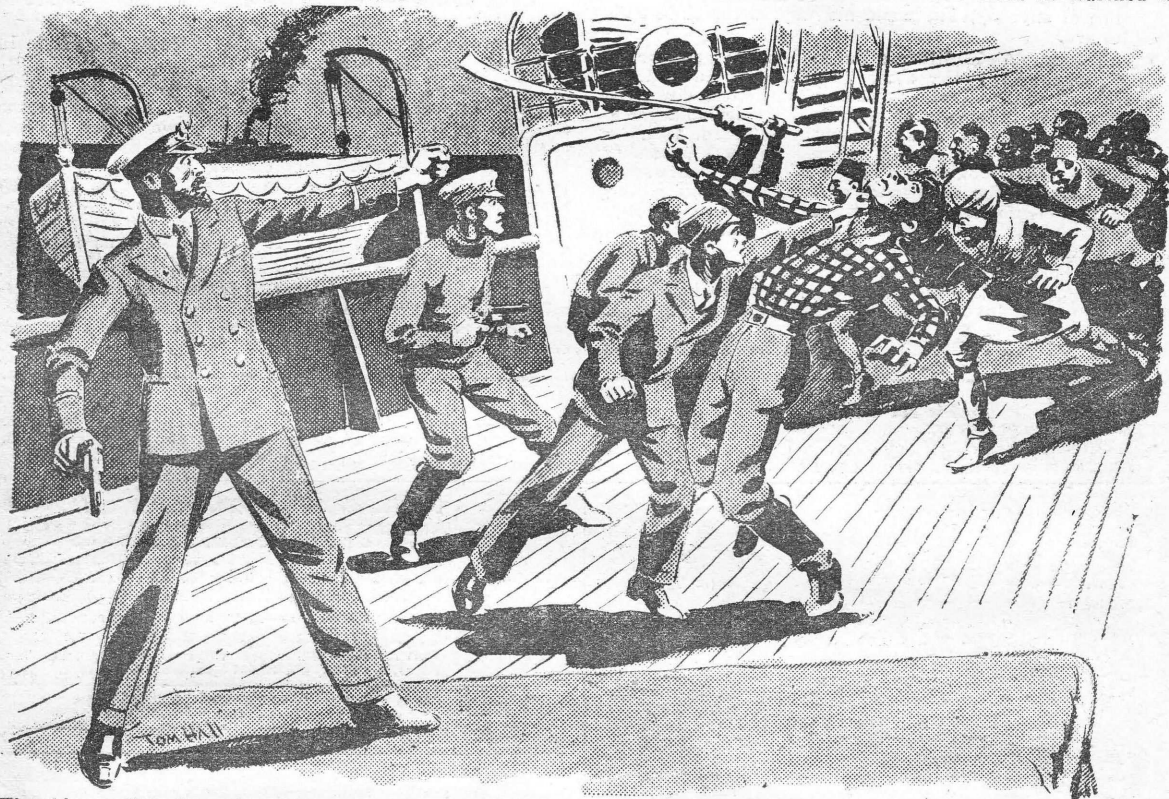
"Good lor', don't you know? Look! Collision! Rammed by that vessel!"

He waved his arm over the weather rail; and Steve saw about a mile away a huge tramp steamer rolling sluggishly in the ground swell, illumined by the pale rays of the moon, her bows crumpled like so much paper.

"Jerusalem!" gasped Steve.

"Got us just abaft the foremast," said the officer. "But I dare say we'll make Ismailia and go into dock. And the tramp says she can fetch Alexandria under her own steam. But I must be off."

Canting badly, the liner limped her way through the mist into Ismailia, but Karl Sweetman and his gang seemed to have disappeared. Steve and the boys roamed round the liner and searched her as far as she could be searched in



The skipper of the liner stood his ground, as the panic-stricken crew rushed madly towards the boats. "Back, you scum!" he roared. "Back to your stations! The ship isn't sinking! Back you go!" (See this page.)

Steve and his pals said nothing; they just acted. They leapt forward and ranged up alongside the officers. The lascars came with a rush, like a pack of wolves, and the rough house began. Ugly faces loomed out of the murk, and they knocked back into the murk savagely. The crooks were there. Karl Sweetman was hovering on the fringe of the mob. Bob saw Bully Mahon and knocked him under the feet of a couple of burly negroes. Syd got Twisty Baker a beauty on the mouth, and he disappeared. Steve spotted Ah Wong and tried to get at him, but the Chink was far too wily to risk getting within reach of Steve's fists; he vanished behind a ventilator.

Svenskhem came barging along through the press, a half-eaten apple in his hand.

"For me you vill vait, ain't it?" he blubbered. "You save me, hein? You not leave me on der poat to trown?"

But the skipper and the officers from the engine-room, reinforced by willing passengers from the first-class saloon, came to the rescue. Revolvers cracked. Men yelled and shouted and cursed. Some of the rescuers had armed themselves with great oars and swept a path for themselves, swinging their weapons like scythes in a cornfield, cracking shin-bones left and right.

"Back, you scum!" roared the skipper. "Back to your stations! The ship isn't sinking! We'll get her to port! Back you go! Back to your holes, you rats!"

And the decks were cleared.

"And that's that!" panted Steve, rubbing his bleeding knuckles.

the general confusion following the collision; but there was no sign of Karl Sweetman Bully Mahon, Twisty Baker or Ah Wong. And certainly no sign of the Black Ruby.

Awkward for Svenskhem?

SYD and Bob squatted on the grimy floor of a barracoon, or large shed, on the quayside at Ismailia. They had their backs to the wooden wall and tried to snatch a few winks of sleep; but, what with the heat, the loss of the ruby, the presence of Bully Mahon barely three yards away, and many other things, sleep was next to impossible.

Of course, they could have gone up into the town and spent the night at an hotel, but that would have meant missing the liner that was due to pass into the Suez Canal in the early hours of the morning. The officials of the shipping company had ordered the passengers off the stricken liner that had brought them from Alexandria, and informed those who were in a hurry that it was advisable to remain on the quayside for an hour or so to be put aboard the next Australian bound vessel. If they went to the hotel they would not be able to get another vessel before thirty-six hours, but by putting up with the discomfort of the barracoon for six hours they would manage to catch the Mangapore as she passed into the canal.

Obviously, seeing that they held the Black Ruby, Sweetman and the crooks would be in a hurry to reach Australia, and would put up with anything to get aboard the Mangapore; so Steve and the boys had to do the same. But,

having been beaten once by cunning, they resolved to employ greater cunning and regain the ruby.

Consequently, the boys waited alone in the barrackoon. They saw Sweetman and his gang there and Svenskem.

When the liner arrived the crooks went aboard, closely followed by the fat Swede.

Syd and Bob went aboard. The crooks eyed them suspiciously. Steve was not with them, yet they were in no way perturbed by his absence. Sweetman growled at Svenskem until the fat Swede faded away, then held hurried consultation with his gangsters. But the pals simply ignored the crooks and made their way to the cabin allotted to them on Deck No. 2.

Almost the last passenger to board the Mangapora was a black-bearded man. He had "squatter" written all over him. He was a type often seen on Australian liners—a man who had been on holiday in the Old Country, and was returning to his lonely sheep ranges in the bush. He took no notice of anybody, but made his way to the third-class deck for'ard.

With the searchlight fitted on the fo'c'sle, the great vessel slowly ploughed her way along the canal to Suez; then, free from all restraint, went speeding southwards down the Red Sea. The night was of the usual tropical blackness, but to the casual observer all was peace on board, with the exception of one fat man who roamed the decks, peering into dim corners, poking his fat head in at doorways—for ever looking for something or somebody and failing to find any satisfaction, until, with amazing speed, a long thin man suddenly leapt from out from one of the cabins, and flung his arm round the fat man's neck.

Svenskem opened his mouth to scream, but Twisty Baker was too quick for him. He clapped his wire-like hand over the Swede's mouth and hauled him into a cabin, in which sat Bulky Mahon.

"Now!" rasped Twisty Baker. "You listen to me, you

lump o' meat! You've done nothing except trail us ever since we left Alexandria. You're getting in our way, that's what!"

"Nein. You not understand it. Herr Faulkner buy der jewels off me, ain't it?—Und der monish he not gif—yet. Und I cannot Herr Faulkner find. Mit Herr Barrett in his cabin I vos, ven to shleep I go, und der oder ship come bang in our ship und der confusion ist! Donnervetter, trodden I vos, und murdered. But Herr Faulkner I lost haf, Ja! Und meine monish I vos vant, ain't it?"

Bulky Mahon laughed derisively. Twisty Baker sneered openly.

"Know any more funny tales like that?" asked Baker. "Sweetman fooled you properly when he did that play acting with you and called himself Faulkner. But you can't fool us. We've got what we wanted, as you know—"

"Nein. I know not!" moaned Svenskem. "Come off the roof!" snapped Bulky Mahon. "You're in with Barrett and them kids!"

"In mit dem?" queried the Swede. "How you mean? In wid dem. Dey meine frients ist, Ja!"

"Thought so," said Baker. "And do you know that Barrett has gone missing? Where is he? Those kids came aboard, not Barrett. And, seeing we've got the big sparkler, that strikes me funny. We want to know where Barrett is, and you're going to tell us! No sense in tackling them boys. We could tear 'em to bits, and then they wouldn't spill the beans. But you—you mountain o' fat—we'll make you talk! We've got to know where Barrett is, and you're going to tell us! It's too risky not knowing where he is—see?"

(Had Baker known it Steve Barrett was not many yards away! There will be another gripping instalment of this powerful serial in next week's GEM. Make sure you read it, chums!)

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