

The

GEM

2^d

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EVERY
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LIBRARY



ST. JIM'S TO THE RESCUE!

Ten minutes later, and the house would have been burned to the ground! But in those ten minutes Tom Merry & Co. achieve wonders! (See the fine school and adventure yarn inside.)

HERE'S AN EXCITING LONG COMPLETE SCHOOL YARN—

The SCHOOLBOY FIRE-FIGHTERS!

by Martin Clifford



Why should Mr. Bond, the owner of a house near St. Jim's, develop such an unaccountable antagonism towards Tom Merry & Co. simply because of their activities in the school's junior fire-brigade? That's what the chums of St. Jim's set out to discover, and in doing so provide the sensation of the term!

CHAPTER 1.

Something Fresh!

"DISMOUNT!"

Manners and Lowther, of the Shell at St. Jim's, jumped. That single word, uttered in the sharp tone of a military command, was decidedly unexpected from Study No. 10.

"What was that?" asked Manners, pausing with his hand on the handle of the door.

"Sounded like Tommy. Open the door and see."

Manners turned the handle and opened the door, just in time to be greeted with the cryptic order.

"Ground sway-bar!"

The voice was undoubtedly that of Tom Merry, the leader of the Shell; yet a glance inside the study was sufficient to show that he was alone. Manners and Lowther looked at each other in astonishment.

No further commands followed; but the two listeners could hear Tom Merry mumbling to himself over a book he was reading.

"Take branch, take first length, run it out, connect branch, lay it on ground, and stand at attention."

"Potty!" whispered Lowther.

"Absolutely!" nodded Manners.

Tom Merry continued to mumble on, apparently unaware that he was no longer alone. What meaning there was in the jargon he was reading Manners and Lowther could not tell. Whatever it was, it seemed to be occupying all Tom Merry's attention. He seemed fairly engrossed in his task.

"Better wake him up, I suppose," murmured Manners.

Lowther grinned and nodded.

"Let's give a yell. When I give the word 'Go!' let it rip!"

Manners and Lowther drew a deep breath. And at the word "Go!" they let it rip, with a vengeance. So much so that Tom Merry jumped out of his chair at the shock.

"Oh!" gasped the skipper of the Shell. "What the merry dickens—"

"We've done it!" said Lowther triumphantly. "Feel all right now, Tommy?"

"Yes, of course. But what—"

"You can recognise us?"

"Of course I can. What's the joke?" asked Tom Merry in perplexity.

"Then you're not potty, after all!" said Lowther, with relief. "But what the thump were you doing, jabbering away all to yourself?"

Tom Merry understood and laughed. He picked up his book from the table and held it forward for inspection.

"Voila! The bag of tricks complete!"

Manners and Lowther looked at the cover curiously, and they began to see the explanation of their leader's strange behaviour.

"Manual for the Use of Fire Brigades," read out Lowther. "So that's it, is it?"

"Now we understand," grinned Manners. "This is the THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,099.

book Railton gave you after his chin-wag on fire-drill the other day."

Tom Merry nodded.

"Exactly. And I was just getting down to it. Railton's made me skipper of the junior brigade, and it's up to me to learn something about the job. Hence this thushness! When you came in, you see, I was just rehearsing what we shall do when we have the school hand-engine out this afternoon."

"Oh!"

"So that's the programme, is it?" said Manners, pulling rather a wry face. "That means no footer, I suppose?"

"Can't be helped, old bean. Duty calls, and all that sort of thing, you know. Remember what Railton told us?"

"Something about 'the stern necessity for more St. Jim's men to be cognizant of the principles of fire prevention and extinction,' wasn't it?" grinned Lowther, giving an effective imitation of the Housemaster's deep voice.

"And a lot of other rot like that," yawned Manners.

"Just where you're wrong, old chap. For once in a way, I agree with the powers that be. Railton, of course, like all the masters, talks a lot of piffle occasionally."

"Naturally!" growled Lowther.

"But this time I fancy he's right. Fire-drill has practically fizzled out at St. Jim's now. What would happen if a bad outbreak did occur goodness only knows!"

Lowther and Manners looked a little more serious.

"H'm! There is that, of course," Lowther admitted. "I've always looked on fire-drill more as a lark than anything else, but I suppose it would prove useful if a fire did break out."

"Quite possible that it would, of course!" grinned Manners. "I quite believe there would be an unholy muddle if the School House did catch fire, Tommy. The old manual engine hasn't been out for practice for terms on end. I even doubt whether anybody remembers how to use it after all this time."

"Exactly what Railton said," nodded Tom Merry. "Anyway, things are going to alter now. Kildare is organising regular drills for the seniors, and I've been told to swot up this book and get busy recruiting a volunteer brigade in the Lower School."

"Rely on us, then, old scout!" grinned Lowther. "It always was my ambition to wear a brass helmet and rescue distressed damsels from burning buildings. Count me in!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a tap on the door at that moment, and Jack Blake of the Fourth entered, followed by Herries, Digby, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

The leader of the Fourth was frowning.

"What's this I hear about a pick-up match taking the place of the practice game this afternoon, Tom Merry?" he demanded.

Tom Merry nodded.

"Quite true, old bean! It's a pity I've had to call it off at such short notice. But Railton has only just told me that we can have the manual out this afternoon."

—STARRING TOM MERRY & CO., THE CHUMS OF ST. JIM'S!

"The manual?"

"The jolly old manual fire-pump, to describe it more fully. Certain members of the junior eleven are spending the afternoon at fire-drill, you see. And naturally they can't play footer at the same time."

"Oh!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I see. Old Railton's pi-jaw about fires is bearing fruit, eh?" said Blake, rather less truculently. "Well, that explains it, I suppose. We'll let you off, then, this time."

"Thanks, awfully!"

"Bai Jove! Fire-dwill will be wathah a pleasant change, for once in a way, deah boys," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy thoughtfully. "I think powwaps I'll take a hand in it myself."

The juniors grinned.

"I've already decided on the fellows I want for brigade work," said Tom Merry. "It's a volunteer brigade, so of course a chap can decline the honour if he wants to."

"But I fancy there won't be many refusals," remarked Blake. "Let's see your list, Tommy."

Tom Merry produced a slip of paper from his pocket and read out the names which he had scribbled on it.

"Merry (captain)," he began.

"Hear, hear!" murmured Manners and Lowther loyally.

"Lowther, Manners, Talbot, Glyn."

"Glyn's engineering knowledge will be useful," commented Digby.

"Just why I selected him," nodded Tom Merry. "Then I've got Figgins and Redfern from the New House—they've already agreed, by the way. The rest are School House chaps: Blake, D'Arcy, Herries, Digby, and Hammond."

"Oh, good!" chorused Jack Blake & Co., and D'Arcy's frown disappeared again at the news that he had not been overlooked.

"That's the lot. I think between us we ought to shape into a pretty serviceable brigade. All agreed?"



"Yaas, wathah!"

"Good! Now I'll go and see the fellows I haven't spoken to yet, before the dinner-bell goes. You'll all be expected to turn up outside the pump-shed, near Taggles' lodge at two-thirty. Don't forget!"

"No fear!"

Tom Merry nodded, satisfied, and went off to rope in the remainder of his recruits.

CHAPTER 2.

A Sceptical Visitor.

"ALL here?" asked Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah!"

The fire brigade recruits had turned up outside the shed where the manual pump was housed, with commendable promptitude. Quite a number of curious sightseers had also turned up; in fact, the parade ground, if the meeting-place might so be described, was quite crowded with juniors, mostly grinning as though in anticipation of a highly diverting entertainment.

Tom Merry produced a rusty old key, and unlocked the door of the shed, and the crowd surged round curiously. It was some time since the St. Jim's manual had been seen in public.

"Want any help in getting out the old bus, Tom Merry?" asked D'Arcy minor, of the Third.

"We'll give you a hand with it," added Curly Gibson generously.

Tom Merry frowned.

"Stand away there, you kids! This is the brigade's work. No others need apply!"

The captain of the Shell turned to the brigade.

"Squad, fall in!"

The squad hastily came to attention.

"Our first aim this afternoon will be to learn something about this manual pumping-engine and hose-carrier," said Tom Merry. "To make demonstrations easier, I propose we shift the manual out into the open, near Taggles' lodge. Squad, stand at ease! Fall out!"

The squad fell out, and entered the shed, and under their guidance the somewhat ramshackle-looking manual was wheeled out.

"Now we'll run it down to the lodge," said the captain of the brigade. "Six of you at the front shaft, two at the back, and the rest follow on. Let her rip! No speed limit!"

It was perhaps fortunate that no speed limit existed on the gravel path leading down to Taggles' lodge, for the juniors fairly raced the old pump along.

So quickly were they going, in fact, that they found it impossible to respond to the command "Halt!" and overshoot their mark by several yards, travelling right on to the main drive from the school gates.

Figgins gave a warning yell as he spotted two figures strolling sedately down the drive ahead of them.

"Look out!"

Tom Merry jumped as he recognised the two gentlemen. They were the Head and a Mr. Bond, who had recently moved into a house near the school.

"Pull up, you idiots, for goodness' sake!" gasped the brigade captain.

With a mighty effort the squad managed to avoid the threatened disaster, and the manual came to a dead stop within a yard or so of the gentlemen, who both looked round in surprise.

"Dear me! You nearly ran us down, boys!" remarked Dr. Holmes, with a frown.

"Careless young fools, by gad!" ejaculated the Head's visitor, a well-dressed—almost flashily-dressed—man, with peculiarly furtive eyes.

Tom Merry flushed.

"It wasn't altogether our fault, sir. This old manual is rather heavy, and we found it a bit difficult to pull up all at once."

The visitor's strangely furtive eyes turned towards the manual, and Tom Merry was surprised to observe his face suddenly twist into an unaccountable expression of fury. The expression vanished again almost instantly, and the young brigade captain was left wondering whether his eyes had deceived him or not.

Mr. Bond looked calm enough when he spoke.

"A manual pump, eh?" he remarked. "I didn't know you ran an amateur fire-brigade here, Dr. Holmes."

The Head smiled faintly.

"What could be more laudable than a brigade of volunteers for the purpose of saving life and property, Mr. Bond?"

Mr. Bond's eyes glittered for an instant—or at least, Tom Merry could have sworn they did—but his tone was still calm and indifferent as he replied:

"Laudable, yes, if efficient. I can hardly credit, however, that these boys regard their training seriously. It seems far more likely that the whole thing is just a good joke to them, in which case, Dr. Holmes, you will excuse me for doubting whether they serve any useful purpose at all."

A hot reply rose to Tom Merry's lips, but with an effort he checked it. It would hardly have done to be impolite to a guest of the Head's.

The Head disagreed with his neighbour, anyway, and quietly took up the point as the two strolled to the gates. In the meantime, he made a gesture of dismissal to the juniors, who wheeled the pump back to the spot they had selected for their inspection.

Tom Merry was looking thoughtful as they halted again.

"Did you chaps notice anything strange about that chap Bond?" he asked, as the squad rested for a minute.

Jack Blake nodded.

"I did. I thought he looked as mad as a hatter when his peepers fell on the jolly old manual."

"I noticed the same thing myself," said Figgins. "Gave me quite a start for a couple of secs. It was soon over; but just for an instant he looked like the Demon King in a pantomime."

"Exactly what I thought," nodded Tom Merry. "But what the dickens does it mean? Why should he be wild because we're practising with a fire-pump?"

"Give it up!"

"Ask me another!"

"Pewpaws you were mistaken, deah boys," suggested Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "I weally can't see that we did anythin' to upset the old bean. Ergo—"

"Meaning 'therefore,'" grieved Lowthah.

"I was already awah of that, Lowthah! Ergo, why should Mistah Bond be upset?"

"That's just what we're asking, chump!" snorted Jack Blake.

"And I am suggestin' that you were mistaken, deah boy! Mistah Bond happens to be a friend of the Head—"

"Not an old friend, though," interrupted Herries. "He's only lived in the neighbourhood a few weeks, anyway. I think he only sees the Head about the paintings in the school; he's an art collector, or something."

"Nevah mind, deah boy. He is a friend of the Head's, and as we all have a vewy deep wespect for the Head, that should be suffish!"

"I suppose you're right," agreed Tom dubiously. "Anyway, we'll get busy again now. Blow Bond!"

And Mr. Bond was thereupon relegated to the limbo of the forgotten for the time being. Unfortunately, Mr. Bond was not to be disposed of quite so easily, as later events were to show.

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CHAPTER 3.

Watery!

"WHAT the dickens—"
Gordon Gay, the leader of the juniors at Rylcombe Grammar School, broke off and stared.

He was strolling past the gates of St. Jim's, in company with a dozen of his followers. It was unusual for such a large number of Grammarians to be out for a stroll together. It was more unusual still for Grammarians to venture so near the stronghold of their traditional rivals. Probably the first fact explained the second. If Gordon Gay & Co. were not altogether out for trouble, they were at least quite willing to entertain any trouble that came their way.

The rest of the Grammarians followed Gordon Gay's lead in coming to a halt and peering through the gates of St. Jim's. Then they, too, looked surprised.

"What is it?" asked Frank Monk. "And what are Tom Merry and his crowd doing round it?"

"Give it up!"

Gordon Gay chuckled.

"Don't make a display of your ignorance, chaps. Let your uncle explain. That weird-looking contraption over there is a manual fire-pump."

"A whatter?"

"A manual fire-pump; or, in other words, a hand-cart fitted up with a tank, pump, and hosepipes, used for putting out fires."

"Oh!"

"Our dear old pals are setting up as firemen, then!" grinned Frank Monk.

"Obviously! I wonder if we can give them any help?" murmured Gordon Gay thoughtfully.

The Grammarians chuckled. Any help they were likely to give would be of a kind that Tom Merry & Co. would fail to appreciate.

"There's a dozen of them," remarked Carboy reflectively.

"Hem! And they're in their own camp," added Gordon Gay. "Looks a bit of a teaser at present. But I'd love to bag it!"

"What, the pump?"

"Why not?"

"Oh crumbs!"

"If we bag the pump and run it down to Rylcombe they'll be able to follow us up and get the benefit of the hose. That'll be good training for 'em, won't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But it can't be done, old bean!" objected Oliver, shaking his head. "We're as brave as lions, and all that sort of thing, but I don't see how we're going to pinch the bag of tricks while there are a dozen men to look after it."

"Don't you? Have another look, then!" said Gordon Gay, who was watching events inside the gates with great attention.

The Grammarians looked, and their eyes gleamed at what they saw. Tom Merry and his volunteer brigade had just formed into two ranks, and were marching across the quad away from the porter's lodge, leaving the manual temporarily unguarded. They were going, as a matter of fact, to inspect a hydrant connected to the main water supply of the school.

"Now's our chance!" murmured Frank Monk.

"Just the opportunity we wanted!" nodded Gordon Gay. "Now, chaps, look shippy! You, Monkey and Carboy, wait here by the gates and throw 'em open as soon as we get the old pump. The rest of you follow me!"

With that the leader of the Grammarians entered the side gate and stole cautiously past Taggles' lodge, followed by his merry men. Keeping, as far as possible, in the shadows of the old elms, the invaders advanced on their objective with the stealth of a party of Red Indians on the war-trail. Meanwhile, Frank Monk and Carboy lay low near the gates and waited for their cue.

At any other time an invasion of the quad by a party of Grammar School fellows could hardly have passed unnoticed. But the Grammarians had turned up at a most fortunate moment, when nearly all the St. Jim's men were engaged on the footer field, and the fire-brigade's original spectators, having tired of looking on, had all disappeared.

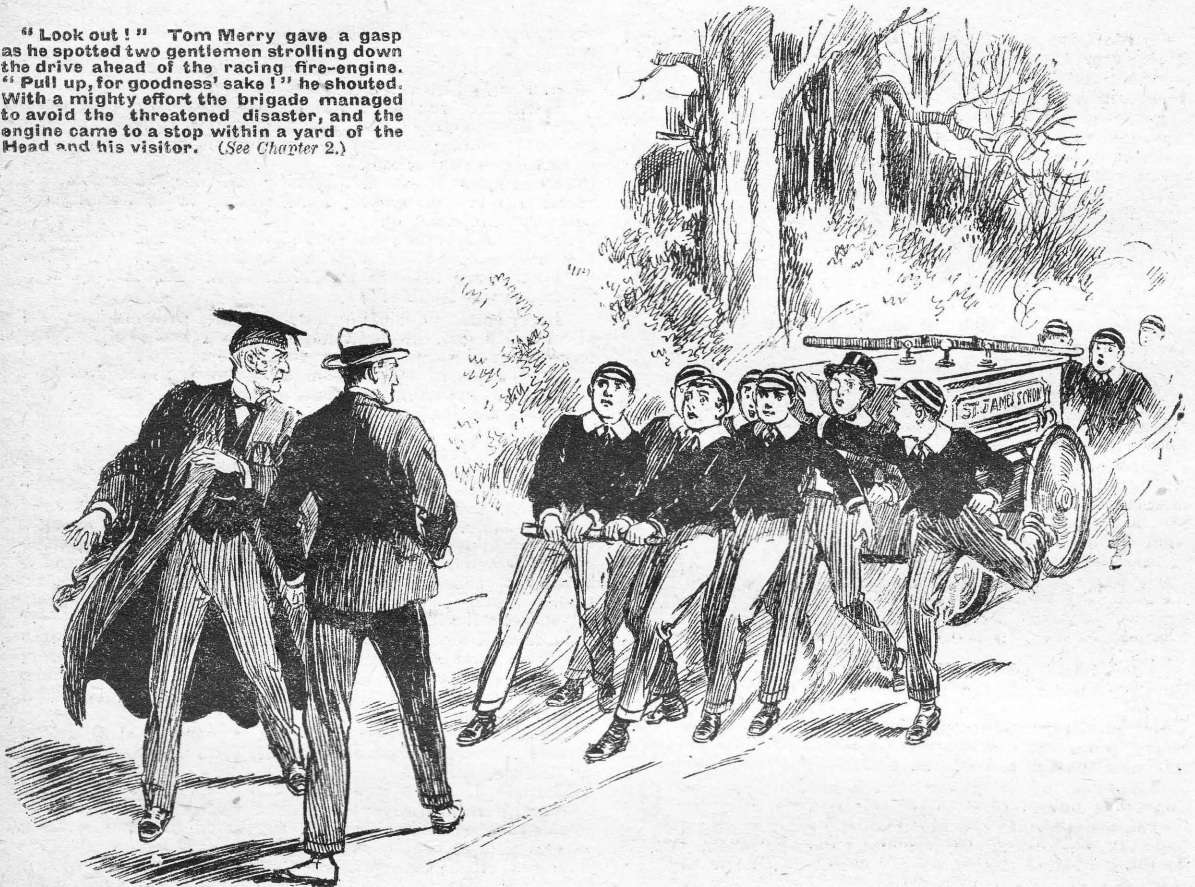
"Now!" breathed Gordon Gay, as they reached the last point from which they could rely on a little cover from the trees.

The Grammarians needed no further command. They made a rush from the trees out into the open, bearing straight upon the coveted manual.

The raiders reached their objective in safety. No alarm had been raised.

"Good egg!" panted Gordon Gay, giving a quick glance across at the St. Jim's juniors, who were still marching along, blissfully unaware of what was going on behind their backs. "Grab the shaft, chaps, then full speed ahead to get her out before we're spotted!"

"Look out!" Tom Merry gave a gasp as he spotted two gentlemen strolling down the drive ahead of the racing fire-engine. "Pull up, for goodness' sake!" he shouted. With a mighty effort the brigade managed to avoid the threatened disaster, and the engine came to a stop within a yard of the Head and his visitor. (See Chapter 2.)



"What-ho!" grinned the gleeful Grammarians, falling to the task with zest.

Many hands made light work. The manual was turned towards the gates in a trice, and then the party hauled it away, quickly accelerating until the old vehicle was careering along at quite a perilous speed.

The raiders' two allies at the main entrance had acted immediately they saw the manual turned, and as the main party raced their prize along Monk and Carboy unbolted the great iron gates, already left unlocked by Taggles, and swung them apart.

There was a rush of many feet and a rumbling of heavy wheels down the drive as the St. Jim's manual fairly flew towards the gates.

"Come on, Franky! Join in at the rear!" called out Gordon Gay.

"Non-stop to Rylcombe!" sang out Oliver.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

With a cheer of triumph, the Grammarians piloted the captured manual through the gateway and swung her into the lane.

Gordon Gay stopped to give a hurried look back to see if they had been detected. A glance was sufficient to tell him that they certainly had. A dozen juniors, headed by Tom Merry, were already streaming across the quad, making a bee-line towards the gates. Gordon Gay grinned and raced after the retreating manual.

"Full steam ahead, chaps! They're after us!" he yelled, and the Grammar School team redoubled their efforts.

It was quickly obvious, however, that the Grammarians could never hope to reach the Grammar School in front of their pursuers. Burdened by the heavy manual, their pace was necessarily somewhat slower than that of Tom Merry and his men, and before Gordon Gay & Co. had got two hundred yards down the lane, their rivals were in sight and rapidly gaining on them.

The Grammar School leader made a quick decision.

"Keep her on the run, you men!" he panted, jumping up on to the manual. "I'll join up the hose, all ready for 'em!"

And he swiftly went to work to connect up the hose-pipe with the joint of the delivery pipe, while his willing followers continued to keep the manual "on the run."

Fifty yards behind, Tom Merry spotted Gordon Gay's move and set his teeth.

"Buck up! Gay's connecting up the hose-pipe! You know what that means!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

The pursuers put on a spurt. As they did so, they saw Gordon Gay jump down into the road again, holding in his hands the nozzle of the hose. The Grammarians carried on a little way farther, and the hose uncurled as Gordon Gay stood his ground.

"Halt!" came the order. Then: "Man the pumps! Let it rip!"

Followed the metallic sound of the pump-handles being moved up and down. The St. Jim's men spurted desperately to reach their rivals before the deadly stream could begin to play.

They were too late. A trickle of water appeared at the nozzle in Gordon Gay's hands; the trickle became a regular flow; the flow became a rush; and as Tom Merry and his followers came within a stone's throw of the manual, the rush became a powerful jet, and Gordon Gay, with a triumphant yell, turned it full upon them.

Swoooooosh!

"Yow-ow!"

"Yaroooooh!"

"Whoooooop!"

The St. Jim's rush quickly came to a stop. Tom Merry, caught at a tangent by the jet, was sent sprawling into the road, streaming with water. Jack Blake tripped over his prostrate leader with a plentiful shower-bath raining upon him. Manners and Lowther blinded by water, came into violent and painful collision and sat down, roaring, while Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, with an anguished yell as the jet reduced his immaculate waistcoat to a soaking rag, sprawled on top of them.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!" shouted Gordon Gay, playing upon the staggering St. Jim's men with devastating effect. "Like some more, Gussy? Here you are, then!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Grammarians, thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Tom Merry, wild-eyed, sprang to his feet again and rallied his followers.

"Rush 'em, you men! We can't get wetter than we are!"

"Bai Jove! That's true!" groaned Arthur Augustus.

"Buck up, deah boys!"

The "deah boys" bucked up, and a jet from a main hydrant could hardly have stopped their furious charge.

Gordon Gay ceased to chortle and looked rather alarmed. "Up the Grammar School! Keep 'em out!"

He played his hose recklessly in an endeavour to stop the rush. But he was unsuccessful. Blinded and drenched, the St. Jim's men charged on, and got right through the fringing-line to the manual.

Tom Merry and Figgins made a simultaneous rush at Gordon Gay, and the Grammar School leader went over with a crash. Jack Blake and Lowther went for the Grammarians who were working the pumps and sent them staggering away. The water ceased to flow, and the St. Jim's men were able to meet their opponents on level terms.

For a bare couple of minutes, a battle royal raged in the usually peaceful Rylcombe Lane. Then the St. Jim's men began to drive the Grammarians back, and as there were soon one or two "casualties" among the latter, Tom Merry had time to look around and make an effort to return Gordon Gay's watery "compliment."

To get Manners and Lowther busy on the pump-handles was the work of a second. Tom Merry himself picked up the nozzle.

"Stand back, St. Jim's!" he yelled suddenly. "Here comes a dose of their own medicine!"

"Hurrah!"

"Dwench the wottahs, deah boy!"

The Grammarians wavered; and as they wavered, a jet of water again swept out of the nozzle and poured into their midst, drenching and blinding them just as Tom Merry & Co. had been drenched and blinded only a few minutes before.

Gordon Gay made a despairing effort to rally his men; but it was hopeless. Saturated and defeated, they staggered back, and as the jet followed them, they turned their backs and ran for it.

St. Jim's had won! The juniors cheered delightedly. But their cheers died a sudden death at the unfortunate anti-climax that followed the retreat of the Grammarians.

As Tom Merry played his jet cheerfully after the disappearing enemy, the figure of a man appeared suddenly and unexpectedly out of the side gate leading to a big house near by.

Tom was too late to avert the catastrophe. Almost before he realised what was happening, the jet had caught the newcomer full in the chest and bowled him over like a ninepin.

The fire brigade's cheers changed to gasps of dismay. Every one of them had recognised their victim. He was none other than the gentleman who had been so sceptical earlier in the afternoon—Mr. Bond, friend and neighbour of Dr. Holmes, their own Headmaster. They had swamped the Head's friend, practically on his own doorstep.

CHAPTER 4.

Mr. Bond is Not Popular!

MR. BOND rose dizzily to his feet, gouging water out of his eyes, dripping water generously around him, and breathing fire and slaughter in the direction of the dismayed juniors.

"You—you young hooligans! You young blackguards! I'll have you all flogged for this! You hear me?"

"We're awfully sorry, sir—"

"Sorry! And what good is that to me, now that the harm's done?" snarled the infuriated gentleman. "I'll make you sorry with a vengeance by the time I'm finished with you, by James! Come! I am going straight to your headmaster."

And Mr. Bond stamped off, oozing water as he went.

"Sounds as if the old bouncer's on his hind legs," remarked Jack Blake dolefully. "What are we going to do, Tommy?"

"What can we do?" asked Tom Merry, with a hopeless gesture. "He's a friend of the Head's, and having seen us once already this afternoon, it's ten to one he can recognise us again if he wants to."

"Besides, we've got to take the manual back to the school, so we can't very well run for it," pointed out Herries.

"Bai Jove! That's twue!"

"Nothing else for it I'm afraid," said Tom Merry. "We'll have to go on the carpet and make the best of it. Rather an unfortunate end to a jolly afternoon, what?"

"Yaas, wathah! Wotten!"

However, there was no sense in standing about any longer, particularly as the juniors were all wet and uncomfortable. They therefore crowded round the manual and pushed off once again in the direction of St. Jim's, hard on the heels of Mr. Bond.

In that formation, the little procession arrived back in the quad.

They temporarily parked the manual near Taggles' lodge, and followed Mr. Bond into the School House in a far from enviable frame of mind.

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Dr. Holmes was in his study. He looked up with a start as Mr. Bond squelched in, with the unhappy juniors trailing behind.

"Mr. Bond! Goodness gracious, sir, what has happened?"

Mr. Bond's face worked spasmodically.

"I will tell you what has happened, sir. I have been assaulted—violently and outrageously assaulted, in the gateway leading to my house—by those insolent boys belonging to your school."

The juniors frowned. Making all due allowance for reasonable loss of temper, Bond seemed to be framing the charge rather strongly.

The Head's stern eyes ranged over the unhappy dozen, and he looked rather surprised as he saw who they were.

"I am sorry to hear that, Mr. Bond," he said quietly.

"What is the trouble?"

"I was coming out of my side-gate, sir, with the intention of paying a call in the village, when I was swept off my feet—literally swept off my feet, sir—and soaked to the skin, by a jet of water from a hosepipe. That hosepipe, Dr. Holmes, was being deliberately played by those boys in the road outside my house, converting it into a muddy swamp!"

"Bless my soul!"

"They had brought out the handcart with which they nearly ran us over in the school grounds earlier in the afternoon, and were creating havoc with it in the lane!" continued Mr. Bond angrily. "That alone was bad enough, but when they added to their iniquities by turning their wretched hose on to me, I considered it high time that the affair was brought to your notice, and I hastened to do so."

"Quite, quite!" said the Head sympathetically. "But—"

"I think I am justified in asking you to make an example of these reckless young ruffians," finished Mr. Bond, shooting a malevolent look at Tom Merry & Co. "I now leave it in your hands, Dr. Holmes, satisfied that I shall obtain redress."

"Whew! Makes you feel you've committed a crime, doesn't it?" murmured Jack Blake, sotto voce.

"Silence, Blake!"

The Head's voice was like unto the rumble of distant thunder. He regarded the juniors with contracted brows. "You have all heard what Mr. Bond has said. I am loth to believe that boys belonging to this school can have indulged in such unseemly, in fact, such ruffianly behaviour. Do you admit the truth of these extraordinary allegations?"

"No fear, sir!"

"Wathah not?"

"It's like this—"

"It wasn't exactly our fault—"

"Silence!" boomed the Head, as a dozen eager explanations began to pour out. "I will listen to you, Merry."

The rest of the brigade lapsed into silence, and Tom Merry became spokesman for the party.

"Mr. Bond has been a little unfair to us I think, sir," he said, respectfully. "I admit we were—hem—a little out of order in using the hose in the lane—"

"So I should think!" snorted the irascible Mr. Bond.

"But we weren't altogether at fault. You see, sir, some chaps had pinched—I mean taken—the manual from the quad, for a lark—"

Dr. Holmes raised his eyebrows a little, but nodded.

"Go on, Merry!"

"And when we chased them down the lane they pulled up outside Mr. Bond's house and played the hose on us."

"Dear me!"

"So when we turned the tables on them, we thought we'd pay them back in their own coin—"

The Head's expression relaxed for an instant and his lips twitched slightly.

"Well?"

"And we did so. It was just after they'd bunked—I mean disappeared, sir—that Mr. Bond happened to come out, and fell right into it. Of course, sir, it was an accident—"

"Nonsense!" from Mr. Bond.

"And we're very sorry it occurred. But we're not so much to blame as Mr. Bond seems to imagine," finished Tom. "That's all, sir."

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"You hear the explanation, Mr. Bond? I think you will agree that it places these juniors' offence in a somewhat less serious light?"

Mr. Bond's face displayed a variety of emotions. He seemed torn between the desire to have Tom Merry & Co. severely punished and the wish to remain on the right side of Dr. Holmes.

"You are willing to take the boy's word then, Dr. Holmes?" he asked harshly.

"Without question. Merry is an honourable lad, and I accept his explanation as entirely truthful."

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"Very well. In that case, I agree that there are slightly extenuating circumstances. Nevertheless, I have been assaulted, sir, and I must ask for protection."

"You shall most certainly have it, Mr. Bond. Merry, I hold you responsible for seeing that nothing like this ever occurs again."

"Certainly, sir. I promise," said Tom Merry promptly.

"You will not forbid them to abandon this senseless fire-drill altogether?" snapped Mr. Bond.

Dr. Holmes shook his head.

"I feel that would be taking a wrong course. The subject of fire protection at this school has, I fear, received less attention in the past than it deserves. I am, in fact, glad that this junior brigade has been formed, and I cannot, at this stage, discourage their efforts."

Mr. Bond inclined his head sullenly.

"Very well, sir. I take it that these boys will be suitably punished."

"Undoubtedly. I will request their Housemasters to cane them later on. In the meantime they had better go and change into dry clothes. You may go, boys."

"Thank you, sir!"

The juniors quitted the study. Tom Merry paused with the idea of rendering the injured party a formal apology. But one glance at Mr. Bond's glittering eyes decided him otherwise. He followed the rest out without a word.

"You will, of course, dry yourself and your clothes before you return?" he heard the Head say to Mr. Bond, just before he got out into the passage. Then he closed the door, and the rest of the conversation became inaudible.

"Not too bad," was Blake's comment, as they went up the stairs towards their dormitories.

"We've got off pretty lightly, taking it all round," said Tom Merry. "But why is this chap, Bond, up against us so much?"

"Just what we'd like to know."

"I'm blessed if I can make it out," declared the leader of the Shell, shaking his head. "Somehow or other, the fact that we're forming a fire brigade seems to send him off his rocker. Did you notice how he tried to get the Head to stop it?"

"Couldn't help noticing. But what's his game?"

"I can't imagine. But one thing I'm certain of. There's something fishy about the man. He's not what he appears to be. And I, for one, don't like him."

"Nor I!" chorused the rest heartily.

Mr. Bond had succeeded in making himself unpopular with the junior fire brigade at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 5.

A Victim for Trimble!

"I SAY, you chaps—"

It was just after tea on the day following the unfortunate happenings in Rylcombe Lane, and the Terrible Three and Blake & Co. were descending the School House steps when Baggy Trimble rolled up to them breathlessly.

The juniors were going for a stroll before prep, and, needless to say, they had no intention of wasting any time on the fat Fourth-Former.

"Buzz off, Baggy!" snapped Blake.

"Oh, really, Blake! Look here! I want to speak to you fellows. It's important," said Baggy Trimble impressively.

"Sorry, old barrel! We're in a hurry," replied Tom Merry, without slackening speed.

"Beasts! Look here, you've got to stop. It's urgent—desperate, in fact!" said Trimble, puffing and blowing at the effort of keeping up with Tom Merry & Co.

Tom Merry stopped, frowning.

"We're in a hurry, Trimble. If you've really got something important to say, say it, and roll off!"

"Well, I have got something to say—something jolly important," grunted Trimble, mopping his perspiring brow.

"What is it, then?" asked Tom Merry impatiently.

"I'm hungry!"

"Eh?"

"I say I'm hungry!"

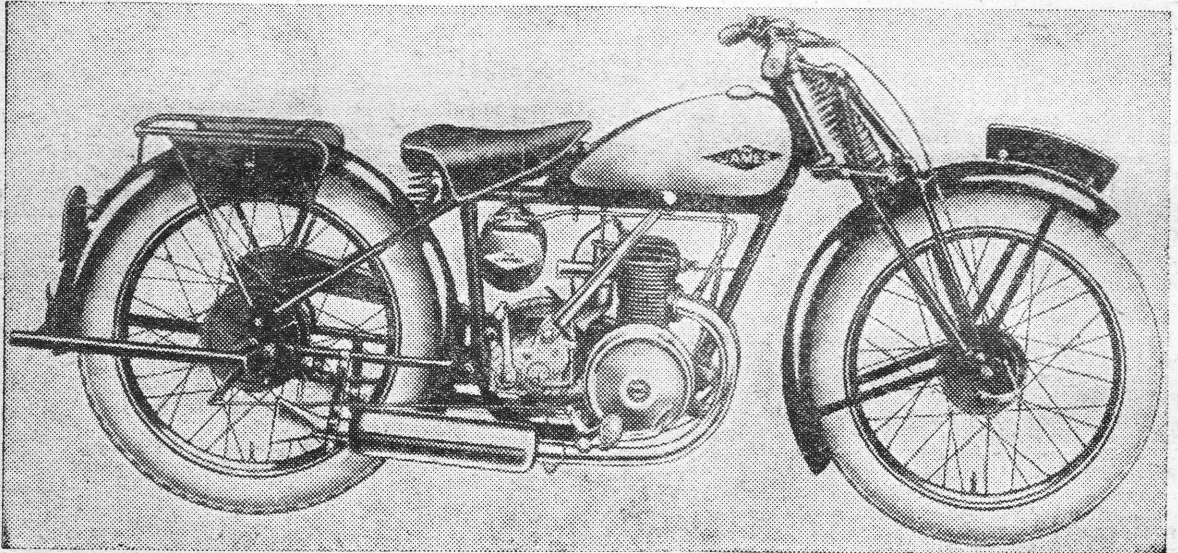
The skipper of the Shell drew a deep breath.

"And you—you call that important?"

"I should jolly well think I do! You wouldn't like to come back to St. Jim's to find me stretched out in the

(Continued on next page.)

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quad a lifeless corpse, would you?" demanded Trimble indignantly. "Look here, I'm expecting a remittance—"

"Rot!"

"From a titled relation—"

"Bosh!"

"If you'd care to advance—"

"Well, that's a good suggestion, certainly!" agreed Tom Merry; and he advanced upon the Falstaff of the Fourth without further ado.

Baggy Trimble dodged hurriedly.

"Lemme alone, you rotter! If you touch me—"

"I'm going to!" said Tom Merry grimly.

"Half-a-mo!" interposed Monty Lowther, with a twinkle in his eye. "Let Trimble alone, Tommy. After all, it's a bit thick to let a chap starve."

Tom Merry stared.

"What the thump—"

"Be human! Have a heart!" urged Lowther solemnly.

"Trimble's starving, aren't you, Trimble?"

"Absolutely famished, old chap!" groaned Baggy.

"Come along with us, then, old fat bean! I'll soon find you something to eat," said Lowther, linking arms with the podgy Fourth-Former. "Let him alone, Tommy. Baggy's all right."

And the humorist of the Shell closed one eye meaningly. Tom Merry looked mystified, but made no further attempt at assault and battery on Trimble, and the whole crowd moved off again towards the gates.

Trimble naturally assumed that it was Lowther's intention to take him down to the bunshop at Rylcombe. He was rather surprised, therefore, when Lowther came to a halt after they had taken but a five-minute journey down the Rylcombe Lane.

"Here we are!" said Monty cheerily. "Still famished, Baggy?"

"Oh, rather! But I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought, old bean. I'm going to guide you to a place where there's enough grub to last you for years. Follow me."

His mouth fairly watering, Trimble rolled after Lowther, who stepped through a gap in the hedge at the side of the road. The rest followed wonderingly.

A narrow, cultivated field was on the other side of the hedge. Trimble could see no sign of food, and he stared at Lowther rather doubtfully.

"I say, Lowther—"

"Half a jiffy, old sport!" said Lowther.

And then he acted in a rather extraordinary manner. Bending over, he began to rake away the earth from one of the green-topped vegetables with which the field was filled. Having raked away sufficient to allow him to unearth the root, he pulled at the green top, and, rising again, handed the result of his labours to Trimble.

Trimble's hand closed over it automatically. He stared at the turnip like one in a trance.

"W-w-what—" he stuttered.

"There you are, old bean! Don't wait to thank me. Get on with it!"

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

"B-b-but you said—" stuttered Trimble.

"I said that I'd find you something to eat—and I've found it for you!" nodded Lowther. "Carry on, Baggy! You'll find there's nothing like a raw turnip for staving off the pangs of hunger!"

"You—you—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Tom Merry & Co.

"You japing idiot! You grinning brute!" hooted Trimble furiously. "Think I can eat a rotten raw turnip?"

"If you're really starving, I should think you'll be jolly glad to!" grinned the humorist of the Shell. "Come on, chaps; we'll push off now and leave Trimble to his feed!"

Fairly yelling, Tom Merry & Co. climbed back into the road through the gap in the hedge, leaving Trimble glaring after them with a fiendish glare.

The juniors tramped off again, still chortling. Baggy Trimble did not follow them. He had come to the conclusion that they were a hopeless proposition. After hurling the unattractive turnip viciously into the hedge, he rolled back into the road and looked round for more promising victims.

The only human being in sight down the road was a middle-aged man, who was staring at Trimble from a gateway leading to a big house. The fat junior eyed the man without much hope. He remembered having seen the man once or twice with the Head. Bond the man's name was, he recollected. An art collector, or something.

Baggy had missed the stirring events of the previous afternoon, or he would have hesitated about going too near a gentleman who, doubtless, was by no means kindly disposed towards St. Jim's juniors. As it was, Baggy rolled down the road towards him, with some remote idea that a polite

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raising of the cap and perhaps a few well-chosen remarks about the weather, might elicit a tip.

"After all, nothing venture, nothing gain!" muttered Baggy, as he set forth to conquer the goodwill of Mr. Bond.

Tom Merry & Co. would have been considerably surprised, had they been present, to see how Mr. Bond acknowledged Baggy's salutation. He displayed none of the truculence and hostility they would have expected. On the contrary, he smiled—a somewhat twisted smile, but a smile which, nevertheless, was obviously meant to be cordial.

"Good afternoon, my boy! You are looking for your friends, I suppose?"

"What, those rotters who have just gone down the lane? Not me!" sniffed Trimble. "They're no friends of mine, sir—quite the reverse, as a matter of fact!"

Mr. Bond raised his eyebrows, and his strangely furtive eyes regarded the podgy Fourth-Former with interest.

"You surprise me. I thought Terry—is it Terry?"

"Merry," corrected Trimble—"Tom Merry."

"I thought Tom Merry and his followers were very popular at your school. Is not this Merry the leader of your fire-brigade?"

"I believe so. Dunno much about the blessed fire-brigade, but I heard 'em say they were going to practise yesterday afternoon."

"They take their practice very seriously, I gather," remarked Mr. Bond casually.

"Silly asses!" grunted Trimble. "Fat lot of good they'd be if a fire did break out, I expect!"

"On the other hand, a hosepipe and a supply of water is always useful," murmured Mr. Bond. "Of course, their paraphernalia is kept close to the school buildings?"

"It's all kept in the freshed—half-way between 'Taggles' lodge and the gym, you know," answered Baggy, then he bestowed a slightly puzzled look on his interrogator, and added: "But you're not interested in the rotten fire-brigade, are you?"

"Tut—tut! Of course not! Merely my inquisitiveness."

Baggy coughed.

"I'm feeling jolly wild this afternoon, sir," he confided.

"A most annoying thing has just happened to me."

"Indeed!" observed Mr. Bond.

"I'm on my way to Rylcombe to get some grub in for tea, and I've suddenly discovered I've left my notecase in another suit."

"That is certainly unfortunate, my boy."

"Rotten, isn't it?" agreed Trimble. "I promised my pals a feed, too. They rely on me for tea, you know. They're a poverty-stricken lot, and my people are simply rolling in cash, so I don't mind standing a spread."

"You are very generous!"

"It's my fault—everybody says so," nodded the fat Fourth-Former. "Well, anyway, sir, I was wondering, just to save me a double journey, if you'd advance me ten bob till my postal-order arrives—I mean, till I get my notecase again?" he corrected hastily.

Much to Baggy's surprise, Mr. Bond did not immediately decline the honour. Instead of that, he smiled quite a benign smile, and inserted his hand in a jacket-pocket. Baggy almost trembled with anticipation.

"You said ten shillings, didn't you? I think we can manage that," said Mr. Bond, producing a crisp Bank of England note.

Trimble almost fell over himself to take the proffered loan. It seemed almost too easy; he began to wish he had asked for a pound—even a fiver.

"Th—thank you, sir!" he gasped. "Of course, I'll let you have it back immediately I return to the school."

"No hurry, my boy! Come and see me again one afternoon. I am interested in your school, and I like to hear you talking about it."

"My hat!" muttered Trimble to himself.

Such kindness was phenomenal—unique, in fact. He could hardly believe it.

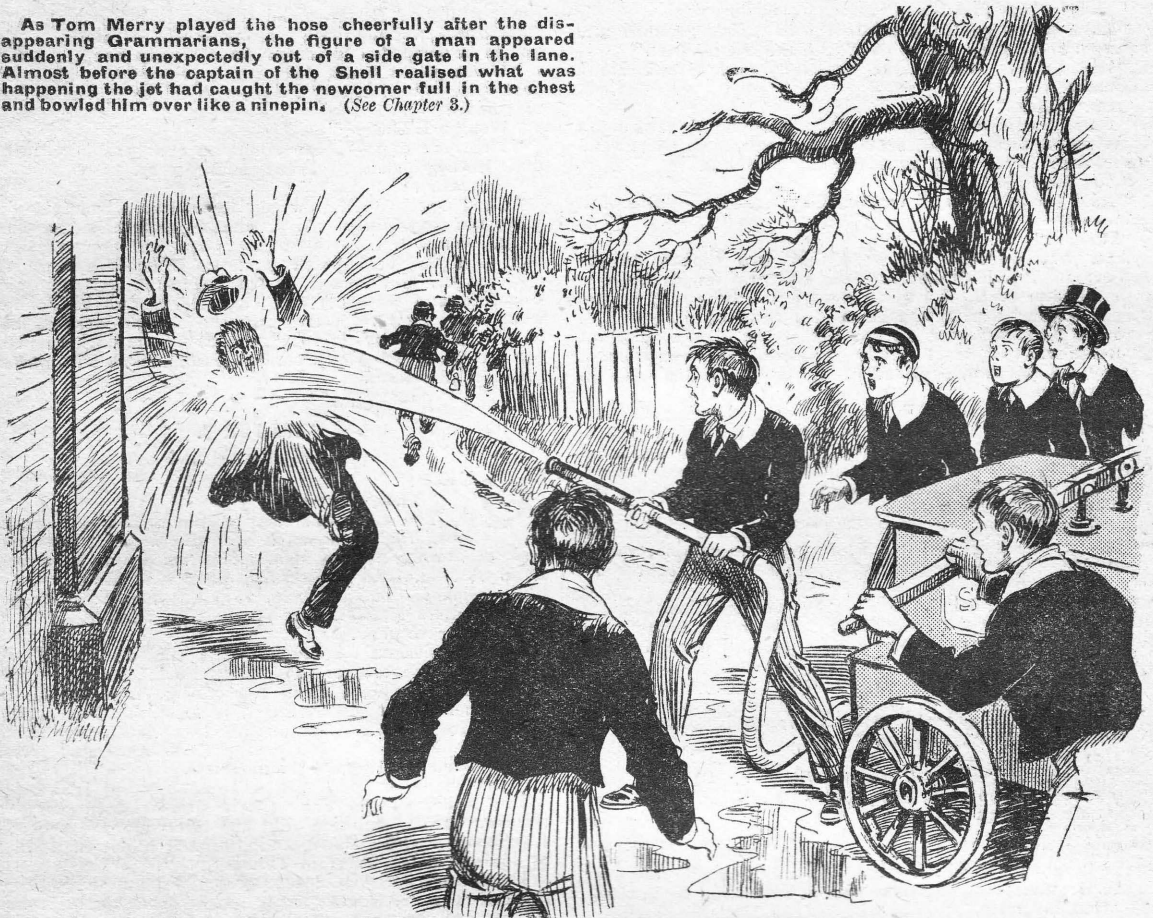
"Well, I must be going now, sir," he said briskly. "Good-bye, sir! And thanks for the loan!"

"It is a pleasure," smiled Mr. Bond, and he waved in the most friendly manner as Trimble rolled off down the lane.

The fat Fourth-Former continued on his way, walking on air—metaphorically speaking, of course. Mr. Bond was certainly a discovery. There was something about him—a strange, elusive "something" that Trimble didn't altogether like; but the solid, satisfying fact that he was willing to hand over ten shillings at the first time of asking put him in the front rank of those whose society was worth cultivating.

Trimble would have been surprised at the change that occurred in Bond's mien the moment he turned back towards his house. His benevolent smile dropped from him like a mask, and a hard, cynical look came into his face.

As Tom Merry played the hose cheerfully after the disappearing Grammarians, the figure of a man appeared suddenly and unexpectedly out of a side gate in the lane. Almost before the captain of the Shell realised what was happening the jet had caught the newcomer full in the chest and bowled him over like a ninepin. (See Chapter 3.)



"A fat fool!" he muttered. "But he has been useful. To know the whereabouts of their cursed fire-brigade equipment is worth a good many notes to me!"

CHAPTER 6.

Gordon Gay's Wheeze!

BAGGY TRIMBLE made the journey to Rylcombe in record time. Having obtained the wherewithal, he would have preferred to return to the school tuck-shop for his feed; but that would have involved the risk of being spotted by Mr. Bond, who might have become suspicious at seeing him again so soon, and Trimble therefore decided on the bunshop at Rylcombe as his port of call.

Once inside that famous establishment, Baggy soon made Mr. Bond's loan look rather small. A pork-pie, several ham-patties, and a remarkable sequence of sugary pastries disappeared, and a couple of bottles of ginger-pop were drained to the dregs. After that, Baggy did not, like the celebrated Alexander, waste time by sighing for fresh worlds to conquer. He quickly found unconquered worlds in the shape of jam-tarts and currant-cake, and polished them off in masterly style.

But even Trimble had his limits, and by the time the currant-cake had been disposed of, his appetite had almost vanished—as had the borrowed ten shillings, for that matter. The fat Fourth-Former ordered a final bottle of ginger-pop, and sipped it with the leisurely contentment of repletion. Then, with a grunt of satisfaction, he slipped off the stool on which he had perched for his feed, and rolled out of the little shop into the village street.

"That was something like!" muttered Trimble, as he turned his footsteps in the direction of St. Jim's again. "I— Oh crumbs!"

Baggy had taken only six paces before he spotted Gordon Gay & Co. in the distance—six slow and somewhat laboured paces. At the sight of the Grammarians, he promptly retraced his steps—and his paces on the return journey were the reverse of slow and laboured. An encounter with Gordon Gay & Co. was the last thing Trimble felt like just then.

Like a frightened rabbit diving into its warren, Baggy Trimble dived back into the bunshop, and sought a shady corner beyond the partition which divided the shop from

the tiny eating-room, hoping that the enemy had not noticed him.

It seemed only too feasible that Gordon Gay & Co. were aiming for the bunshop, and, in the shadow of his nook, Trimble wondered whether he had not, in his haste, committed a tactical error in returning to the shop at all.

Even as he debated that problem within himself, there was a tramp of footsteps in the shop on the other side of the partition, and Gordon Gay's cheerful voice called out: "Six ginger-pops, if you please, Mrs. Murphy."

"Very well, Master Gay!" came the answering voice of the proprietress of the Rylcombe bunshop.

Baggy Trimble crouched in his corner and hoped for the best. He was thankful to note that the Grammarians did not advance beyond the shop portion of the premises. If they had merely come in for a drink, there was a reasonable prospect that they would soon go out again without discovering his presence.

Having nothing better to do while he waited, Trimble pricked up his ears and listened to the Grammarians' conversation. Eavesdropping being one of Baggy's favourite recreations, he did his best to catch every word that was said.

He succeeded; and what he heard made his little eyes gleam excitedly.

"About St. Jim's to-night—" began Gordon Gay, as soon as their foaming glasses had been served up.

"Ah!"

"There's going to be no backing out at the last minute, I hope. I dare say most of you slackers will be snoring your heads off at half-past eleven to-night—"

"Here, chuck it! I shan't, for one!" broke in Frank Monk indignantly.

"Nor I!"

"Same here!"

There was quite a chorus of protest.

"Good! I hope you're all as good as your word, then," the listening Trimble heard the Grammar School leader say. "Mind, it's going to be a risky bizney."

"Who cares?"

"The riskier the better!"

"Hear, hear!"

"To start with, we shall have to break bounds—"

"Not for the first time!" came Carboy's voice.

"Then we've got to get into the St. Jim's grounds and break into the shed where they keep the old manual."

"It'll be the lark of the season!" said Frank Monk enthusiastically.

"Oh, rather!"

"Finally, we've got to spend half an hour painting a message on the manual, some pithy truth, such as 'Grammar School is top dog,' or something like that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As I say, it's risky," Gordon Gay went on. "But if it comes off—"

"It will!"

And that was the last word that was spoken on the subject in Trimble's hearing, the conversation drifting to football after that. But quite enough had been said to give Baggy all the information he needed to bring himself well into the limelight when he got back to St. Jim's. The fat Fourth-Former's heart fairly thumped with excitement during the remaining period of the Grammarians' stay in the bunshop.

To his relief, they did not stay long. Having finished their ginger-pop, they bade Mrs. Murphy a boisterous farewell, and tramped out of the shop. Slipping out through the door of the partition, Trimble noticed, with thankfulness, that they were continuing through the village, leaving the road home clear for him.

He watched them till they turned the corner of the old village street, then rolled out of the bunshop once more. This time there were no alarms, and in due course he reached St. Jim's.

Back at the school, he made a bee-line for Tom Merry's study. The party that had left Trimble in the turnip field had just returned from their outing, and all were there in the study, including Jack Blake & Co.

Baggy burst in like a podgy cyclone.

"I say, you chaps—"

"What, hungry again?" grinned Monty Lowther. "Get the turnips, Tommy, will you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cackling idiots!" roared Trimble. "I've a jolly good mind to keep mum now, and let the Grammar School cads score over you!"

"Eh?"

"What's that?"

The laughter ceased abruptly. Trimble's cryptic reference to the Grammarians had succeeded in attracting the juniors' attention instantly.

"Trot it out, Baggy," said Tom Merry briefly.

"Cough it up, old fat bean!"

Trimble's snub nose became perceptibly loftier in position.

"Thought you'd be interested," he remarked calmly.

"I shall have to think whether I'll tell you or not, though. You treated me pretty shabbily a couple of hours ago, when I was hungry, offering me a rotten turnip—"

The juniors chuckled.

"Forget it, Baggy. We've got a topping cake in the cupboard," said Manners gently.

Trimble's condescending air underwent a sudden transformation.

"Of course, I'm not suggesting for a moment that I'm not going to tell you—don't think that, old chap!" he exclaimed hastily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts! Look here, Manners, I've just walked up from Rylcombe. I'm feeling fearfully hungry. If you'll give me a snack to go on with—"

"Give him a slice, Manners, and get on with the giddy washing, Trimble, or else prepare to meet a sudden and painful doom!"

Manners went to the cupboard, and Trimble hurriedly began to explain what he had found out, before the sudden and painful doom should overtake him.

The juniors whistled as they got the gist of Trimble's story, which the fat Fourth-Former decorated with numerous fanciful events having no existence outside his own vivid imagination. Knowing Trimble, they did not find it difficult to sort out the wheat from the chaff, and in a few minutes they were in possession of all the facts of the proposed Grammar School raid, as Trimble knew them.

Trimble hastily finished his yarn as Manners placed a plate containing a huge slice of cake on the table, and transferred all his attention to the very acceptable gift, leaving the juniors to discuss the news.

Needless to say, there was general glee at the knowledge that they had gained possession of the full details of Gordon Gay's plot.

"Yaas, wathah! I shall be vevy pleased to assist in puttin' those cheeky wottahs in their places!" said D'Arcy.

"There's only one way to meet the situation; that is to lie in ambush for them to-night," went on Tom Merry

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thoughtfully. "Better make sure of it by turning out in full force, in case there's a big crowd of them. We've got to be prepared to forego some beauty sleep, chaps."

"We're game!" said Jack Blake promptly. "None of us particularly need beauty sleep—with the exception of Gussy, of course!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Then it's a go—I can count on everyone here turning out, to begin with?" asked Tom Merry.

"Oh, rather!"

"Good egg! We'll rake out some others from the dorm when the time comes. Now, what's going to be the plan?"

The chums fell to discussing ways and means of dealing with the anticipated raiders. Difficulties were soon disposed of, and details of the suggested ambush quickly discussed and settled. And Tom Merry and his followers went up to their respective dormitories that evening, happy in the satisfactory knowledge that everything was ready for providing the venturesome Grammarians with the surprise of their lives.

CHAPTER 7.

After Lights Out!

"QUIET!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

The time was nearing the midnight hour, and St. Jim's was dark and silent. All respectable and law-abiding juniors should long since have been in the Land of Nod. But law-abiding juniors at St. Jim's, as at other schools, did sometimes vary the monotony by defying the strict letter of the law. And Jack Blake & Co. were doing so now.

Two additional volunteers—Levison and Clive—had brought the number of the Fourth Form contingent up to six. The six tiptoed along the passage towards the box-room where they had arranged to meet the Shell party.

Tom Merry & Co. were already there when they arrived at the rendezvous. The two parties exchanged hurried and subdued greetings in the darkness.

"How many of you?" asked Tom Merry of Blake.

The leader of the Fourth told him, and in his turn received the information that the Shell party consisted of Kangaroo, Clifton Dane, and Bernard Glyn, in addition, of course, to the Terrible Three.

The united party, a dozen strong, did not tarry long in the box-room. All were eager to get down to the scene of action, and no time was to be lost, anyway; for if the Grammarians had started out at eleven-thirty, they would be nearing St. Jim's by this time.

Led by Tom Merry, the juniors climbed one by one out of the box-room window on to the leads of the outhouse roof below. From that roof it was an easy matter to descend by the strong old ivy to the ground, and in a very short space of time the entire force was safely assembled in the shadow of the outhouse wall.

"Well, that's that!" murmured Tom Merry. "The next move is to get round the School House and across the quad to the shed without being spotted by some stargazing beak. Keep well in the shadows, chaps!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

In single file they followed their leader silently round the School House, and when the word came to abandon the shadows and make a dash for the trees, they flitted across the deserted quad like phantoms of the night.

All went well. They reached the trees without any alarm being raised, and after that no caution was needed, the old elms affording ample protection from the eyes of any School House spectators.

The shed which housed the manual and the miscellaneous fire equipment which had suddenly become so valuable in the eyes of the juniors lay back among the trees, silent and gloomy at this midnight hour. There were no signs to indicate that the raiders had yet arrived, and Tom Merry murmured satisfaction.

"All serene! They're not here yet. Now, most of you know the position you're taking up. The rest, who weren't at our meeting this evening, had better make themselves scarce behind bushes and so on."

"That'll be easy," remarked Kangaroo, with a glance at the plentiful shrubbery that spread out at the side of them.

"Exactly. There's plenty of cover. Now, when I give the word, the stunt will be to rush them and collar the entire bunch before they know where they are. My idea is to attack swiftly and silently. We can hardly kick up a shindy at this hour of the night."

"Well, hardly!" grinned Lowther through the nocturnal gloom.

"So, for goodness' sake, be as quiet as you can over the job. When we've got them, we'll give them each a coat of the paint they're bringing with them, just to show there's no ill-feeling—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "And then we'll pack them off again. I fancy they won't feel like coming back, by the time we've finished with them."

"Ha, ha! Not likely!"
 "Now we'd better take cover, I think," said Tom Merry.
 "Don't forget, chaps—no noise!"
 "Rely on us!"

The juniors dispersed, taking up strategic positions behind various shrubs and bushes, and within a few seconds all was silent again.

Fortunately they had only a short time to wait before Gordon Gay & Co. put in an appearance.

Subdued voices on the other side of the school wall were the first indication the watching juniors received of the approach of the enemy. Followed a rustling and the sound of laboured breathing as the raiders climbed on to one another's shoulders to scale the wall.

Listening with bated breath, the St. Jim's men could hear the voice of Gordon Gay, the Grammar School leader.

"Can the rest of you manage?" he was calling out in a hoarse whisper.

Muttered replies from his followers.

"Come on, then! I'm going down. Got that paint, Carboy?"

"Oh, rather!"

"Harry up, old bean!"

"Shan't be a jiffy!"

There was a scrambling and a bumping as several other Grammarians arrived on the top of the wall, and a renewal of it as they dropped down one by one into the grounds of St. Jim's. Very soon what was evidently the entire raiding-party had arrived. Tom Merry, from his point of vantage, counted them. They were six in number, which meant that the odds were two to one in favour of St. Jim's.

Gordon Gay led his party over to the shed, and shone an electric torch on the door.

That was Tom Merry's cue. He had no intention of letting the raiders get as far as tampering with the lock.

"Up, St. Jim's!" he cried, in a voice which, while not loud enough to reach the nearest of the school buildings, was still sufficiently penetrating to rouse his men to instant action.

The St. Jim's juniors rose as one man. There was a scurrying of many feet across grass and gravel, and a fitting of shadowy forms across the spaces between trees and bushes.

The Grammar School raiders turned with startled exclamations, peering into the surrounding darkness with eyes that could scarcely see a thing after the brilliant light of Gordon Gay's torch.

"What the thump—"

"Look out! 'Ware Saints!" gasped Frank Monk.

"Oh, crikey!"

A moment later the Grammarians were simply swept off their feet as attackers from all sides rushed in upon them.

Naturally, such celebrated fighting men as Gordon Gay & Co. did not surrender at the first blow. Hopeless as their position was from the beginning, they made valiant efforts to stand up against their old rivals. But valiant efforts could not achieve much when the odds were two to one against them, and in a couple of minutes every man-jack of the raiding-party was a helpless prisoner.

"Got 'em!" panted Tom Merry. "Hold on to 'em like glue, you chaps!"

"What-ho!"

"We'll teach the checkay wottahs to waid our bwigade shed, bai Jove!"

"Groooo! This is a fair catch, and no mistake!" said Gordon Gay ruefully. "What licks me is how you got to know!"

"Don't puzzle your little noddle over it now," grinned Monty Lowther. "The important thing is that we did get to know in time to welcome you. Is that a pot of paint, Carboy, old scout?"

"Look here, you let that paint alone!" growled Carboy, rather apprehensively.

"W-what are you going to do, Lowther?" asked Gordon Gay, watching the humorist of the Shell uneasily.

"Keep your peepers open, old scout, and you'll see what you will see," was Lowther's somewhat cryptic reply.

"Hullo, here's the brush!—Bring forward the giddy victims for execution!"

"Sh! Quieter, you fatheads!" warned Tom Merry.

"Now, Gay, I believe you're the alleged leader of this motley crew. We'll have you first."

"Look here—" began Gordon Gay.

"No time for argument. Give him his make-up, Monty."

"With pleasure. I've always thought that his was the kind of face that ought to be disguised," grinned Lowther.

"Ready, Gay?"

"No, you rotter! If you touch me with that rotten paint

I— Groooooogh! Gug-gug-gug!"

Gordon Gay did not complete his remarks. Monty Lowther's deadly brush swept across his face before he had time to do so, and a blob of paint entered his mouth, causing his threat to end in a wild gurgle.

Two or three well-placed strokes of the brush, and the face of the leader of the Grammarians was pretty well covered. It was white paint, and it shone up well in the darkness of the night. There was a burst of subdued laughter from the St. Jim's juniors as they regarded the effect.

"That'll do for him, I think," chuckled Tom Merry. "Don't use up all the paint before we've finished off the others. Come on, Carboy, you next!"

Carboy, wildly protesting, was led to the slaughter, and very unwillingly submitted to Lowther's attentions. The rest of the Grammar School party followed, one by one, until they had all been plastered over with the dreadful contents of Carboy's can of paint.

"That all?" asked Lowther cheerfully. "Pity there's still a pot of paint left. A little more for you, Monkey?"

"You—you—"

"We'll let it go at that, I think, Monty," laughed Tom Merry. "Nuff's as good as a feast, you know."

"Don't they all look clean?" grinned Kangaroo.

Gordon Gay & Co. certainly presented a striking appearance. There was something about them reminiscent of ghosts and phantoms. Monty Lowther's artistic work had succeeded in making them look not quite human.

"I think we'd better let them go now," said Tom Merry. "Ready to go, Gay, or would you rather stay for another coating?"

"Grooooh! I'm ready, you rotter! Just you wait till another day, though!" groaned the Grammar School leader.

"We'll wait for anything you're good enough to give us," grinned Tom. "Let 'em go, chaps!"

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

Six wretched Grammarians, their faces painted white, were released, and helped on to the school wall. From the top they paused in turn to breathe fire and slaughter on the chuckling St. Jim's men, then dropped over to the other side. The juniors could hear them groaning and complaining in chorus as they moved off down the lane. Then their foot-

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steps died away, and the victorious party prepared to return to the School House.

"Our win, I think," remarked Jack Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"It's been a great score—the biggest we've had for a long time," grinned Tom Merry. "I rather fancy that paint will take a lot of removing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now we'd better go back to bed. I'll hold on for a few minutes to make sure they don't come back."

"I don't think they will, but please yourself," said Jack Blake. "We'll push off, anyway. Good-night, Tommy!"

"Good-night, all!"

The rest went off in a body, leaving Tom Merry to keep guard for a few minutes longer, not that that precaution seemed really necessary.

Tom Merry watched his followers out of sight, then hid himself behind a tree. He entertained no real doubt that the Grammar School visitors had had quite enough of St. Jim's for one night, and he quite anticipated that with the coast still clear after a brief interval, he would be able to return to the Shell dormitory and get some much-needed sleep.

Several minutes passed. Nothing happened. Tom was just preparing to depart when a slight sound from the direction of the wall attracted his attention.

He paused and listened.

There was no mistake about it. It was a dull sound as of somebody moving stealthily about in the lane on the other side of the wall. Tom Merry strained his ears to determine exactly where the movement came from.

He soon knew.

There was a thud, and then a rustling of the ivy which covered the wall at one spot. Almost immediately after a hand appeared over the wall.

Tom watched, his heart palpitating with excitement. It was not the return of the Grammarians as at first he had naturally suspected. The hand was that of a grown man wearing a cap pulled over his eyes.

Somebody else in addition to Gordon Gay & Co. had evidently decided to pay a midnight visit to St. Jim's, and by the look of him his objects were by no means as innocent as theirs.

CHAPTER 8 A Midnight Mystery!

THUD!

The newcomer landed heavily on the ground, and staggered before righting himself. By his movements he appeared to be a man who had long since left youth behind him.

He stood stock still for a minute, listening intently. Tom Merry held his breath, fearful lest he should betray his presence by the slightest sound.

After a tense, painful interval the mysterious visitor relaxed, evidently satisfied that he was alone, and that his arrival in the grounds of St. Jim's had not been detected.

Tom Merry watched him with fixed attention. His first thought was that the man was a burglar. Obviously he had not climbed over the wall of St. Jim's at the midnight hour for the purpose of paying a social call, and the conclusion was quite natural.

Strangely enough, however, the intruder did not proceed towards any of the school buildings, or to the Head's house, which contained valuables worthy of the attention of any nocturnal marauder. To the watching junior's surprise, he walked over to the shed which had so recently been the object of attention by the Grammarians.

Tom could scarcely believe his eyes. That Gordon Gay & Co. should plan a raid on the building which housed the old manual over which they had battled on the previous day was not surprising. But that a stranger—and particularly a stranger who looked every inch a burglar—should find anything to interest him in the fire-shed was remarkable.

Remarkable or not, the shed was evidently the stranger's object. He stopped at the entrance to it and tried the door. Being locked, it did not open. He walked slowly round the building, stopping at each window to ascertain whether it opened or not. In each case his attempt was attended with a negative result.

He produced a torch, and a beam of light fell on the door around the lock. Diving his disengaged hand into his jacket, he brought out an ugly-looking metal implement. Tom Merry, leaning forward to watch the man's movements, rubbed his eyes in astonishment. A jemmy? To force open the door of the fire-shed? Was all this real, or was he dreaming?

The torch-light vanished suddenly, and Tom saw the mysterious visitor pocket the torch, then bend over the lock, his jemmy held in position. There was a dull, scraping sound as metal met wood.

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The St. Jim's junior gritted his teeth. What the man's motives were in attempting to break into the shed that housed the school fire-extinguishing equipment, Tom could not guess. But the man was up to no good—that much seemed certain.

Tom did not stop to think, or he would have gone back to the House to fetch help. Instead of that, he did the first thing that instinct urged him to do.

He sprang from his hiding-place and made a rush at the mystery man.

The latter must have heard the soft sound of Tom's swift movement across the grass, for he wheeled round just an instant before the junior was upon him.

He gave a startled exclamation and instinctively ducked as Tom Merry's arm shot out. The blow, as a consequence, failed to get home, and Tom momentarily lost his balance and staggered.

In a flash he had recovered again, and was gamely attacking. But the interval, brief as it had been, was sufficient to enable the stranger to get his bearings, so to speak. As Tom hurled himself forward for the second time he was met with a fist that seemed to be made of iron. He tried to parry; but his opponent's advantage in weight, height, and reach inevitably told, and a ruthless blow, with all the man's weight behind, crashed on to Tom's jaw and stretched him limp on the ground.

"Let that teach you not to meddle!" hissed the midnight visitor, aiming a savage kick at his fallen assailant.

Tom Merry dizzily tried to scramble up, and opened his lips to cry for help. But the man anticipated the move, and, falling down on his knees, clapped his hand over the junior's mouth.

Though his senses were swimming from the blow he had received, Tom Merry still struggled. And, badly placed as he was, he managed to get in a blow that took his opponent by surprise and gave Tom the opportunity to jump to his feet again.

That decided the issue. The ruffian, evidently coming to the conclusion that his wisest course was to escape before others were aroused, made no further attack, but ran to the school wall. Tom Merry followed and made a desperate attempt to stop him, but his efforts were unavailing. The fugitive scrambled up the ivy, and, kicking himself free of the junior's hands, reached the top of the wall.

From that position he poured down a volley of furious oaths before disappearing. Tom Merry, looking up, was able, for the first time, to get a full view of the dim outlines of his face. The view lasted only a couple of seconds, but in that fraction of time the St. Jim's junior got a staggering surprise.

For the face was that of a man he knew—knew quite well, in fact. Tom was certain that there was no mistake about it. Incredible as it seemed, the mysterious visitor to the fire-shed had been none other than Dr. Holmes' friend and neighbour, Mr. Bond!

Tom remained at the foot of the wall for quite a minute after the man's disappearance. He was almost paralysed with astonishment. What he had discovered was preposterous—fantastic. Yet it was true. Not for an instant did he doubt that the ruthless scoundrel with whom he had just fought was Bond. Sudden and startling as the revelation had been, he could not discredit the evidence of his own eyes.

Bond was the man—the mysterious visitor who had come to St. Jim's like a thief in the night and for unimaginable reasons tried to force an entrance to the fire-shed. The amazing truth left Tom Merry thunderstruck. Why should he have done it? What explanation could there be? That an apparently highly respectable local resident might in reality be a cracksmen was conceivable, if improbable. But that a man taking such a dual role should content himself with breaking into the St. Jim's fire-shed seemed utterly ridiculous.

Yet Tom knew it to be true. And as he stood there marvelling, the affair began to take on a less ridiculous aspect. He suddenly remembered Bond's hostility to the school fire brigade on their first meeting in the quad, and his efforts to suppress the juniors' activities after the battle with the Grammarians. There was something logical, after all, in the present strange sequel.

The junior's thoughts were interrupted by a soft call in the familiar tones of Monty Lowther.

"Tom, old man, what's the game?"

Lowther and Manners, alarmed at the long delay, had come out in search of their leader.

Tom Merry joined them, and in a few jerky sentences explained what had happened, greatly surprising his chums in the recital.

"It sounds almost too wild," remarked Manners. "I suppose there's not the slightest shadow of doubt about its really being Bond, Tommy?"

"Not the slightest! I could never mistake his hard face."

Lowther bent down and picked up a small bottle that was lying in the grass.

"Did he drop this, I wonder?" he asked.
 "Quite possible. It was just about here that he bent over me to stop me yelling for help," replied Tom Merry.
 "What is it, Monty?"
 Lowther drew the cork and sniffed at the contents.
 "Acid of some kind—and strong stuff at that, judging by the smell of it," he replied seriously. "Do you know what I think, chaps?"
 "Well, what?" asked Manners.
 "I believe that Bond came here to chuck this acid over the metal parts of the manual, and so destroy them!"
 "Oh, my hat!"
 "But why—"

"Goodness knows why! I'm not trying to answer that," said Lowther, with a shrug. "But it strikes me that what I've suggested is the only reasonable explanation of Bond's coming here to-night."

"But what beats me is why he should want to do it, anyway," said Manners.

"Echo answers 'why,'" answered Tom Merry, with a grim laugh. "Anyway, we shan't solve the mystery by staying out here all night. I suggest we get back to bed."

"Good idea!" remarked Manners. "You're not going to report things to the beaks, Tommy?"

"And raise a lot of inquiries as to what took me out at midnight? No fear!" chuckled the leader of the Shell. "Besides, d'you think the beaks would be likely to believe a word of it? I can hardly believe the whole thing myself. But, for all that, we're going to get to the bottom of it—or bust in the attempt!"

"Hear, hear!" grinned Manners and Lowther, in cordial agreement.

"And now to bed!" concluded Tom Merry. "I must say I feel like a sleep after all this."

"Same here!"

The Terrible Three returned to the House via the outhouse leads and the box-room, and the exciting events of the night having little or no effect on their respective nervous systems, they were soon sleeping the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER 9.

Information for Bond!

AFTER lessons on the following day, Baggy Trimble, wearing a rather thoughtful look on his podgy face, rolled out of the School House and made his way down to the gates.

A serious problem was exercising the mind of the fat Fourth-Former—the problem whether he could, with advantage to himself, make a friendly call on the gentleman who had treated him with such unexpected generosity on the previous day.

Mr. Bond's willingness to advance cash without security had made a deep impression on Baggy Trimble. It was a new and delightful experience for the Fourth-Former to meet someone who not only believed him, but was also willing to support his belief with a ten-shilling note.

The problem was, would it work again? Trimble weighed up the pros and cons, as he rolled through the gates and down the lane in the direction of his benefactor's house. The answer he finally arrived at was, that it might.

This optimistic conclusion he based on two main premises. The first was that Mr. Bond had told him he need not hurry to repay his

loan; and the second, that Mr. Bond had told him to call again. The second, Trimble argued, in his own peculiar way, was almost an invitation to borrow another ten bob whenever he happened to need it.

The thought that Mr. Bond might have any ulterior motive in treating a stranger so generously—that he might be seeking information about matters upon which that stranger could enlighten him—had not yet occurred to Trimble. From Trimble's point of view, Mr. Bond's friendly attitude was the perfectly natural response to Trimble's charming personality.

Whatever the explanation, he had parted very easily with ten shillings, and there seemed a reasonable prospect that he might do so again. And Baggy Trimble, having convinced himself, rolled down the lane to the house of the generous Mr. Bond with all the self-indulgence in the world.

Bond was not at the front gate on this occasion, so Baggy boldly opened it and rolled up the short drive leading to the house.

As he rounded the shrubbery that partly concealed the house from the road, he caught a glimpse of his quarry bending over the open bonnet of a motor-car, evidently effecting some minor repair.

Baggy Trimble put on his most ingratiating smile, and doffed his cap politely.

"Hem! Good-afternoon, sir!"

Bond jumped, and jerked his head round as though Baggy's sudden arrival had given him quite a shock. Caught off his guard for an instant, the man's face contained little of the friendliness and amiability that had attracted the fat junior on the previous day. On the contrary, there was, at that

minute, a 'savage, hunted look about him—the look of a man who suspected every caller of being an enemy until he was proved otherwise.

That strange, terrifying expression put Baggy Trimble completely off his stroke for a moment. The fat junior faltered and took a pace back.

"Oh, crikey! I—I hope you don't mind my calling, sir. B-but you said—"

By this time, however, Bond had recognised his visitor, and his expression had changed with that remarkable suddenness which had puzzled Tom Merry & Co. at their first meeting.

"That is quite right, my boy. I am pleased to see you again," he said, with a smile that contrasted oddly with the grim look it had replaced. Baggy Trimble regarded him rather dubiously.

"If I'm in the way, sir—"

"Not at all—not at all!" Mr. Bond assured him. "I was hoping you would call to-day, rather than to-morrow, for I am motoring to London to-night, and shall not return until to-morrow evening."

"Important business, I suppose, sir?" ventured Trimble, beginning to regain a little courage.

"Business and pleasure," replied Mr. Bond smoothly. "I am meeting your head master at an exhibition of oil paintings late in the afternoon, and shall motor him back, as a matter of fact."

Baggy's host spoke nonchalantly, but his nonchalance was such a contrast with his former strained appearance that even the gullible Fourth-Former was not altogether deceived, and wondered vaguely why this eminently respectable gentleman should behave so strangely.

The fat junior felt rather

Your Editor Says—

"ALL IN GOOD TIME!" I don't mean that unkindly, but it's intended especially for those readers who have been writing in recently, and hinting that the good old GEM is backward in coming forward, so to speak. In other words, certain disgruntled readers think it high time the GEM gave away some Free Gifts. But don't be impatient, you chaps, for

FREE GIFTS ARE COMING ALONG

How's that? Feel better? Good! And so do I now that I have got that off my chest. To go back to those Free Gifts. They take the form of picture cards, wonderfully coloured, and similar in size to the large cigarette card with which most of you must be familiar. The GEM cards will form a series that will be the envy of all non-reader pals. No, these cards are nothing to do with footballers or cricketers, or any other branch of sport. They deal with—

But there, I feel justified in keeping you on tenterhooks a little longer. I'll just say this much—that the subject of these wonderful cards has not been exploited before. It's novel, unique—one might almost say prophetic. Does that get you guessing? Well and good. That's what I intended.

Now, for further particulars, you must wait until next Wednesday. But it'll be well worth waiting for. Apart from this matter of Free Gifts you chaps will find a magnificent long complete story of Tom Merry & Co., and the fags of the Third, entitled:

"STANDING BY A FAG!"

By Martin Clifford.

Wally D'Arcy and young Jameson are to the fore-front; and so is Mr. Selby, the sour-tempered master of the Third. You'll enjoy this yarn to the full, believe me, also the next instalment of our gripping adventure serial. And you readers who have been sending in queries for the "Oracle" to answer will find another interesting set of replies in next week's bumper issue.

Don't forget now about those Free Gifts. Just watch this corner in the GEM for full details next week. Till then, chums, just bear patiently with

YOUR EDITOR.

reassured to hear that so mighty a personage as Dr. Holmes was meeting Mr. Bond in London. If the Head hobbled with him, then it was inconceivable that Bond could be a bad egg, reflected Baggy.

"Excuse me if I finish this little job now," went on Bond. "You will tell me about your sports—your football and so on—while I work, perhaps!"

"H'm! Matter of fact, there's not much to tell," said Baggy. "Of course, I'm a Soccer player, right enough. What I don't know about the game isn't worth knowing, I can tell you. But jealousy can make a lot of difference to a chap's position in school footer, you know, and there's no doubt about the chaps being jealous of me."

"I can quite believe that," observed Bond, with smooth sympathy. "These jealous boys keep you out of the team; is that it?"

"Exactly!" nodded Trimble unsuspectingly. "Tom Merry's an obstinate beast of a captain—"

"Ah! Merry!" exclaimed Bond, a sudden gleam entering his eyes at the mention of the name. "He is the football captain—eh?"

Trimble nodded.

"And a pretty rotten job he makes of it, too!" he sniffed. "If I couldn't do better, I'd eat my hat!"

"This football team—I suppose they visit other schools sometimes?" murmured Bond, as he bent over his work.

"Oh, often! They're playing at Rylcombe Grammar School to-morrow afternoon, as a matter of fact," said Baggy, without much interest. "But I was saying—"

"I suppose those boys who belong to the fire-brigade mostly belong to the team?" interrupted Bond quickly.

"Most of 'em do," nodded Baggy, after a pause. "Nearly everybody goes to Rylcombe to watch, anyway, as the Grammar School is only a short distance away, so you can bet there won't be any brigade practice to-morrow. Well, as I was saying—"

"The seniors—they also play in other districts?" broke in Bond, again preventing Baggy from developing the doleful story of Tom Merry's obstinacy.

"Yes, rather! They're at Abbotsford to-morrow. I expect they'll take a crowd with them, too."

Bond drew a deep breath, and his lips twisted into a smile in which there was something unpleasant—something almost sinister.

"Excuse my interruptions—my interest in sports matters," he explained lightly. "Well, Master Trimble, you were saying—"

Baggy scratched his bullet head in perplexity.

"Blessed if I haven't gone and forgotten what I was going to say, now," he confessed. "Never mind; it'll come back, I expect. By the way, sir, I'm awfully sorry—I can't return you that trifling sum you advanced me, for the moment."

Bond laughed.

"That was nothing; please forget all about it."

"Oh, really, sir! I shouldn't dream of doing that!" said Baggy, shaking his podgy head quite solemnly. "You'll have it, never fear. We Trimbles are most particular about money. As a matter of fact, I thoughtlessly lent a chap my last fiver this morning, clean forgetting that I owed you ten bob!"

"Your generosity must embarrass you at times, my boy." "It does. I'm always running myself short through being too generous," agreed Trimble.

He cast a furtive glance at his host, who had now apparently finished working on the car.

"Hem! To tell you the truth, sir, I was wondering—"

Bond seemed to divine his thoughts.

"Can I be of assistance to you?" he suggested.

"Well, you can, as a matter of fact," said Trimble promptly and gratefully. "If you could manage, say, a quid—"

"I am delighted," murmured Bond softly, and he held out a pound note, over which Baggy's paw closed greedily.

"Thanks awfully, sir! This is really decent of you!"

"Say no more about it!" said Bond, with a wave of his hand.

"Now you will not expect to see me to-morrow. I am proceeding to London to-night, and I shall not be back until to-morrow evening, when, as I told you, I drive Dr. Holmes back to St. Jim's. You understand?"

"Oh, quite, sir!" said Trimble.

The fat Fourth-Former was willing to agree with anything his host said, and express his understanding of anything on earth, in return for that magnificent loan.

As Trimble rolled out of the front gates, however, and his podgy brain turned over Bond's remarks, he began to come to the conclusion that there were one or two things he did not understand.

Bond's terseness at Trimble's unexpected arrival was one thing that struck Baggy as being very extraordinary. His renewed interest in the St. Jim's fire-fighters was another strange feature of the interview. And, finally, his care in seeing that Trimble fully understood what his movements

were to be in the coming twenty-four hours was considerably greater than the circumstances seemed to warrant.

Trimble's brain was incapable of providing a solution to the problem; but he rolled back to St. Jim's in a decidedly suspicious, if highly delighted, frame of mind.

If Bond was, in some mysterious way, making a dupe of Trimble, it looked as if he had rather underrated even that podgy Fourth-Former's intelligence!

CHAPTER 10.

Baffling!

"HALLO, hallo! Trimble in funds?"

"Looks like it!" grinned Tom Merry.

The Terrible Three had just strolled into the school tuckshop. Dame Taggles' little shop was, for once in a way, almost deserted—one solitary customer being perched on a high stool at the counter.

JACK The G

THE "TEST" PLAYER

PRACTICALLY nineteen years ago, in the summer of 1910, Somerset introduced a new chum to county cricket. This new chum was then nineteen years of age, but there was very little suggestion, from his accomplishments of that season, that a player who would make cricket history had been introduced.

His highest innings of that season was twenty-three, and although he took eight wickets in first-class matches, each of those wickets cost his side 64 runs.

"I don't think I shall be any good to Somerset cricket," said the lad, somewhat disappointed.

The officials of the Somerset County Club, however, could see a little bit further than the lad of nineteen. They persevered with him, and as a consequence of that perseverance the lad of those days has occupied a prominent position in the newspaper headlines during the past few weeks. His name is John Cornish White. Those of us who know him call him Jack, and those who don't know him also call him Jack. He is Jack White to everybody—even to his professional colleagues.

The Last Choice!

Now, when White has played his part so magnificently in helping England to make cricket history by winning four Test matches in succession in Australia, I can tell you a secret. He was the last player to be chosen to go to Australia. Some said that White was too old; others said that he would not be a success on the concrete wickets to be found "down under." But finally, he went, and the deciding factor was that he was a left-handed bowler—the sort England wanted.

Jack White also went to Australia in the role of vice-captain, but it is perhaps just as well that he wasn't the actual captain of the side, for as a matter of fact, he is somewhat unlucky. He is the skipper of Somerset, of



J. C.

course, and at one point actually lost the toss. Somebody suggested of winning the toss with heads on both sides.

"What would be the

What Dame Taggles' trade lacked in numbers, however, it apparently made up for in quality. That solitary customer, who happened to be Baggy Trimble, was ordering on a lavish scale. A varied and liberal assortment of viands was spread out before the fat Fourth-Former, and Trimble's podgy jaws were working as if for a wager.

The Terrible Three stared.

"My hat!" ejaculated Monty Lowther. "What bank have you been robbing, Trimble?"

Baggy Trimble snorted.

"Don't rot! Anyone would think, by the way you talk, that it was unusual for me to be in funds."

"Well, you're not exactly rolling in it, in the usual way, Baggy," remarked Tom Merry candidly. "What's happened? Rich uncle died, or something?"

"Of course not, you ass!"

"Have they sold up the family jewels at Trimble Hall at last?" asked Monty Lowther humorously.

"Beast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cackling idiots!" grunted Baggy Trimble.

"Ginger-beer and jam-tarts, please, Mrs. Taggles!" ordered the captain of the Shell.

"Very well, Master Merry."

The Terrible Three sat up at the counter and regaled themselves with the refreshments which Dame Taggles served up.

The fat Fourth-Former glanced at them rather dubiously once or twice, as though he wanted to speak but didn't know quite how to begin. Tom Merry noticed those side glances, and inwardly wondered what was going on within Trimble's podgy mind.

That problem was soon solved for him. Baggy Trimble was at no time very retiring or reticent in his behaviour. And when he had something on his mind—particularly something concerning other people's business—Baggy was

"Know anything about him?" asked Trimble cautiously. "An art collector, or something, isn't he?" replied Tom Merry carelessly.

"Yes, I know that. But anything fishy or suspicious?" pursued Trimble.

"Why should we know anything fishy or suspicious?"

"Oh, nothing! No reason at all, of course," said Trimble, rubbing his podgy chin reflectively. "You see, I happen to be a pal of his—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Here, draw it mild, old bean!"

"Fact! We're the best of friends, really," said Trimble fatuously. "He's pally enough to advance me money when I'm temporarily stumped, anyway—more than you tight-fisted bounders would do!"

The Terrible Three stared.

"Bond has lent you money, do you say?" asked Tom Merry, almost unable to believe his ears.

Trimble nodded.

"I happened to leave my notecase in my study, you know—"

"Why did Bond lend you money?" interrupted Tom Merry, looking keenly at the podgy Fourth-Former. "That's what puzzles me!"

"Oh, really, Tom Merry! Because he could tell an honest face when he saw one, of course! Bond is one of the best—he struck me as being quite a gentleman, in fact."

"He would, if he lent you money," remarked Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh rats! Anyway, what I'm coming to is that, although he seems a very decent sort, there's something fishy about him, to my mind—something jolly mysterious," said Trimble seriously. "For one thing, he's always asking funny questions about your idiotic fire-brigade."

"Oh!"

"Then he looks like a blessed criminal when you come on him unexpectedly—as though he's in fear of being pinched, or something."

"Go on, Baggy," said Manners.

"And then, again, why should he want to tell me all about his being out of the district till to-morrow evening and about driving the Head back from London?" asked Trimble argumentatively. "Taking it all round, you chaps, I think there's something fishy about the chap, although, mind you, he seems a decent sort, for all that. What do you think?"

And Trimble looked eagerly to the Terrible Three for their verdict. With his usual insatiable curiosity the fat Fourth-Former was consumed with anxiety to find out what was the mystery behind his strange benefactor.

Tom Merry's brow was corrugated with thought as he regarded the expectant Trimble.

"You say that Bond is always asking funny questions about the fire-brigade. What questions has he asked you?" he demanded.

Baggy pondered.

"Well, he seemed awfully anxious to know where the equipment-shed was yesterday, for one thing," he replied.

Tom Merry & Co. looked at each other meaningly. Here, with a vengeance, was confirmation of Tom Merry's belief regarding the identity of the midnight visitor.

"Anything else?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Yes. He appeared to want to know whether the members of your one-eyed fire brigade were footer players. Also whether they visited other schools to play," added Baggy, as that additional point occurred to him. "Don't you think it's funny for a blessed outsider to take so much interest in school bizney?"

"Bit of a Nosey Parker, perhaps," said Tom Merry carelessly, for he had no intention of acquainting the inquisitive Trimble with what he knew about Bond. "What did you tell him, Baggy—to mind his own business?"

"No; I told him what he wanted to know, of course. Said you were playing the Grammar School to-morrow, and so on. Nothing wrong in that, was there?"

"Not at all, old bean. But didn't you find it rather a strain to tell the truth, after all the years you've gone without practice?" asked Monty Lowther seriously.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, if you keep on trying to be funny I'm going!" declared Trimble furiously. "Here am I asking your opinion on a jolly interesting problem, and all you can do is butt in with idiotic jokes!"

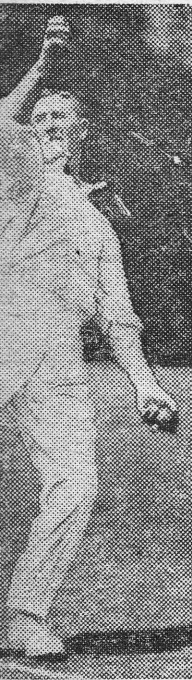
"Don't mind Monty; he can't help it!" said Tom Merry consolingly. "Did I hear you say that Bond is leaving his house to-day, and driving the Head back from town to-morrow?"

Baggy Trimble nodded.

"That's what he told me, anyway. Now, there you are again. Why the thump should be trouble to tell me all

ANT KILLER

WITH A GREAT HEART.



Jack. "For the opposing captain would call heads every time."

The Pair That Won The Test!

In Australia, White has played several different roles. In the third Test match, for instance, he was used almost exclusively as a bowler who could keep down the runs while the wicket-takers—such as Larwood and Tate—took a rest. How he filled that role can be illustrated by figures. In one innings he bowled 57 overs. Thirty of them were maidens, and from the whole only 64 runs were scored. True, he only took one wicket, but he had played his part.

Then, in the fourth Test match he played a different part. He took the wicket of the Australian batsmen—eight of them in the second innings when our star bowlers were wholly incapable of getting a single victim. If ever it can be said that two men won a Test match, then two men won that fourth game for England—Hammond with the bat, and Jack White with the ball.

The wicket at Adelaide for the fourth Test developed a "spot." And it was lucky for England then that we had Jack White in the team, because of all the bowlers in cricket to-day, he is the most capable of "finding" a "spot." Here, in fact, lies the secret of his success as a bowler—he is amazingly accurate. If you put a sixpence down on the ground Jack White would hit it, or get very near to it several times in an over.

Left-Handed and Great-Hearted!

He is left-handed, of course, both with the ball and with the bat. He generally bowls round the wicket, and makes the ball turn a bit from the leg. But he doesn't make it turn a lot. The way he flights the ball is most deceptive: keeps the batsman guessing. He has also scored centuries in county cricket in England, and as everybody loves him he gets the best out of the Somersetshire players.

WHITE.

od of last season he
e times in succession.
men that his only hope
to get a penny with
ood of that?" asked

like the proverbial cat on hot bricks until he had unburdened himself to interested ears.

Very soon after the Terrible Three's entry into the tuck-shop Trimble made the discovery that even he, for once, had had quite enough to eat. It was then that he pivoted round on his chair and faced the chums of the Shell.

"I say, you chaps—"

"Sorry! Stony!" said Monty Lowther briefly.

"Beast! Look here, chuck rotting, you know. I'm serious! You know that chap Bond—"

"Well, what about Bond?" asked Tom Merry curiously.

He was interested to know what had turned Trimble's thoughts to their mysterious visitor of the night before. So far, only the members of the brigade had been informed of the extraordinary events that had taken place by the fire-shed, and as they had all been sworn to secrecy it was very unlikely that Baggy had learned anything of the affair.

that? He repeated it, too, as though he really wanted me to get it off by heart. What do you make of it all, Merry?"

Tom Merry feigned a yawn. Having got all the information he seemed likely to get from Trimble, he didn't feel like satisfying that youth's curiosity by an exhaustive discussion about Bond. He was intensely interested in Baggy's revelations; but the problems those revelations raised were of a kind that called for examination by more subtle brains than those of the fat Fourth-Former.

"Blessed if I know what to make of it, Baggy," he said. "Why don't you put it to the Head and ask his opinion?"

"Ass!" grunted Trimble. "Catch me asking for a licking! Look here, you chaps—"

"Sorry, old bean! We're going."

"Mean to say that's all you've got to say about it?" exclaimed Trimble indignantly. "I ought to have known better than to ask you brainless rotters! Yah!"

"Cheerio, Baggy! Here's Kildare coming in. Tell him all about it, and see what he thinks!"

"Beasts!"

The Terrible Three smilingly quitted the tuckshop, and Trimble was left to spin his yarn to Kildare of the Sixth, if he felt so disposed. The chances were that he wouldn't feel so disposed.

"Well, the mystery deepens," remarked Manners, as the three chums strolled across the quad in the evening dusk.

"Why, in the name of all that's wonderful, should Bond want to pump Trimble about the brigade?" demanded Lowther. "It fairly licks me!"

"Me too, at present!" nodded Tom Merry. "But there's something deep behind it—something deep and something jolly shady, too, if you ask me."

"But what can we do?"

"I've already decided what to do. I'm going to call together a little committee, consisting of the liveliest wires in the brigade, and place the whole facts before them. We can then thrash the matter out; and if we don't get somewhere near the truth between us, then we jolly well ought to be scragged!"

CHAPTER 11.

Talbot Sees Daylight!

TOM MERRY was as good as his word. Soon after prep that evening, Jack Blake of the Fourth, and Bernard Glyn and Reginald Talbot of the Shell—the three co-opted members who, with the Terrible Three, were to constitute the committee of inquiry—presented themselves at Study No. 10.

"Now we're all here, I suggest we lock the door," said Monty Lowther, after greetings had been exchanged.

"What is it, then? A giddy inquisition?" asked Jack Blake in surprise; for Tom Merry, in hurriedly summoning the juniors to the little meeting, had had no time to acquaint them with its purpose.

The door was duly locked, and then, safe from interruption, the committee of inquiry sat down round the study table.

Tom Merry plunged right into his subject. "For the benefit of you chaps who don't know it already, I'll begin by saying that this meeting is called for the purpose of discussing a gentleman named Bond."

"The rotter who tried to break into the fire-shed last night?" nodded Bernard Glyn. "He wants discussing, I should think."

"My idea is that he wants ragging!" growled Blake. "If you're thinking of that, Tom Merry—"

"I'm not," said the captain of the Shell. "Matter of fact, I have a shrewd idea that the case calls for something more than a mere rag. As I said to Manners and Lowther, earlier in the evening, there's something deep and jolly fishy about this merchant Bond. On the principle that six heads are better than three, I want to see whether we can puzzle out the mystery. Thanks to Baggy Trimble, we know a little more about the blighter now, and some of you may be able to see daylight."

"You flatter us!" grinned Bernard Glyn. "But go ahead, Tommy."

"On the bawl!"

Tom Merry proceeded, in quiet but forceful tones, to describe the data he now possessed concerning Bond. Starting with their first meeting in the quad on the occasion of the brigade practice, he went on to draw the juniors' attention to Bond's strangely malevolent attitude towards the fire-brigade, both then and on the occasion of the unfortunate meeting that followed after the flight of the Grammarians in the lane.

The juniors—brigade members all—listened, with thoughtful faces, to their leader's description of Bond's extraordinary attempt on the brigade-shed on the night following those two episodes. Although they were already aware of

these happenings, and of the circumstances of Bond's successful attempt at bluffing, which Tom Merry next touched on, the speaker's clear and telling recital brought up everything more vividly than they had previously seen it.

The captain of the Shell finished by bringing out the facts that had been elicited from Baggy Trimble in the tuckshop—facts which greatly surprised them. After that, Tom Merry, without suggesting any confusing theories himself, left his revelations to sink in, and quietly sat down again.

The members of the committee were left staring at one another rather blankly.

"Well, that's that!" remarked Jack Blake. "So far as I can see, the only solution is that Bond is off his napper!"

"But you can't say he looks particularly balmey," objected Manners.

"Tricky, if you like, but not mad," said Bernard Glyn.

"What's your opinion, Talbot?" asked Tom Merry, with a keen look at that junior.

Talbot—the one time Toff, associate of rogues and crooks in former unhappy days—had seen considerably more of the seamy side of life than anyone else at St. Jim's. It was from him, if anybody, that Tom Merry expected a solution to the mystery.

Talbot had been staring down at the table, with brows knitted in thought, as though the perplexing problem took up every bit of his attention. At Tom Merry's question he raised his head.

"My belief is," he said soberly, "that we're up against a first-class crook. I'd already been thinking a lot about Bond before you called us here to-night. What you've learned from Trimble confirms the hazy sort of idea I had already formed."

"You can see daylight?" asked Tom Merry eagerly.

Talbot nodded.

"I believe so."

"Oh, good!"

"Let's hear what you think, old bean."

The juniors leaned over the table expectantly, and waited for Talbot to explain his theory.

Talbot did not beat about the bush.

"The conclusion I've come to is that Bond is what is known as a fire-raiser," he said.

The committee-men stared at him rather wonderingly, hardly understanding his meaning at first.

"A—a fire-raiser?"

"You mean that he is the sort of chap who is likely to commit arson?" asked Tom Merry.

"Exactly."

"But—"

"But in that case, what's his idea? Do you mean that he is thinking of setting fire to St. Jim's?"

Talbot laughed grimly.

"No, I don't think St. Jim's is his mark. A fire-bug doesn't set fire to a place just for the fun of the thing. He does it because he stands to gain a lot of money out of the fire? Savvy?"

"But how the dickens can he do that?"

Talbot smiled.

"Suppose a chap insures some property against fire for a thousand pounds. And suppose that property is worth only a hundred. If it is burnt to ashes, nobody can tell from the remains what was the original value, and the Insurance Company has no option but to pay out in full. See?"

"Oh!"

"My hat!"

"That means that the fellow gains nine hundred quid," said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming. "Of course, it would be a swindle!"

"Naturally; but a swindle that is sometimes easy to bring off," said Talbot. "The fire-raiser is a chap who carries the thing one step farther than merely swindling the Insurance Company over the value. He makes the swindle possible by setting fire to the stuff himself."

"Oh, crikey!"

"A chap would have to be an awful villain to do such a thing," remarked Manners, frowning.

Talbot nodded.

"It's an offence punishable by a long term of penal servitude," he said. "Now, to get to the case of Bond, I'll tell you why I think Bond is a fire-raiser. In the first place, he has done his best to stop the activities of our fire-brigade, first by getting us into trouble with the Head, and, second, by trying to ruin the manual with the acid Lowther found."

"That's the only thing we can think of, anyway," nodded Lowther.

"The next point is that, although everybody you meet will tell you Bond's house is full of valuable pictures and art treasures, nobody has ever been inside it. That leads us to the conclusion that Bond himself has spread the story."

"Quite likely."
 "It stands to reason that if Bond intends to set fire to his house, it will help him a lot in his claim for compensation if he has acquired a local reputation as the owner of such valuables. That gives a sound reason for his spreading the yarn, and would also explain his keenness to become pally with the Head."

"You mean that his being pally with a man in the Head's position would almost place him above suspicion?" asked Tom Merry.

"Just so. Now imagine Bond's position as a fire-raiser. He has got a house, furnished it with a lot of worthless rubbish, and has spent months becoming established as an art connoisseur and the owner of a house full of valuable stuff. The nearest fire-brigade is at Wayland, and he feels confident of being able to start a fire that will get beyond control before the Wayland crowd can arrive."

The juniors nodded eagerly. Talbot's cold, clear reasoning had got them all interested, and by this time they were simply hanging on his words.

"Carry on, old bean!" murmured Harry Manners.

"Suddenly, he finds that a fire-brigade is being trained under his very nose—within a stone's-throw of the house he wants to burn down. He sees at once the danger of his plans being frustrated. On an alarm of fire, the St. Jim's manual can be at his house and on the job in a few minutes. Taggles' lodge is so near the house that even during the night there would soon be an alarm. Our brigade, therefore, becomes an obstacle in Bond's way."

"My hat! That would certainly explain his antagonism to us," exclaimed Tom Merry.

Talbot nodded grimly.

"Realising the danger, Bond does his best to put the brigade out of action—how, we know already."

"But he failed—thanks to Tommy!" put in Lowther.

"Exactly! And that failure, according to my theory, leads right on to his questioning Trimble about how many brigade members are footer players," said Talbot, his keen eyes gleaming. "Failing to stop our activities, you see, his next idea is to find out when we are all likely to be away from the school."

"Oh, crikey!"

"Didn't you say that Baggy told him we'd mostly be away at the Grammar School match to-morrow, Tommy?" asked Blake excitedly.

"That's so."

"Then in that case, if Talbot's theory is the right one, Bond will probably work the oracle to-morrow afternoon!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Half-a-mo!" interrupted Bernard Glyn frowning. "As I understand it, Bond went to London this evening and doesn't return until he drives the Head back to-morrow evening. Doesn't that rather spoil the theory? He can't very well set fire to a house in Rylcombe Lane when he's in London, can he?"

The juniors turned to Talbot, who merely smiled. "That's not a very grave objection," he said. "If anything, the reverse, as a matter of fact. The fact that he has already arranged to meet the Head in London, gives him a splendid chance of proving an alibi."

"Oh!"

"Why should he have troubled to tell Trimble about his intended movements, unless he was out to mislead him? From what I can see of it, if my judgment of Bond is right, he probably decided to make it to-morrow, during his talk with Trimble. Having decided, he started to establish his alibi straight away. And probably before he drove away from Rylcombe, he made a point of telling the vicar, and as many other people as he could, that he was going to London and would not be back for twenty-four hours or so."

"Nevertheless, you think he'll return?" asked Tom Merry.

"I certainly do. If the evidence is anything to go on, he'll return to-morrow afternoon while we're all at the Grammar School. Disguised, for safety, he'll sneak into the house, start the fire, then buzz off to London to meet the Head as quickly as possible."

"Great pip!"

"I say, old chap; don't think I'm pouring cold water over the idea, but— isn't this all rather wild?" asked Bernard Glyn dubiously.

Talbot gave a shrug.

"Possibly it is. But aren't the circumstances leading up to the theory also wild—Bond's attempt on the brigade shed, and his friendship with Baggy, I mean?"

Bernard Glyn had to admit that they were.

Tom Merry got up from his chair, a very determined expression on his face.

"Wild or not, Talbot's theory strikes me as being the only reasonable explanation of Bond's conduct," he said. "I believe Talbot has hit the nail on the head. I'm going to act on it, anyway."

"What are you going to do, Tommy?" asked Blake.

"Cancel the Grammar School match, and get ready for a fire call!"

CHAPTER 12.

Fire!

TOM MERRY and his colleagues went to bed that night feeling very excited, and sure of themselves. Even Bernard Glyn's doubts soon vanished in the animated discussion of ways and means that followed Tom Merry's decision.

On the following morning, just before classes, Tom Merry saw Figgins and Redfern, the New House members of the fire-brigade, and put them in possession of the facts.

There was a good deal of suppressed excitement in the Fourth and the Shell, that morning. With the possibility of a stern call to duty after dinner, the amateur fire-fighters of St. Jim's did not feel in the mood to appreciate the beauties of Roman writers who had been dead for two thousand years or so. Even the fellows who were not in the secret caught the infection, and in wondering what was "on," found their attention straying from the lesson. Both Mr. Linton and Mr. Lathom, as a consequence, had rather a harassed time, and before the morning was over, lines had been distributed over the two Forms as plentifully as leaves in Vallombrosa.

During morning break, Tom Merry & Co. saw Dr. Holmes drive off to the station. To Tom Merry, once more confident that they were on the right track, that event seemed like the first act of a drama in which he and his chums were to act leading parts. He wondered, with a quickening heart, what kind of a setting Dr. Holmes and Bond would find on their return to St. Jim's in the evening.

Morning lessons dragged through the remainder of their dreary course, and after what seemed an interminable period, the bell rang for dismissal at last. The brigade members, mostly richer by "impots.," but fortunately all free of afternoon detention, rose from their desks, feeling that they were on the threshold of a great adventure.

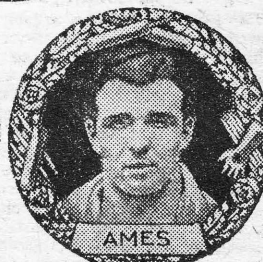
After dinner, Tom Merry paraded his men in a quiet corner of the quad, and explained his plans. Talbot and Blake and Lowther were detailed off as scouts, to watch Bond's house. The rest were to get the manual prepared for action, and to hold themselves ready for a call at any moment.

(Continued on the next page.)

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Talbot, Blake, and Lowther went off together. When they got near Bond's house, they left the road, and approached their objective warily from a field adjoining the grounds of the house.

Talbot had insisted on the need for caution. He, more than anyone else, believed that they had really discovered Bond's secret. The prospect that they would be called on to extinguish a fire that afternoon was, to him, very real indeed.

"Keep under the cover of the trees, chaps!" he murmured, as they drew nearer the house. "I believe I can spot a hole in the fencing over there. Better make for it, and see if we can get in."

"Right-ho, old bean!"

The three juniors glided along in the shelter of the freshly-budding trees that extended irregularly across the field as far as the fence forming the boundary of Bond's property. Soon they were at the spot that Talbot had indicated. Sure enough, there was a hole in the fence sufficiently large to enable them to get into the grounds without difficulty. This they did, and on the other side paused to reconnoitre.

They found themselves in a somewhat dilapidated garden, overrun with weeds and unkempt evergreens.

"What's the next move, Talbot?" asked Monty Lowther.

"To separate, and conceal ourselves at different points round the house," answered Talbot readily. "Perhaps you will remain here at the back of the building, Lowther? Blake, I suggest you take up a position at the side of the house, and I'll go round to the front. Agreed?"

Lowther and Blake nodded.

"Good enough, then. Remember, all we can do is to watch points. If Bond turns up, we can't attack him for entering his own house. We can only take action if he sets the place alight. Savvy?"

"All serene. We understand."

"Off we go, then! Give a yell, if anything happens."

"We will!"

The three scouts separated. Monty Lowther concealed himself behind a rhododendron bush not far from the fence, Jack Blake, bending down to make himself inconspicuous, struck off in the direction of the side of the house, and Talbot flitted silently away towards the front.

Then followed a long, and rather weary vigil, which severely taxed the patience of Lowther and Blake, though Talbot, with his greater experience and more mature outlook, found it tolerable enough.

Half an hour passed. Another quarter went by, each minute seeming more like an hour to Blake and Lowther. The sound of the St. Jim's clock after another interval chiming the hour of three, told the waiting juniors that they had been there an hour.

Blake and Lowther, in their hiding-places, yawned, and began to wonder whether, after all, they had not come out on a wild-goose chase. Talbot's logic began to seem decidedly less impressive after an hour's uneventful wait in this uninspiring spot.

But Blake and Lowther pricked up their ears at the sound of a motor-car approaching in the lane not far from the house. Though they could see nothing of the front entrance, the thought occurred to them simultaneously that there was no other house near, and the sound therefore probably indicated a visitor.

Talbot, in his place of concealment facing the house, also heard the sound. His heart beat more rapidly as he heard the front gate unlatched and swung open. There was no false alarm about it. Someone from the car which had stopped, was coming to the house!

Talbot shrank into the shadows of the clump of bushes in which he was hiding, and watched with keen eyes.

The figure of a man appeared, coming up the short drive with a quick, jerky movement, that seemed to show either that he was in a hurry, or that he was very nervous, or possibly both.

At a first glance, there was nothing familiar about him. He was dressed in a long raincoat and soft hat, with a broad brim that shaded his face. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses adorned his face, and a heavy moustache gave him a somewhat quaint, old-fashioned appearance.

But Talbot was not deceived. His eyes soon saw beyond the glasses and the moustache, and dwelt on the thin lips, the hard grey eyes, and the rather pointed ears of the newcomer. And he recognised the man he had expected to see—Bond, the owner of the house which he was now entering with the air of a thief in the night!

The disguised man did not go to the front door of the house. Instead of that, he slipped round to a side, or tradesman's entrance, and rounding the corner of the house, was cut off from Talbot's view. Blake saw him, however, though he, unlike Talbot, did not penetrate the disguise. The Fourth-Former watched him unlock the small door leading into the house, then disappear inside.

Waiting there in a state of uncertainty as to what he

should do, Blake was suddenly aware that Talbot had noiselessly come up behind him.

"He's gone in?" whispered Talbot.

Blake nodded.

"You recognised him?"

"No! Surely it wasn't—"

"Bond? It was," murmured Talbot grimly. "Hang on here, Blake. I'm scouting round."

And Talbot went as noiselessly as he had come.

The disguised Bond was in the house no longer than three minutes. He appeared at the side door again, locked it, then hurried away to the front gate.

A few seconds later, Blake heard the waiting motor-car start off again.

The noise of the engine died away in the distance. Bond had gone.

There was a whistle.

"Blake! Lowther! Hurry up!"

Blake rose and raced round to the front of the house. Talbot was standing there, his face stern and set. Lowther came up an instant after Blake, eager to know what had happened.

"Hallo, you chaps! What's on?"

"Bond has gone. And I think he's done what I thought he'd do," answered Talbot rapidly.

"No sign of fire," said Lowther, with a quick glance at the house.

"There wouldn't be—yet. But I'm going to break in, and chance it."

"We're game," growled Jack Blake. "What shall we do? Smash a window?"

"That'll do."

And Talbot leaped up the stone steps, swung on to the top of the balustrade, and kicked through a lower pane of glass belonging to the adjacent bay window.

There was a crash of splintering glass. A jagged hole showed in the pane. Talbot climbed on to the window-sill, and after kicking away some of the dangerous edges of glass, stepped into the room.

But it was hardly necessary for him to do so. Even as he disappeared, a wisp of smoke curled out through the broken window.

Blake and Lowther rushed up the steps, their faces tense and anxious.

"Talbot! No risks, you know!"

Talbot's face appeared again.

"All serene. I'll look after myself. Blake, you're the best runner. Run back and give the alarm. And tell Tommy to phone the police."

Blake nodded, and raced away.

And within two minutes the remaining members of the St. Jim's Junior Fire Brigade, still waiting patiently in the quad, were electrified into action by a ringing cry from the gates:

"Fire!"

CHAPTER 13.

The Truth About Bond!

TOM MERRY, despite his brief apprenticeship at the work, was a tower of strength, now that the testing time had come. Though inwardly his heart was beating as excitedly as that of any of his men, his face was expressionless as he issued his commands.

Bernard Glyn was ordered to telephone the police and the Wayland Fire Brigade, though the latter would undoubtedly take some time to arrive on the scene of the fire. The rest fell in round the manual, and pushed her off, swiftly accelerating until they were fairly racing.

The distance to Bond's house was quickly covered. Lowther, waiting in readiness, swung back the big gate, and they rolled up the drive and came to a halt in front of the house.

Smoke was pouring out of the windows of the two front bays by this time. Evidently the fire had got a good grip.

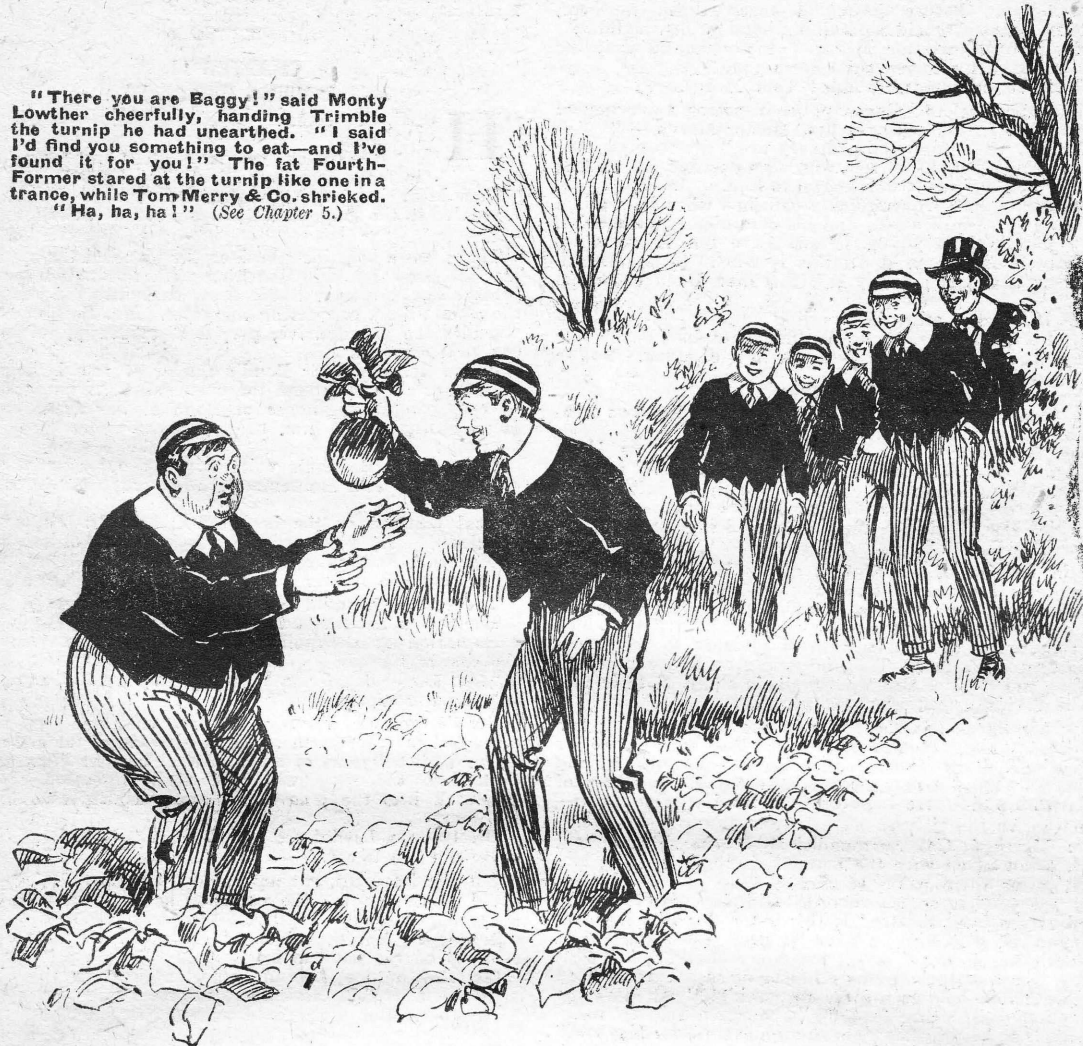
As they pulled up, the door was thrown open, and Talbot, his face white and strained, appeared in the aperture, smoke swirling round him.

"This way, Tommy! Bring the hose into the hall!"

Willing hands were already uncoiling the hose. Tom Merry seized the nozzle, and carrying it under his arm, went up the steps and plunged into the hall, a dim cavern of acrid smoke by this time.

His eyes smarting and his throat choked, the brigade captain followed Talbot, who had been doing some rapid exploration during his short sojourn in the house. Jack Blake was half-way down the hall, when he rushed back with the command to begin pumping. Eiggins and Herries, on the pump, were only waiting for the signal, and readily fell to work. Inside the house, their efforts were answered by a stream of water which Tom Merry was able to play on the cupboard beneath the stairs where the flames were

"There you are Baggy!" said Monty Lowther cheerfully, handing Trimble the turnip he had unearthed. "I said I'd find you something to eat—and I've found it for you!" The fat Fourth-Former stared at the turnip like one in a trance, while Tom Merry & Co. shrieked. "Ha, ha, ha!" (See Chapter 5.)



already roaring fiercely. It seemed a puny measure to take against that malevolent mass of fire.

Leaving Talbot to continue the work for a period, Tom Merry returned to the open, to direct the connecting-up of an additional hose to a hydrant in the lane. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, for once heedless of the danger of begriming his clothes, instantly volunteered to enter by the broken window and play on the fire which was raging there. Meanwhile, other volunteers, tying wet handkerchiefs round their mouths, entered the other room by the hall, and with tarpaulins and jackets tried to hamper the progress of the flames until water could be obtained.

Reginald Talbot, working single-handed at the miniature inferno beneath the stairs, was the first to collapse. Talbot had been breathing that foul, acrid air since he first entered by the window. Though his hands were blistered by the heat, and his senses swum, he stuck it till he was beaten. But the smoke and the heat won at last, and Talbot staggered and fell, the nozzle leaving his hands and streaming water across the floor. Redfern carried him out, and Digby, fresh from the open air, took his place.

D'Arcy was the next man to collapse, and his place was filled accordingly.

Working like Trojans, the juniors continued to fight the flames at every point where they broke out. And in the course of time, despite the rapid progress already made by the fire before their arrival, the fight began to turn in their favour. Bit by bit the flames lessened in intensity. The fire under the stairs was reduced to such an extent that Digby was able to transfer his attention temporarily to the room where half a dozen juniors were still doing their best to smother the outbreak. Bernard Glyn, helped by Tom Merry and Manners, managed eventually to extinguish the fire completely in his section of the building, and that signalled the triumph of the amateur fire-fighters. The three juniors were able to concentrate on the other wing which was still burning, and in a matter of minutes the flames had been finally subdued.

Mr. Railton and a considerable crowd of St. Jim's men had arrived on the scene by this time. There was a cheer as Tom Merry, pale and drawn after his efforts, reappeared at the front door to order the withdrawal of the water supplies.

Mr. Railton met him at the top of the steps.

"Merry! You are all safe?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"Yes, sir. A bit smoke-dried, but that's all, I fancy."

"Thank Heaven! You have succeeded in extinguishing the fire?"

"I think so, sir. The fellows are still inside, making a thorough search of the house."

Mr. Railton nodded, and hurried in himself. As he did so, there was a brazen clanging from the lane, and a few seconds later the Wayland fire-engine drew up outside, followed soon after by a private car containing Inspector Skeat and two constables from the Wayland Police Station.

Tom Merry hastened to meet the captain of the professional brigade.

"We've got it under, I think," he said. "Glad you've turned up, though. The place needs watching for a while, and we're all tired out."

The brigade captain looked astonished.

"You've put the fire out? You boys, do you mean? But surely, by the look of things, there has been a pretty bad blaze here?"

"It was pretty fierce while it lasted," answered Tom.

"But who are you, then? And where did you find your pump and hose-pipes?"

Tom briefly explained that they were the junior volunteer fire-brigade from St. Jim's, and that the equipment belonged to the school. The officer, who was obviously impressed by the work, did not stop to question Tom further, but hastened to direct his men to various parts of the house, from which steam and smoke were still rising.

Tom made to cross over to the spot where Talbot

D'Arcy, attended by several seniors, were just beginning to revive again. Before he could reach them, however, Inspector Skeat had laid a detaining hand on his shoulder.

"One moment, Master Merry. I understand that the phone message I received came from you."

"That's so, inspector," nodded Tom Merry.

"It is not usual to bring a police-inspector a journey of several miles for an ordinary fire, Master Merry—"

"Exactly. But this is no ordinary fire," interrupted Tom Merry. And then, in as few words as possible, he related the story of Bond, as it was known to him.

Inspector Skeat's frown quickly vanished when he realised that it was a case of arson, and his eyes gleamed excitedly.

"By gad! You young fellows have put in some remarkably useful work, if all this is true!" he exclaimed. "You say that you actually saw this man Bond enter the house?"

"Not I; but two other fellows did."

"I'll see them later, then. We'll have a look inside the house now, and see what evidence there is of arson. You're staying here, Master Merry?"

"Yes, for the present."

The inspector nodded, and signalling to the two constables to follow him, went into the house.

When Inspector Skeat emerged from the house later, deep in conversation with Mr. Railton and the brigade captain, his notebook contained a wealth of information about the origin of the fire at Bond's house—information which Bond had little dreamed would ever be known to anyone but himself.

In the opinion of the captain of the Wayland Brigade, the house was now safe from any further outbreak. He stopped for a minute to congratulate Tom Merry on the work of the St. Jim's firemen—a professional tribute which rather naturally brought a flush of pleasure to the young brigade captain's face. Then he swung on to his place on the Wayland engine, and with a single clang of their fire-bell the Wayland contingent moved off.

Inspector Skeat left the house in the charge of his two subordinates, and, accompanied by Mr. Railton, went as far as St. Jim's. There, he accepted Taggles' hospitality, and sat down in the old porter's lodge, to await the return of Dr. Holmes and—more important, in the inspector's eyes—Bond.

Tom Merry & Co., surrounded by a cheering, excited crowd, followed on with the manual, feeling tired out and hungry after their valorous efforts.

"Phew! What an afternoon!" said Jack Blake, as he helped at the front shaft. "If this is the life of a fireman, give me a life on the ocean wave for preference."

"Nevah mind, deah boy!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, whose monocle, again glimmering in his eye, seemed to indicate that he was rapidly recovering. "We have the satisfaction of knowing that we have unmasked a fearful scoundrel, and furthermore, have vindicated Tom Mewry!"

Tom Merry smiled.

"I'm naturally pleased at that. But the honours, I think, are due to Talbot, who was brainy enough to fathom Bond's motives. Thanks to Talbot, we got an inkling of the truth about Bond. This afternoon we've proved the theory up to the hilt and found out the truth with a vengeance."

Talbot, leaning on Tom Merry's arm and still looking pale and weak, smiled faintly.

"Never mind that. I feel more interested in the problem



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of whether a good tea is going to set me on my feet again. I rather fancy it will."

CHAPTER 14.

A Villain Unmasked!

"HERE they come!"

"Hush!"

"Keep back, you men! The inspector told us to make ourselves scarce, you know."

Tom Merry and quite an army of excited juniors were concealed in the shadows of the trees at the back of Taggles' lodge.

There was a breathless hush as the sound of the approaching car grew louder. Watching with fascinated eyes, the juniors saw Inspector Skeat draw back into the shadow of the stone pillars supporting the gates. Mr. Railton stepped out into the broad drive, prepared, evidently, to stop the car as it came in.

A few seconds later Bond's car swept round the corner and drove slowly through the open gates. A hundred pairs of eyes caught a glimpse of Bond at the wheel and the Head sitting beside him.

"Stop!"

It was Mr. Railton's voice, ringing out sternly on the evening air. The Housemaster advanced, both hands held up.

Bond jammed on the brakes and brought the car to a standstill. He regarded the Housemaster of the School House with startled eyes.

"What's the matter?"

The spectators could hear his hard voice clearly.

The next moment Bond had started out of his seat with an exclamation as the police inspector appeared silently at the side of the car.

"Mr. Bond, I must ask you to step out. I arrest you, in the name of the Law!"

Bond's face was a study. Utter dismay and baffled rage struggled for expression in his hard features for a moment. Then, with the snarl of an animal at bay, he flung himself back into the seat, with the plain intention of driving back into the lane and making a desperate bid for freedom.

Dr. Holmes, bewildered and dismayed, leaped to his feet, uncertain how to act.

But the inspector was not caught napping. Before Bond could reach out for the controls, he was inside the car, grappling with the fugitive. Furiously Bond struck out, but only to feel the touch of cold steel as the inspector snapped on the handcuffs.

Mr. Railton was behind Inspector Skeat by this time.

"Do you require assistance, inspector?"

"Thanks. But I've got him now, sir. Out you come, Bond!"

The incendiary, white to the lips now that the game was obviously up, stepped unsteadily out, and stood in the open, with Inspector Skeat's firm hand resting on his shoulder. The watching spectators could no longer resist coming out from their hiding-places now, and in a couple of seconds the drive was alive with excited juniors whom even Mr. Railton could not control.

Dr. Holmes, looking as though he found it hard to believe the evidence of his senses, followed Bond out of the car.

"Mr. Railton—Inspector Skeat—I am astounded. What is the meaning of this extraordinary scene?"

"It means, sir, that I have placed this man under arrest, and am taking him to Wayland, where he will be charged with arson."

"Arson? Good heavens!"

The Head was shocked, as indeed was only natural. That he should have been the companion to a man now under arrest for such a crime, was a thought that staggered and humiliated him. He turned to the prisoner, with a bewildered gesture.

"Mr. Bond, this is impossible, preposterous! You are surely not guilty of—of this dreadful charge?"

Inspector Skeat broke in.

"It is my duty to warn you, Bond, that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

"I'm not likely to say anything that's likely to help you!"

"I think we can arrange everything all right without your assistance, though!" said the inspector grimly. "Mr. Railton, can you send a messenger to fetch one of the constables I have left on duty at the house?"

Mr. Railton dispatched Grundy, who was standing by, and Bond was then conducted to Taggles' lodge. The Head and Mr. Railton followed him in, the Housemaster explaining matters as they went. Outside, the crowd, swollen by this time to tremendous proportions, was left to



The six wretched Grammarians, their faces painted white, were released and helped one at a time on to the school wall. From the top, they paused in turn to breathe fire and slaughter on the chuckling St. Jim's men, then dropped over to the other side. "Our win, I think!" grinned Jack Blake. "Yaas, wathah!" chortled Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. (See Chapter 7.)

discuss and argue and explain to each other to their hearts' content.

Some time later Bond, reduced by now to sullen submission, was transferred to the inspector's car and driven to Wayland.

This was the last St. Jim's saw of the mystery man of Rylcombe Lane. Of the trial that followed, in which it transpired that Bond had on several occasions before brought off successful frauds against Insurance Companies, it is unnecessary to give details beyond the fact that Bond was placed somewhere where he would be unable to pursue his criminal career for a term of three years.

Just before bedtime that night Tom Merry was summoned to the Head's study.

Dr. Holmes was looking troubled and disturbed, but he gave the captain of the Shell a kindly smile as the junior entered the study.

"Merry," he said, "I sent for you to congratulate you and the other juniors in the fire-brigade on your magnificent work."

"We did what we could, sir," said Tom Merry modestly. "Your behaviour was courageous and level-headed in the face of a grave emergency. I shall make public mention of it after prayers on Monday. In the meantime, Merry, you may inform your colleagues that I shall grant them an extra day's holiday one day next week."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" gasped Tom Merry, almost overwhelmed.

"That is all, Merry. You may go."

Tom Merry went, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels.

Back in the Common-room, he was greeted with a roar.

"Here he comes!"

"What did the Beak say?"

"Cough it up, old bean!"

Tom Merry laughed.

"There's nothing much to tell. He wants the members of the brigade to know that they're all good men, and that they're being granted a day's holiday next week."

There was wild applause from the brigade members at that welcome announcement, not unmingled with lamentations from other juniors who had not been fortunate enough to be numbered among the chosen few.

Baggy Trimble grabbed Tom Merry's arm excitedly.

"Look here, Merry, I consider I ought to get the hbl. as well as you. Didn't I tell you all along I suspected Bond? Didn't I collect all the blessed evidence about him for you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry scratched his head.

"My recollection is that you palled on to the chap for all you could get out of him, old fat bean. You can't expect to get the holiday for that; but I think you deserve something."

"Oh, good! What do you suggest?" asked Trimble eagerly.

"I suggest a bumping. All agreed?"

"What-ho!"

Trimble jumped.

"Whooop! Lemme alone, you rotters! Yaroooh!"

Bump!

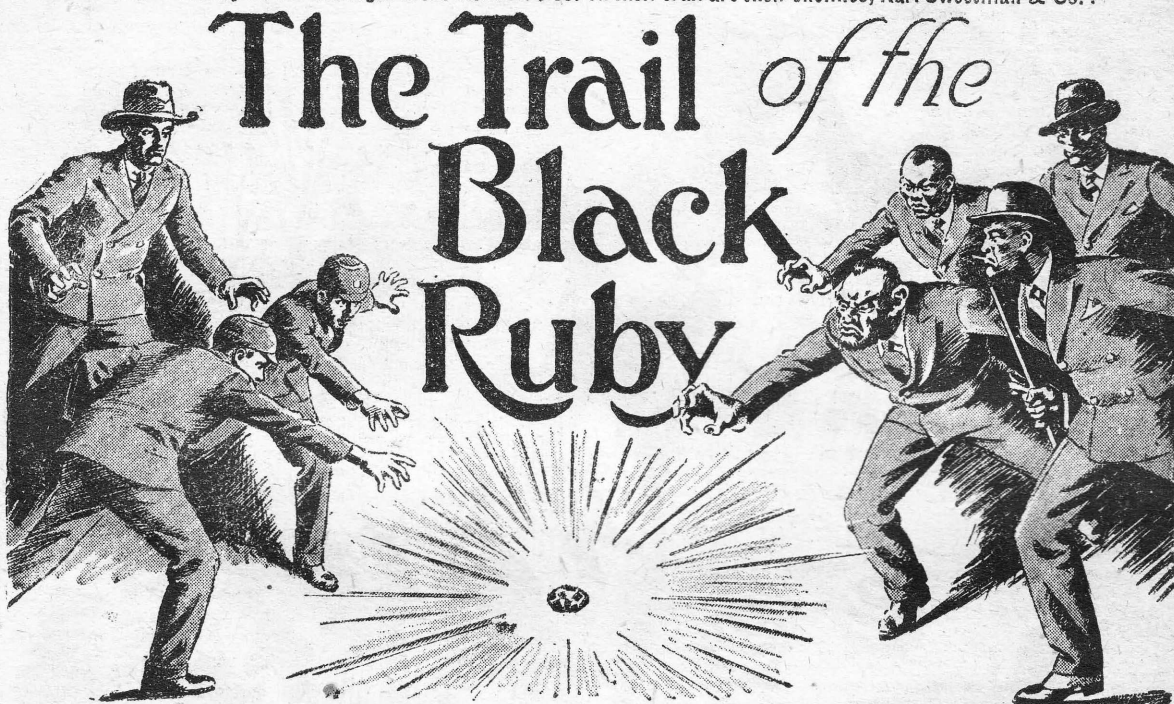
Trimble had got what he deserved.

THE END.

(Now look out for next week's GEM and another topping long story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled: "STANDING BY A FAG!" by Martin Clifford. You'll vote it the goods, chums!)

PERIL IN AUSTRALIA:

Australia at last! Syd, Bob and Steve are nearing their goal—the place where lies a wonderful fortune, and their excitement is intense. But they do not lose sight of the fact that close on their trail are their enemies, Karl Sweetman & Co.!



A STIRRING AND DRAMATIC NEW SERIAL STORY OF ADVENTURE, FEATURING BOB AND SYD, TWO PLUCKY SCHOOLBOYS!

By PERCY A. CLARKE.

Steve to the Rescue!

SVENSKHEM realised he had been brought here to be questioned, and knew his danger; but he was in a quandary. Half of what his captors said to him was so much Greek. He could not understand the drift of it at all. His great eyes goggled fear through his cart-wheel glasses. He was ghastly pale, and his fat hands trembled.

"But I know not v'ere ist he!" he cried. "Herr Barrett meine frient ist, und dat ist der all of it. Ja!"

"Don't try that bunk!" snapped Bully Mahon. "You're in with Barrett. If you're not, why are you always trailing us? Think we're a lot o' ginks that can't see through a brick wall? You're going to talk—see?—and pronto!"

"But I know not v'ere ist he?" protested Svenskhem. "I for heem look vos."

"Apple-sauce!" snarled Baker. "You were looking for Sweetman—or Faulkner—just now. You can't fool us! You're going to talk!"

His claw-like hand shot out and gripped the Swede's wrist. Svenskhem tried to draw his hand away, but not for nothing was Baker nicknamed Twisty. He had a grip like wire hawsers, and the fat Swede was powerless.

"Matches, Bully!" snapped Baker. "Hold a lighted match between his fat fingers! Guess he'll talk fast enough then!"

Bully Mahon grinned, fished a box of matches from his pocket, extracted a match and struck it. The yellow flames flared up with a hiss, and Svenskhem's whole fat body squirmed with fear and anticipation.

"Nein! I know not v'ere ist he. Dot match burn me vill!"

"Sure it will!" grinned Twisty Baker.

He forced the Swede's fat hand nearer to the flaming match. Svenskhem could feel the heat of it on his flesh. He opened his cavernous mouth to scream, but Baker clapped his hand over the orifice.

"You talk," he hissed, "or we'll do it! We ain't just playing! You talk or—"

Crash!

A man blundered into the cabin. He was big. He sported a monstrous black beard, and had "squatter" written all over him. He stood in the doorway, staring about him foolishly, owlshly. It was plain he had been drinking heavily.

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"Ullo, pards!" he cried thickly. "Is this my cabin, or yours?"

"Get out!" roared Bully Mahon.

The black-bearded man grinned.

"Must be your cabin, pommy," he said. "Sho sorry—hic! Losht mo way, and—"

He stared at Svenskhem at first. Then gradually the light of drunken recognition came into his blurred eyes.

"Bust me! he cried. "It'sh Little Willy, isn't it? Or old Hindendorff, or Ludenberg, or shomebody. Must be shomebody! Hic! Come an' have a drink!"

"Get out, curse you!" hissed Baker.

"No. Want old fat face come an' ave a drink!" persisted the squatter. "Come on, Little Willy! Be a shport—hic—and ave one on me!"

Svenskhem was more perplexed than ever, but he thought he saw a chance of getting away from the crooks. Even then his basic principles did not desert him.

"Herr Stranger," he said, "I do not der strong drink drink. I der vegetarian am. Ja!"

"S'ats a'right!" said the squatter. "Hops an' grapes—vegetables, ain't they? Come an' have one!"

"T'anks; but no!" said Svenskhem dubiously.

"Then come an' see me ave one!" urged the black-bearded man.

"Look here!" snapped Baker, rising to his feet and confronting the intruder. "You're not wanted here! Get out!"

But the squatter retorted in an unexpected way. His hand shot out, caught Twisty Baker full in the face, and toppled him over backwards on top of Bully Mahon.

"Dirty, ugly face!" grinned the drunken squatter. "Don't like it! Come on, Willy; come an' ave a drink!"

Svenskhem saw his chance, and grabbed it with both hands.

"Ach! I come, ain't it?" he hissed.

He shot out of the cabin quicker than he had moved for many a long day. The door closed behind him violently, and he had another shock, for the big black-bearded man, suddenly sober, had seized his arm, and was racing him along the deck down the companion-ladder to the forward well-deck, along to the third-class tourist accommodation, down below, and along a dark corridor, into a tiny box-like cabin. Siam went the door. Click—the light was turned on.

Like one in a dream Svenskhem stared at his companion; but the big black beard was on the bunk and Steve Barrett sat there grinning at him.

"You'll be the death of me, Svenskhem," he said. "When you're not baulking me and getting in my way, you're falling foul of Sweetman's gang, and I've got to rescue you!"

Svenskhem appeared sheepish. "In der daze I vos!" he moaned. "Vat der meaning ist?"

"They were going to try lighted matches between your fingers. I was listening outside their door all the time. You were trailing Mahon and Baker, hoping to find Faulkner. Weren't you?"

"Ja, dot ist so. Der monish—"
"You'll never get that money. Faulkner was really Karl Sweetman, the biggest unhung crook in the world. He was using you to fool me, and he got that Black Ruby he's after. And now I've got to get it back, and I can't have you getting in my way, so understand that! I've got you out of a mess—"

"Und grateful I vos!" declared the Swede.
"Then show your gratitude by lying low. This Black Ruby is nothing to do with you. Keep out of my way and keep clear of those crooks."

"But—how? They to make me talk again vill try."
Steve offered him a revolver.
"Here. Take this," he said tersely. "And don't try trailing them. If they get you again let fly with this."

Svenskhem took the gun and rose to his feet.
"Donnervetter, fed-up wid dis crook game I vos. I meddle no more. But, Herr Barrett, your cleverness und der bravery I never forget vos. Und vun day der same for you I do vos, ain't it?"

"That's all right," grinned Steve. "Only, remember, you don't know where I am. Get that?"

"Der secret mit me safe ist. Ja," the Swede assured him. "Der not'ings. I know."

"Right. Then get out of here and don't talk. I've got to get busy after that Ruby."

He ushered the Swede out of the cabin and donned his great black beard again. Ten minutes later he was lurching drunkenly up the companion ladder to the boat deck. Drunk as he was supposed to be, he had the sense to keep in the shadows, and suddenly a hand came from nowhere and plucked at his sleeve. He halted, gazed about him to make sure no one could see, then he crept under a lifeboat and found Bob there.

"Where's Syd?" he asked in a whisper.
"In that ventilator," whispered Bob. "Connects with Sweetman's cabin. You watch!"

Snapping Strands!

STEVE and Bob crouched there beneath the lifeboat and watched. The tension was terrific.

Suddenly in the round black patch that was the gaping mouth of the huge ventilator, appeared Syd's white hand. Cautiously Steve and Bob left their post and crept across the deck. Syd's grinning face appeared. They helped him out. He dropped lightly to the deck.

"Well?" queried Steve, trying hard to keep the thrill out of his voice.

"Heard lots," whispered Syd. "But can't talk here."

Steve jerked his head and led the way down to his cabin. It was safer there. The crooks had not yet penetrated his disguise and found out where he slept.

In the privacy of his cabin Syd told them what he had heard.

"We saw Mahon and Baker dodge into Sweetman's cabin," he explained. "They looked sort of rattled. So we got the hang of the ventilator that connects, and—heard them talking about in there. As far as I could make out there's been some shemuzzle with Svenskhem. They're looking for you, Steve, and thought Svenskhem could tell them where you were."

"Guess I know about that," growled Steve. "But carry on, I'll tell my yarn later."

"Well," said Syd, "to cut a long story short, I heard them talking about the Ruby. Ah Wong has it, hidden in the knot at the end of his pigtail."

"Queue, sonny," grinned Steve. "Never talk of a

Chink's pigtail east of Suez. Out here they're called queues. But where is Ah Wong?"

"Travelling steerage," said Syd.
Steve thumped the edge of the bunk with his fist.

"We're going to get that sparkler," he said. "But first we've got to get a peep at Ah Wong, and I'll tell you how to do it."

He talked rapidly for about five minutes. The boys nodded assent, then cautiously they crept out on deck again and went forward to the break of the fore-cle over the steerage accommodation. The crew on deck were up against the anchor heads, either dozing or playing cards. The pals had to work quietly and swiftly.

Steve had a rope. He made one end fast to a stanchion and tossed the other end over the side. Without a word Bob clambered over the rail and shinned down the rope bit by bit until he reached the second row of ports. Below him the black water hissed and gurgled as the great liner ploughed her way southwards.

The night was black and hot. There are not many places where a night can be hotter than in the Red Sea, and the ports were open. Inside the steerage lights were glowing dimly. Rough, unkempt men of all nationalities were jollifying about. Bob peered this way and that to find Ah Wong, but failed. He was about to give up the search in disgust, when he started violently and nearly dropped from the rope.

That porthole was immediately above a berth, and lying in that berth was a Chinaman. He was asleep. In his sleep he turned over to face the port, and Bob found himself suddenly staring into the villainous yellow face of Ah Wong.

Bob's heart pounded against his ribs. There was the Chinaman's queue lying limply on top of the dingy coverlets within reach of Bob's hand.

Moving cautiously, Bob fished for his keen pocket knife and opened the blade. He had to grip that rope with his knees. How he hung on he hardly knew. He reached in through the open port and drew the end of the black, greasy queue towards him. Then he cut it off, four inches from the end, stuffed the length of hair into his pocket, fully aware of the fact that the knot at the end that contained something hard.

For a split second he studied the Chinaman to make sure he was still asleep. Ah Wong was snoring. Satisfied, Bob commenced to climb upwards to the deck, hand over hand. Maybe in the excitement of the moment he climbed faster than he should have done, and with more vigour. The rope jerked convulsively, but he paid no heed to it. His one idea was to reach the deck with the Black Ruby. But suddenly from above Steve hissed sharply. It was the agreed signal for caution. Someone was moving about the deck, and discovery was imminent.

Bob ceased climbing. He hung on there in the darkness, the ship rolling to the heavy ground swell, the water gurgling angrily beneath him. It seemed ages to him that he waited for the signal to climb again. He put his head well back and tried to peer upwards through the tropical darkness, and suddenly the rope jerked again convulsively.

Bob frowned. He knew what was happening. The rope had been chafing against the stanchion and the strands were snapping, one by one. He felt himself dropping. The rope seemed suddenly weak. Now and again it jerked downwards as other strands went.

Bob peered upwards. Only two strands were holding, and he was hanging over the gurgling, hissing water—the Black Ruby in his pocket, but not safe! The rope was breaking, snapping like a piece of string.

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 events the chums retrieve the precious stone and board the Maharanee, bound for Australia. Sweetman and his gang also get aboard. The Maharanee is rammed by a huge tramp steamer, however, and during the scramble which follows, the gang is instrumental in regaining possession of the precious stone. Forced to continue their journey by another boat, Barrett resolves to deceive Sweetman by disguising himself as a "squatter." Alarmed at the sudden disappearance of the Australian member of the trio, the gang way-lay a vegetarian crook named Svenskhem, whose acquaintance the chums had made on the voyage, determined to force from him the whereabouts of the missing Steve.

(Now Read On.)

The Getaway!

BELOW Bob the sea hissed and gurgled, as the great ship ploughed her way towards the Antipodes. The waves crashed against the steel plate of her sides and broke in a smother of spray that gleamed cruelly white in the darkness of the semi-tropical night. And that sinister, sucking noise of the backwash reminded Bob of sharks. Exactly why it should do so he hardly knew, but he knew that rope on which he hung over the side of the liner might snap at any moment and precipitate him into the shark-infested waters below.

Already his aching muscles were complaining. Another strand snapped, and Bob jerked and swung helplessly on the end of the rope. The liner rolled in the swell, and helplessly Bob swung to and fro, the steel plates chafing his knees and elbows.

Grimly, despairingly, he hissed a curt warning to the deck above him. He craned his neck and peered up. He could just make out the weather rail, and beyond that the stars in the jet black sky, twinkling down mockingly.

Yet again the rope jerked as another strand snapped. One more, reckoned Bob, and that would put paid to his brief career. He gritted his teeth. The liner rolled in the trough of the ocean waves. Bob clutched out wildly, hopelessly. His fingers came into contact with the edge of an open port, and he hung on like grim death, just as the last strand of the rope gave way.

Bob let the frayed end fall, and he could not repress a shudder as he heard the faint splash it made striking the water. He had two hands free now to clutch the end of that port. It was dark—pitch black. He dared not shout for help. He did not know what cabin that was on the other side of that porthole, nor whom he might arouse.

Daringly, he hissed, and craned his neck to peer upwards, but all he could see was the dark line of the weather rail and the stars, like gems, set in black velvet. Where was Syd? Where was Steve? Why had they left him to his fate? Would they return? Had Sweetman got hold of them and allowed him to hang there to drop to the sharks in due course? It was the sort of thing Sweetman would do, he knew. On the other hand, surely Steve would have kicked up enough row to have aroused the whole ship's company rather than let such a thing happen. Then what had happened to Steve and Syd?

Bob listened intently, and heard the soft, rhythmical padding of someone pacing the deck. He hissed, but got no sort of reply. How was he to know that Steve and Syd were crouching in the shadow of the deckhouse in an agony of suspense, while the junior officer of the watch paced to and fro dreaming, no doubt, of the girl he had left behind him!

If Bob was in a dangerous position, Steve and Syd were awkwardly placed, as anxiously they watched for the junior officer to go to some other part of the ship. They were painfully aware that Bob was dangling over the Indian Ocean, and that anything may have happened to him. Ah Wong might discover him. The officer might discover him, and cause trouble with the skipper. And even if Steve felt no qualms of conscience, knowing that the Black Ruby was really his property, it was doubtful whether the skipper would see eye to eye with him in the matter.

And with aggravating monotony and persistency, that officer paced to and fro, to and fro, softly humming a tune to himself. He went to the starboard rail, gazed listlessly at the dark, heaving water. He turned his head to peer up at the bridge to make sure whether his superior officer could see him or not. Then he calmly extracted a cigarette from his case, an act that seemed to imply he would stop where he was to smoke.

But apparently he thought better of it. The glow of a cigarette might be noticed from the bridge, and it isn't healthy for an officer of the watch to be caught smoking on duty. Consequently he straightened, spun round on his heel, and walked for'ard, almost to the anchor heads, to place the binnacle locker between himself and the navigating bridge.

That was the chance for which Steve had been waiting. No sooner had the officer disappeared than he was darting to the port rail, with Syd close on his heels. He leant over the side, peering down into the Stygian blackness. He hissed twice, as warning that he was about to pull up the rope. He groped for the rope—found it—and—

"By George!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "He's gone!"

"Gone?" gasped Syd stupidly, hardly comprehending.

Steve hauled in the rope. It was slack. It swayed about as if it were no more than a piece of packthread. And when they came to the end of it, much sooner than should have been the case, they eyed the frayed ends with understanding, that did nothing to dispel their fears.

Without a word Syd clambered over the rail. He hung on with one hand and bent his body to lower his head, so that he could peer down into the darkness.

"Bob!" he called, as loudly as he dared. "Bob!"

He thought he saw something dimly white close to the plates of the liner.

"That you, Bob?" he called.

"Yes! Sling a rope! Quick!"

The answer came up, curt, terse, yet only in half a whisper. The vibrancy of Bob's voice commanded quick action. He couldn't hold on much longer.

Syd turned to Steve.

"He's there! Hanging on a port! A rope! Quick!"

Steve looked around for a rope that would reach Bob, but in the darkness he could not see anything like a rope beyond the broken fragment he had just hauled in.

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Syd was in an agony of fear. Any moment that junior officer might take it into his head to wander that way.

"You get over," he snapped to Steve. "You're taller than I am. Hang from the bottom rail by your hands. Perhaps he'll be able to reach your feet."

"Dingoes!" hissed Steve. "That's an idea!"

He wasted no time. In a flash he was over the side and caught hold of the bottom rail, hanging down. He hissed instructions down to Bob.

"Say, sonny! Can you reach my number nines?"

There was no need for Bob to answer. The extra weight that made Steve grunt was answer enough for Syd, who quickly clambered inboard again, ready to lend a hand at the right moment.

Bob was climbing, hand over hand, swarming up Steve's pendant body. Now and again Steve grunted at the strain imposed upon him, otherwise he made no complaint. He just hung there grimly. And Bob came up slowly, surely. He reached out and grabbed the rail, and Steve heaved a sigh of thankfulness. Syd helped Bob over the rail, and Bob slumped down on the deck, well-nigh exhausted by his ordeal. Then Steve came, hauling himself inboard.

For all his trial, only one thought occupied his mind.

"You got it?" he queried.

"Rather!" grinned Bob.

Then—pad, pad, pad—that familiar sound fired them to sudden action.

"Look out!" hissed Syd.

Crouching, keeping well in the shadows, they bolted aft, darting from shadow to darker shade, across the for'ard well deck, and under the welcome concealment of the hurricane deck, up the ladder to Number Two deck, and so to the boys' cabin. Like rabbits into a burrow they bolted inside and closed the door—locked it. Steve slumped down on the lower bunk and fanned himself vigorously with Syd's pillow.

"Next time," he said, "I try double-crossing double-crossers I'll do it north o' the Arctic circle. By George, this game is too strenuous for these latitudes! But—you got it, sonny?"

Bob was chafing his strained arms. He grinned, and dived his hand into his pocket, bringing to light a four-inch length of a Chinaman's queue, terminating in a hard knot.

"Jumping wallabies!" cried Steve. He grabbed the souvenir, and with his keen clasp knife cut the knot at the end, so that the Black Ruby fell out into the palm of his hand.

At the sight of that coveted jewel, the rays of the cabin lamp scintillating flashingly on its wonderful facets, the pals drew in their breath sharply. It was an amazing sight. No wonder the crooks were ready to risk even death for the sake of that gem. And yet, valuable as it was, it was the key to greater wealth.

Steve was pale with excitement. His eyes glittered with an unnatural light; but he had perfect control of himself. He wrapped the ruby in a piece of newspaper he got from his pocket, and stowed it away very deliberately in the leather belt he wore around his body beneath his clothes.

"I was wondering," said Syd, "what was best to do with it."

"Sure, and so was I," grinned Steve. "And I reckon I'd better keep it."

"Why?" asked Bob.

"Because," said Steve, "Sweetman knows where to find you two. See? But he hasn't found out what disguise I'm wearing, nor where I'm sleeping o' nights. So it's best with me. And if you want to know anything, sonny, I reckon it won't be long before Karl Sweetman and his lambs will pay you two a visit, and it won't be a polite visit, either. All the same for that, I'd give something to see Ah Wong's face when he wakes up and misses part of his queue. By George, sonny, you've sure established a record as the first sportsman to shingle a Chink in his sleep!"

Syd hissed a caution. Someone was padding along the deck outside. But the padding went right past the cabin and was lost in the distance—probably, a marauding stoker. But the incident reminded Steve that he had better make himself scarce. Accordingly, he donned his black beard.

Bob went to the door and strolled out leisurely on to the promenade to make sure no one was about. But he came back rather excited.

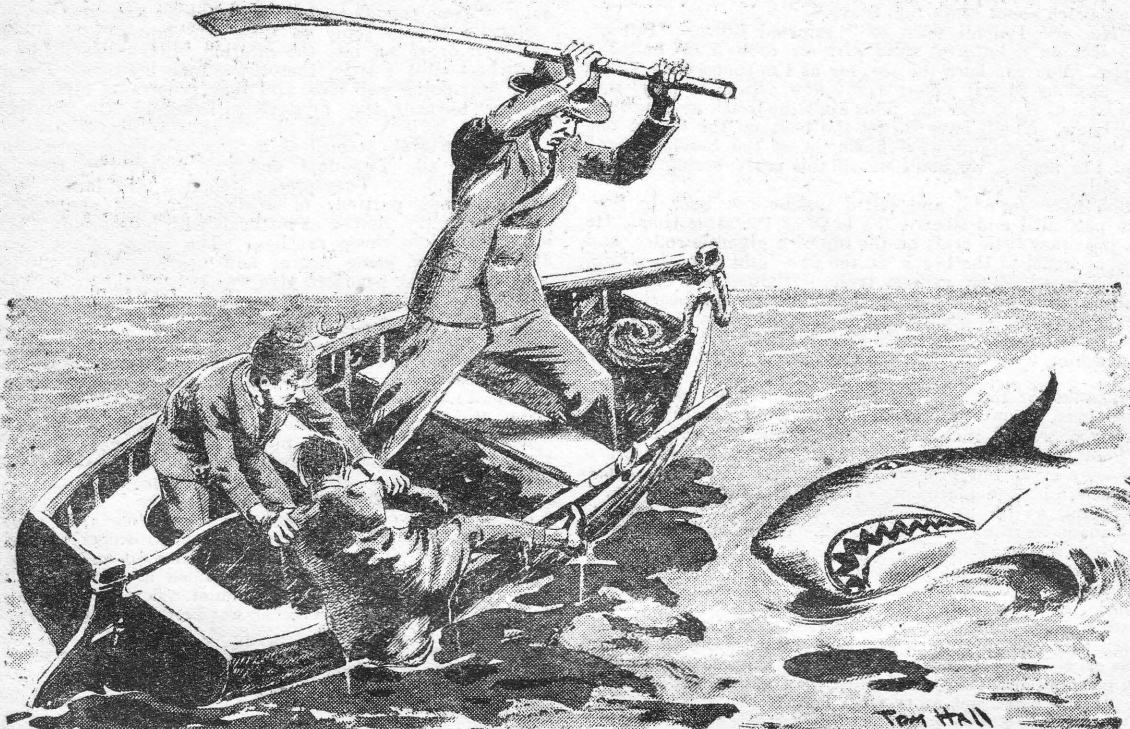
"We're approaching land—in harbour, or something," he exclaimed.

And even as he spoke came the hoarse cries of men on the fo'c'sle, the clanging of the engine-room bell, the clanking of the anchor chains.

"By George!" cried Steve. "It's Perth! I clean forgot we'd get it before daybreak! Shut that door, buddy—quick!"

Bob closed it—only just in time. A number of seamen went rushing past.

Steve stood stock still in the middle of the cabin. He was thinking—strange thoughts, too, from the way he kept shooting quick glances at Syd and Bob.



Bob turned his head and saw the shark coming at him like a torpedo, and he made a last desperate effort to reach the side of the boat. Brandishing an oar as if it were no heavier than a walking-stick, Steve stood ready! (See this page.)

Suddenly, he spoke. "Boys," he said, "I've got an idea. But listen here! If you think it's a sight too dangerous and fantastic like, you say so straight off, and we won't do it."

"What are you getting at?" queried Bob, a trifle harshly. "It's like this," Steve explained. "We've got the Ruby at last, and I'm keen on keeping it till we get to Stony Gorge, and I guess you boys are with me, so far. But you can bet your boots, now we've got the sparkler, Sweetman and his gang won't rest easy till they've got it back again, and here's a way we can ditch 'em proper. They know we've booked through to Melbourne—or you two have, at any rate. They don't know quite where I am."

"Well, boys, here's my cutest. Let's jump ship here in the dark. Get ashore unbeknown to a soul and dive into the interior, trek across Australia and come on Stony Gorge, which is at the back o' Queensland, from the west instead of from the east."

"You see the point? We'll have danger enough in the interior; but them crooks won't bother us none, for the simple reason they'll be aboard this here ship sailing for Melbourne. What d'you say?"

Syd looked, while Bob, who was thoughtfully stroking his chin, stared at the floor. Suddenly, he raised his head and looked at Syd. It was a knack of his to leave the brain work to his chum and keep the brawn work for himself. And Syd raised his eyebrows. Bob raised his eyebrows to indicate he'd do what Syd did. And Syd nodded his head and grinned.

"I'm game," he said. "So'm I," said Bob eagerly. "It's worth a shot, anyway." "Good egg!" cried Steve, borrowing Syd's favourite phrase. "We got to get busy right now! Come on!"

Furtively they crept out on deck. There was no one about idle enough to be interested in their movements. The crew were busy heaving bulky mail-bags over the rail to a fussy little tug-boat. Over the black mass of the land in the east the first light of dawn was streaking the grey skies.

Steve went to the rail, and a matter of a hundred yards away saw a small row-boat moored to a buoy. He just jerked his head, and the pals understood.

"But watch out for sharks!" hissed Steve, in a warning whisper. "It's risky. Say the word, boys, and we won't do it!"

The boys didn't say the word. Instead, Syd clambered over the rail, and slid silently down a rope that hung over the side from a stanchion, and at the bottom of which hung a fender—no doubt, thrown over in case the tug came along-side there.

Bob followed close behind his chum. Steve brought up the rear. And with hardly a splash, one after the other, the three of them entered the black, cold water—cold by

comparison with the upper air, rather than really cold in actual temperature.

Boldly, cautiously, they struck out for the moored boat. The sky was cloudy, which was lucky for them, for the clouds obscured the light from the rising sun. Fortunately, the sharks seemed to be otherwise engaged.

Steve reached the boat first and scrambled in-board. Syd came next, and was helped in over the sternsheets by Steve. In normal circumstances Bob was by far the best swimmer of the three, but his muscles still ached from his terrible experience on the end of the rope, and he was more or less cramped.

Steve leant over the gunwale of the boat, his great, brown hand outstretched to help Bob when Syd hissed the warning.

"Shark!" Bob turned his head and saw the brute coming at him like a torpedo, the wedge-like fin cleaving the water. Steve grabbed an oar and brandished it as if it were no heavier than a walking-stick.

Bob made one desperate effort to reach the boat, where Syd was waiting to drag him in-board.

Crack! Steve got the brute on the snout with the oar. The monster fish scurried away in a welter of foam, and Steve eyed the butt of the oar ruefully. The weapon had snapped off short in his hand.

"All's well," he said dubiously. "I'd do it for you again, sonny. But how the jumping wallabies do we get ashore now?"

Over the Edge!

"WAS that the only oar?" queried Bob, worried. "Sure, no," said Steve. "There's one more, but a pack of idiots we'll look rowing round in a ring with the sharks waiting in the middle for a kiss. Takes two oars to row straight, so I've heard."

Syd grinned knowingly, and proceeded to unship the rudder.

"Your education's been sadly neglected," he said. "Hand over that oar, Bob. Thought everybody knew this."

"Knew what?" asked Steve. Syd didn't answer. He stood on the thwart, his feet well apart, and, with the oar resting in the tiller groove, proceeded to scull the boat ashore, with a long, swaying motion.

Steve scratched his head in simple amazement. "Live and learn," he said. "Where did you learn that trick?"

"Thought everybody knew it," said Bob. "We've seen the fishermen at Lowestoft do it. In fact, they hardly ever

row a boat with two oars if they can help it. You don't know much about seafaring, Steve."

"No, and I don't want to!" retorted Steve. "Put me two feet on a lump o' solid dirt, or even mud, and I'm happy. You can keep the sea, far as I'm concerned. Guess I'm anxious to get ashore right now. Take it easy, son, and land us right side up. This ain't the beach at Brighton, you know. You'll have to get the boat on the top of one o' them rollers, and we'll finish up on the beach. See? And I'm hoping we don't smash this craft, seeing as how we only borrowed it."

Bob went forward, and called instructions back to Syd, who propelled and steered the boat at the same time. He got the crazy little craft on the top of a gigantic roller, and they approached the beach, in the dim light of early dawn, at the speed of an express train. Before they properly realised what was happening they were on the beach, and Steve, thoroughly accustomed to the Australian surf, was out and hauling the borrowed boat up the beach. The boys helped him, until they had the craft safely above high-water mark.

"Thanks for the loan," grinned Steve. "But don't hang about here, chums. Might be spotted from the ship."

They concealed themselves amongst the big rocks at the back of the beach, and dried their sodden clothes. Steve was busy every few minutes, making sure the Black Ruby was where he had placed it—in the belt around his body.

Keeping as far as possible out of sight of the harbour, they made their way into the town. It was still early, and the place was hardly awake.

"Answer no questions," advised Steve. "And don't ask any. That is the healthiest way in this man's country, chums. We've got to leave these parts in a hurry, and mustn't waste time. It'll take longer getting to Stony Gorge this way, but them crooks won't be hanging on our heels all the time. And once we strike Queensland, we can find my old pard, Gentleman Jack, and get on with staking our claim. First, get away from here."

But that was not so easy as at first appeared. They could not walk across Australia. Some form of transport was necessary, and Steve doubted the advisability of buying horses, partly because that might attract attention, partly because the boys were not absolute experts in the saddle, but mostly because the animals might die when crossing the desert and endanger the lives of the whole party. Horses might prove necessary in the end, but, if possible, a car would serve their purpose better.

Cars were at a premium in Perth. There were plenty there, but what were there were wanted, and not for sale. But after some time the trio unearthed a one-horse garage, where the proprietor had an old, ramshackle Ford he didn't want, and they bought it. The tonneau was filled with canned food and tins of water, and the petrol tank with petrol. In half an hour the three were on their way, chugging wheezily out of Perth.

The pals grinned with amusement, but Steve was worried. That old Ford wasn't encouraging. But after a mile or so she got warmed up, and sort of unlimbered, and began to plod along at a good pace. For two or three miles nothing eventful happened at all. Then, as they surmounted a hill a weird wailing smote their ears, droning above the roar of the engine of the car. The noise echoed and vibrated amongst the trees, like the notes of a monstrous organ.

"By George!" exclaimed Steve. "What was that?"
 "All right," said Bob. "Only the liner's siren."
 "Dingoes!" cried Steve to Sid, who was at the wheel.
 "Hit her up, son. They've found out we're missing!"
 "Guess again!" retorted Bob. "Three long blasts. That means farewell. The ship is off to Melbourne."
 "Jumping Wallabies, that's good news!" grinned Steve.
 "Farewell Sweetman, we've ditched you proper this time!"
 He flourished his hat, but Syd, at the wheel, frowned.

"We're not out of the wood yet, by a long chalk," he said. "Time enough to feel safe when we are safe!"

Steve made no reply to that. He lapsed into silence, and Syd drove on into the interior. Bob relieved him at the wheel after a time, then Steve took his turn. The old Ford was doing well now, and they penetrated farther and farther towards the mysterious heart of the Southern Continent.

But it certainly seemed as if Steve's boastful words were true, after all. Two days and two nights they travelled without incident. They passed irrigated farm lands. They went through portions of arid desert, and across well-wooded country, dotted at intervals with homesteads. They crossed spacious sheep ranches. The range of mountains ahead of them came nearer and nearer. The watered, green landscape, began to give way to a bleak, stone-strewn view. The farms gave way to grimy mining settlements.

The trail took them through a large mining town. They did not stop, and no one interfered with them. The rocky desert was before them, and the pals held doggedly on their way. They were so far hopeful, inasmuch as Karl Sweetman had not turned up in any shape or form.

"Well, chums," mused Steve, who was at the wheel at the time, "I guess we've got plenty o' tough times ahead in them mountains and the desert behind 'em, but we have ditched Sweetman. We fill up with water—as much as we can take aboard—at the next town we strike."

But they did not strike another town. The trail wound in and out amongst the huge boulders, and suddenly, rounding a bend, the way was blocked by a man on horseback. He was burly. His sombrero was pulled low down over his eyes. A grimy coloured handkerchief was across the lower part of his face, and a revolver was held in his right hand.

"Hallo!" rasped Steve.
 "Hallo, yerself!" snapped the man. "Pull up. I want a word wiv you and them two pommies."

The appearance of the man was not encouraging, and the gun he held did not spell friendship as far as Steve could make out. And, even as he hesitated, with the car slowing down, he saw the tops of more sombreros behind the rocks beside the trail.

It was a hold-up—ambush! Maybe. But how could Karl Sweetman have anything to do with this, seeing he was aboard the liner somewhere in the Great Australian Bight?

But Steve knew he had the Black Ruby in his belt, and if these desperadoes searched him—

Steve made up his mind. He shot the car into top gear, and he put his foot on the accelerator.

"Out of the way!" he roared. "Duck down, chums!"
 The car shot forward like a mad thing. The tough was nearly thrown as his scared horse leapt aside. The off-side wings of the old car scraped the animal's legs as it shot sideways. Revolvers cracked amongst the boulders, but the boys had taken Steve's advice, and were ducked down behind the hood. The bullets whistled harmlessly over their heads.

In the rear came hoarse shouts. The toughs were in pursuit. Helter-skelter they came from their ambush amongst the rocks. Horses appeared, they were mounted, and the chase was in deadly earnest.

Steve gave the old Ford more juice and kept her hard at it. The trail was rough and uneven; but she was built for rough going, and performed wonders for her age. The speedometer-needle crept up to twenty-five, then thirty—on to thirty-five. The toughs were strung out some way behind, galloping furiously in pursuit.

"Might have waited and seen what they wanted," observed Syd. "Expect we could have got away afterwards."

"And perhaps not," said Bob.
 "Just so!" granted Steve. "Guess I know me way about this here continent, and them guys didn't want to kiss us. I'm aiming to lose 'em if I can, and if this old bedstead can stand the racket we'll do—Dingoes! Where's the trail? Are we still on it?"

"Search me!" commented Bob, studying the dreary landscape.

That trail had wound in and out amongst the rocks; but it was open to doubt whether they were still on it, or just careering across the desert.

Syd gazed back over the hood.
 "Never mind the trail!" he said curtly. "Keep moving! They seem to be gaining on us."

Steve did not answer. He was busy. He was trying to coax more speed out of the old Ford, but she refused to be coaxed. Instead, the speedometer needle began to go back the way it had come—from thirty-five to thirty—to twenty-five.

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The toughs had their guns in their hands. Faintly came the reports, but at first the bullets dropped short. Steve toiled like a demon to keep his distance, but the old car had shot its bolt. It coughed and wheezed, the cylinders complained noisily. The whole contraption rattled alarmingly. The exhaust roared and exploded like a miniature cannon.

The toughs were drawing nearer. Their bullets whistled overhead; then came lower, nearer, as they found the mark. One smashed the windscreen; another drilled a hole in the hood within six inches of Bob's head.

"Keep her going!" roared Syd. "I'll get a gun and scare 'em."

He fished about on the floor of the tonneau. He found Steve's revolver and rammed cartridges into the magazine. Cautiously he peered over the hood, and was about to fire, when suddenly Steve ripped out a cry of amazement.

"By George, look what we've struck!"

The pals looked ahead. The ground sloped steeply down to the edge of a precipice. What lay beyond that sheer drop they did not know, but it was plain that the old Ford was heading for the edge.

Grimly Steve wrenched at the wheel to bring her round. She rolled like a ship at sea. A stone embedded in the ground altered her course, and Steve had to do some more wrenching to turn her, while she lumbered ungainly towards that cliff.

But she answered the helm, so to speak. She turned lumberingly within a few yards of the precipice, her radiator steaming furiously, her engine beginning to conk out. Desperately Steve gave her yet more juice; and then—

Crack! Bang!

One of the toughs made a lucky hit. His revolver-bullet got the off-side back tyre. The old Ford lurched horribly, skidded, and slithered sideways, entirely out of control, towards the edge of the precipice, churning up the dry sand of the desert in a cloud of arid dust.

"Hold on!" roared Steve. Though why, he hardly knew. There was not even time to jump clear before the aged car was over the cliff.

To the pals the world seemed to be performing somersaults and catherine wheels. The whole universe was going over and over, and round and round. Everything was dizzy and blurred. The crash would come and—

It came sooner than they anticipated, with a rending of wood, a cracking and splintering of branches, the scraping

and grinding of wood on metal. And then in a split second all was strangely still.

Syd was somewhere amongst the canned food on the floor of the tonneau. Bob was draped awkwardly over the hood, his arm wedged firmly in the metal stays. Steve seemed to be coiled round the steering column, with the clutch in his mouth.

"By George!" he said in muffled tones. "It's better to be born lucky than rich!"

"What's happened?" inquired Syd.

"Happened? We're stuck half-way up a blank wall!"

"Bush, or something," said Bob, "stopped our fall. Mind how you wriggle, or down we go!"

Carefully, cautiously, they extricated themselves from the car—or what was left of it. There was a ledge of rock close handy, and they managed to clamber on to it. One glance told them that the old Ford had given up the ghost. Even supposing she could be salvaged, she'd never go again. Her radiator was smashed to atoms, three wheels were gone, half her engine was hanging loose from the bonnet, and she smoked like a worn-out bonfire.

"Now what?" said Steve. "Them crooks must be up on top. Guess we'd better go down."

"Come on, then," said Syd. "We don't want to be shot off here like flies on a wall. I'm going down."

He proceeded to scramble downwards, from bush to bush, towards the floor of the gorge. But Bob yelled at him.

"Stop! My godfathers! We can't go down there!"

Syd stopped and looked, and the colour ebbed from his face. The place was alive with snakes—huge, venomous monsters as thick as a man's arm. They squirmed and coiled and crawled there like gigantic maggots, over the rocks, over one another, in a weltering, poisonous mass of hissing venom.

And while they stared at that gruesome sight several of the toughs poked their heads over the edge of the precipice and chuckled with delight.

"Say, you pommies," said one, "better come up this way! It ain't healthy down there amongst them worms. 'Sides, gent wants a word wid you—gent name o' Sweetman."

(It seems as though Sweetman has got the chums just where he wants them, doesn't it? But our adventurous trio are not beaten yet, never you fear! Look out for next week's gripping instalment; you'll enjoy every line of it, chums.)

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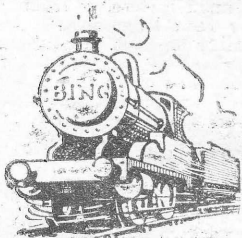
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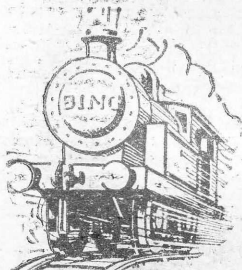
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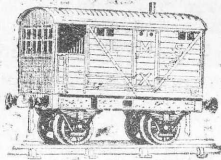
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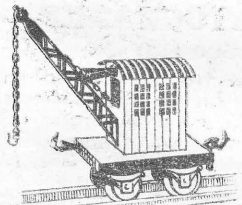
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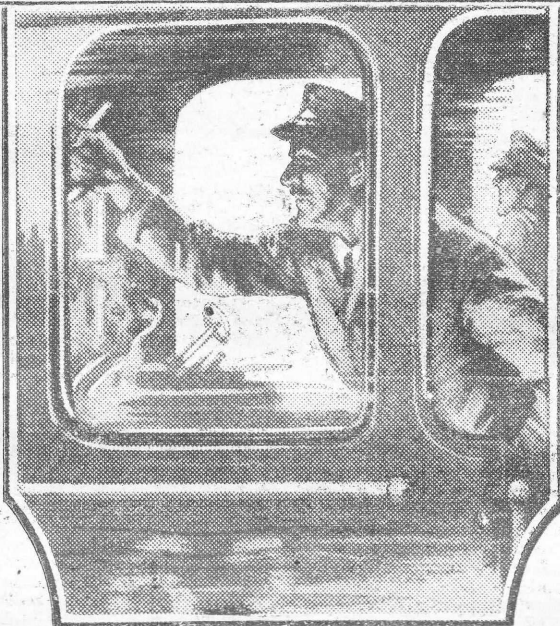
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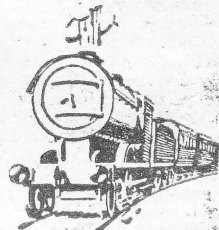
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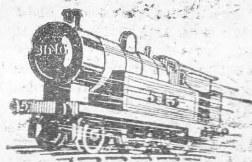
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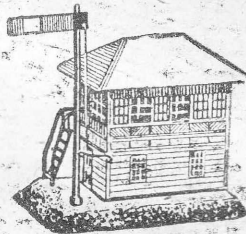
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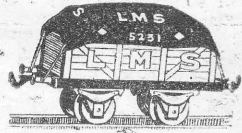
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