

START ROBERT MURRAY'S "CHICK CHANCE--ADVENTURER!" To-Day,
SENSATIONAL STORY . . . Chums.

THE GEM 2d



THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

GREAT THRILLS--MYSTERIES & SCOUTING ADVENTURES

"SOS," "SOS," "SOS"—comes the call for help through the darkness. And the St. Jim's Scouts are there to answer it!

CHAPTER 1. No Takers!

"I SAY, you chaps—"
"Scat!"

Baggy Trimble, the Falstaff of the Fourth at St. Jim's, paused in the doorway of Tom Merry's study in the Shell passage and eyed its occupants rather dubiously. The unanimity of that "Scat!" was not encouraging.

"I've come—" said Trimble.

"Thanks awfully. Now go!" said Tom Merry, with a nod towards the passage.

"Yes; but you haven't heard—"

"And we don't want to hear, my fat tulip! Buzz!"

"Yaas, wathah! Pway twavel, deah boy; we are vewy busay. Now, Tom Mewwy, I'll wesume what I was sayin' just—"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, having disposed of Trimble, resumed what he was saying.

Trimble snorted.

There were six juniors seated round the table in Study No. 10—Tom Merry, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and Con-tarini of the School House, and Piggins, Lawrence, and Redfern of the New House.

It was rather an unusual assembly. For the two rival Houses to be meeting in apparent harmony was in itself surprising. What made the meeting more unusual was that the hour was midday of a fine spring day, when the warm sunshine made the quad and playing-fields much more attractive than Study No. 10.

The occasion, however, was important enough to relegate open-air attractions to a place of secondary importance. The meeting, as a matter of fact, was a committee meeting of the St. Jim's Boy Scouts. Scouting manoeuvres had been arranged for the following afternoon, and the committee was getting down to brass tacks on the subject. A good many details remained to be settled, and the Scouting Committee was going about the task of settling them as expeditiously as possible.

They carried on, oblivious to Baggy Trimble. Trimble, meanwhile, lingered on in the doorway.

"I say—" he began again.

"The question is, do we get the same number of points for each capture, irrespective of rank—"

"Look here, you chaps—" said Trimble, raising his voice.

"The idea is for New House men to get to the boundary field on the Wayland side of the woods—"

"Tom Merry—"

"Nothing counts after four-thirty; at that time we all muster in the boundary field—"

"Gussy—"

"We shall have to decide which side has won on the percentage of possible points—"

"Look here—" shrieked Trimble.

"Oh, my hat! You still here, Trimble?" groaned Tom Merry.

"Of course I'm here!" roared Trimble. "Mean to say you haven't heard me yelling at you for the last five minutes?"

"Haven't heard a syllable! Buzz off, anyway! No time for fat wasps at present!"

"No feah!"

Trimble snorted.

"Cheeky rotters! You've got to hear me, anyway! It's important!"

"So's this Scout meeting. Roll away, fatty!"

"Oh, really, Redfern! A fellow would think that your rotten scouting games—"

"Our what?" demanded Tom Merry sharply.

"H'm! I mean, your scouting games. A fellow would think that your scouting games were all that mattered on the blessed earth. Anyway, as a matter of fact, what I want to speak about is connected with scouting," said Trimble, as an afterthought.

The Scouting Committee stared at Trimble. What the Falstaff of the Fourth could have to say about scouting was a deep mystery. Trimble had never belonged to the St. Jim's Boy Scouts, and by all indications never would

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The MESSAGE in MORSE!

By
Martin
Clifford

belong to them. Open-air exercise and lofty ideals were not much in Trimble's line.

"Connected with scouting, did you say?" asked Tom Merry.

"Exactly. That's why I came here."

"But what connection can a fat oyster like you have with scouting?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

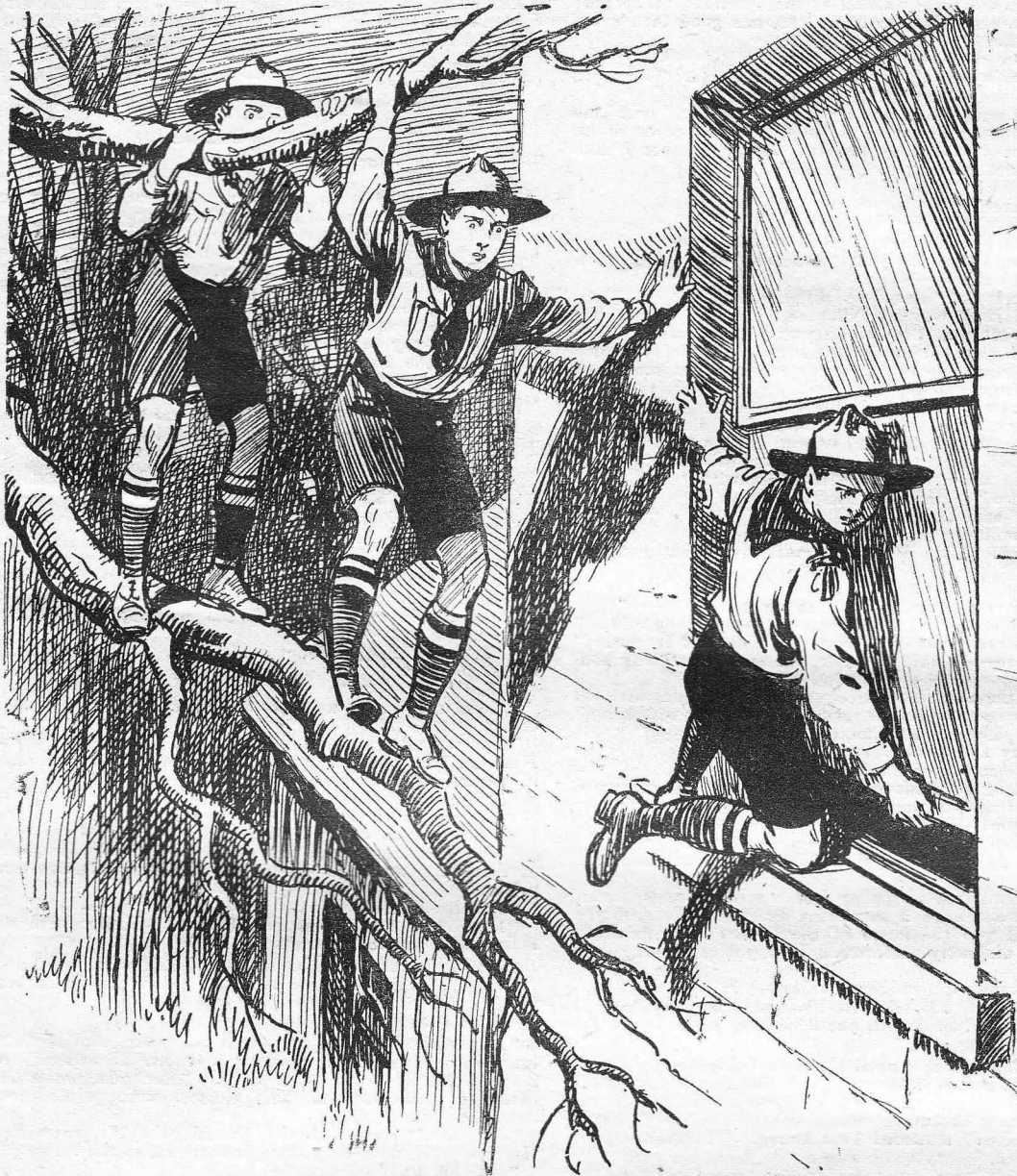
"Beasts. Dashed if I can see what there is to cackle at!" snorted Trimble. "I believe in scouting, myself. I've often thought of joining, but pressure of work and other things have always stopped me."

"Things in the tuckshop, I suppose?" grinned Edgar Lawrence.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, rats! Stop cackling and listen to me. I don't want to stop your meeting—"

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



"Then why the thump don't you roll away and bury yourself somewhere?"

"But this is important and urgent," went on Trimble, ignoring Redfern's impolite suggestion. "And, as I say, it's connected with scouting. Now, you know all about this footling exhibition of Italian pictures we've got to go and inspect at Wayland this afternoon—"

"Excuse me, my fat friend!" interrupted Contarini, eyeing the cheerful Falstaff with a distinctly hostile eye.

Trimble coughed.

"Sorry, I'd forgotten you were a blessed Italian, Contarini. Come to think of it, of course, it's your pater who's in charge of the rotten things—I mean the things!" corrected the fat junior hastily. "Anyway, the Head's told us we've all got to go to Wayland this afternoon and see 'em, hasn't he?"

"Well, what of it?" asked Tom Merry impatiently.

"Don't hurry a fellow, Tom Merry. The point is this. Although it's not a bad idea, being allowed to cut lessons for once, and all that, it's come as rather a sudden sort of affair to some fellows."

"Sudden?"

"I mean the expense of fares and so on. Suppose you know we're to go to Wayland on our own, and report to Kildare when we get there?"

"Hadn't heard it, but I suppose it drifted through somebody's keyhole as you've got hold of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts! Well, anyway, to cut a long story short, I know a chap who's in an awful stew about it because he hasn't got the fare. I'm relying on your confidence, mind you, you fellows. He'd be awfully upset if it got about."

"But—but—"

"What the merry dickens are you worrying about?" asked Redfern, in astonishment. "First time I've ever known you to bother about other people's troubles!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Redfern—"

"But the chap can easily borrow five bob from someone else in his Form, can't he?" suggested Figgins.

"That's just where the snag crops up," said Trimble sadly. "An ordinary fellow, of course, wouldn't hesitate. But this particular fellow I'm telling you about is a fellow with rather high standards of conduct. The fact is, he's too proud to borrow, in the usual sense of the word."

"My hat!"

"Bit of a problem, isn't it?" said Trimble, with a podgy grin. "Now, turning it over in my mind, I came to the conclusion that this was just the sort of job for you Scouts to tackle."

"Us?"

"You!" nodded the Falstaff of the Fourth. "Why not? All Scouts are supposed to do at least one good turn every day, ain't they?"

"That's so. But—"

"Well, now's your chance!" grinned Trimble. "Have all you chaps done your good turn yet?"

"H'm! I tried to reform Knox this morning," said Tom Merry. "I thought perhaps he might see the error of his ways if I set a booby-trap for him, though whether I shall succeed or not remains to be seen!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Trimble snorted.

"Call that a good turn? Can't be done! No; the fact is, you chaps haven't done a good turn to anybody to-day, so far. Now, I'm giving you the chance. This noble fellow I've told you about—"

"But who is he?" demanded Figgins.

"H'm! I can't very well divulge his name, Figgy. But every word of what I'm telling you is true. Here is this high-minded chap, dreading the coming of the afternoon because he hasn't the 'oof' for his rail-fare, yet too proud to borrow from another chap—"

"Here, draw it mild, Trimble!" protested Tom Merry, with a laugh. "If it's true that one of the fellows is short of cash, then I dare say we can raise a loan between us to tide him over. No need to turn dramatic over it. I'm all right for half-a-crown, to begin with."

"Same here!" grinned Redfern.

"I, also!" said Contarini.

Trimble smiled.

"Oh, good! Then if you'll hand over what you can spare—"

"Eh?"

"I say, if you'll hand over what you can spare—"

"You'll go and look for the chap in the tuck-shop, what?" said Tom Merry sweetly. "Not this time, old fat bean!"

"Look here—" said Trimble, his smile vanishing suddenly.

"Tell us the name of this chap who's hard up, and I'll see that he gets enough to cover his exes. for the afternoon."

"I can't! It's—it's confidential, you see!"

Tom Merry shrugged.

"Then he can't have it, that's all."

"Look here, Tom Merry, you don't want to put yourself to the trouble of hunting the House—"

"No trouble!"

"If you'll just hand it over to me—"

"Nothing doing! Buzz off, Trimble, and let us finish the meeting."

Trimble hesitated, his podgy face a mixture of emotions. "Look here, you're a suspicious lot of cads, but if you like I'll tell you the name of the fellow. But first, it's got to be distinctly understood that you're lending him the cash."

"Can't promise, he might not deserve it!"

"Beast! Well, I'll tell you his name, anyway, and if you're anything like Scouts, you'll be jolly glad to have the chance of helping him."

"Well, what is his name?" hooted Figgins. "Think we've got the rest of the day to spend listening to your gas?"

"Oh, really, Figgins! Well, his name's Trimble!"

The Scouting Committee jumped.

"T—Trimble?" stuttered Tom Merry. "But that's your name!"

Trimble smiled a somewhat sickly smile and nodded.

"Just so. I'm the chap I was speaking about!"

"M-m-my hat!"

For a moment the juniors were too paralysed to act. Then Tom Merry jumped to his feet.

"Trimble wants us to do him a good turn, you men. The best good turn I can suggest for Trimble is something that will teach him not to be a greedy, swindling young rotter, and, above all, not to waste our valuable time. All agreed?"

"Oh, rather!"

Trimble backed towards the door.

"Look here—" he said feebly.

"Collar him!"

"If you touch me—whooop!"

"Three of the best!" grinned Figgins. "All together!"

Bump!

"Yaroooogh!"

Bump!

"Yooooop!"

For the third and last time, Trimble's anatomy and the hard, unsympathetic floor came into violent collision, and again Trimble's unmusical howl reverberated through Study No. 10. Immediately after, six pairs of hands helped to speed the parting guest, and achieved the speeding process so successfully that Trimble finished up half-way down the passage.

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The door of Tom Merry's study slammed; the sound of a key being turned from inside followed, and the Scouting Committee concluded its deliberations without any more suggestions for good turns from Baggy Trimble!

CHAPTER 2.

Contarini is Puzzled!

"A ND now for a spot of Art!"

Monty Lowther made that remark as he strolled into the main hall of the Wayland Art Gallery with a crowd of other juniors.

The Lower School party had left St. Jim's soon after dinner, with instructions from Mr. Railton to report themselves to Kildare at the art gallery. That done, the juniors were left to their own devices for a few minutes until their guide made his appearance. As Mr. Railton had mentioned, it was hoped that Contarini's father, who had come over from Italy in charge of the exhibits, would be able to conduct the St. Jim's party round the exhibition, and Kildare had gone off to seek an interview with him to that end.

"Funny-looking pictures, if you ask me!" remarked Figgins of the New House, after a cursory look at one or two of the famous Old Masters that were on view. "Look at that fat johnny in the top picture over there—almost as fat and ugly as Trimble!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"By the way, where is Trimble?" asked Tom Merry, looking round the crowd for a sight of the Falstaff of the Fourth.

"Buzzed off as soon as the roll was called," grinned Lowther. "I don't know, of course, but if I were given one guess I should say he was in the bunshop opposite the station."

"Not much question about that. Well, what do you think of the pictures?"

"H'm!"

Most of the juniors were not quite sure what they thought of the pictures.

"They're all Old Masters are they, Contarini?" asked Manners, who was better informed on matters artistic than his chums.

"Not all, my friend. Some are quite modern; one or two are the work of living artists, but for the most part these are, as you say, Old Masters."

"How the thump can they be Old Masters when some of them are women?" demanded Herries, in naive surprise.

Contarini smiled.

"Ha! You misunderstand. The Old Masters are the artists who painted them."

Herries glanced at the Old Masters rather critically.

"Bit old-fashioned, some of them, aren't they?" he ventured.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I am surprised at your confessin' to ignorance of such elementary mattahs, Hewwies!" remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Are you not awah, dear boy, that some of these pictures were painted four hundred yeahs ago?"

"My hat! Lasted well, haven't they?" commented Herries. "Wonder they thought them all worth keeping!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My friend does not see with the eyes of the artists," said Contarini, with a smile. "Perhaps he will be more impressed if I tell him that the collection of pictures on show to-day have been valued at one million English pounds."

"Phew!"

"A—a million quid, did you say?" stuttered Herries.

"Yes!"

"Ye gods! Mean to say there's anybody alive so potty that he'd give a million for this lot?" demanded Herries.

"Many collectors in America would pay considerably more."

"Well, my hat! That takes the biscuit!"

Herries, in his blunt way, was voicing the opinion of more than one in the crowd. The St. Jim's visitors, in most cases, had not reached the age for appreciating Art very deeply, and the pictures did not strike them as particularly wonderful. Why anyone in his sane mind should be willing to pay a million pounds for them was a complete mystery.

That extraordinary and inexplicable circumstance did, however, achieve the result of stimulating their interest in the exhibits, and they puzzled over individual pictures for longer periods than they might otherwise have done. Which perhaps advanced their æsthetic ideas a little; and on the other hand, perhaps, did nothing of the kind.

Contarini went round with Tom Merry and his chums,

Even as Baggy Trimble opened his mouth to shout, sinuous hands were at his throat—almost strangling him!



giving them the benefit of what little he knew about the pictures, many of which he had seen before in the museums and art galleries of his native land.

From time to time the olive-skinned Italian junior glanced back to the swing-doors leading to the entrance-hall, where they had left Kildare inquiring for Signor Contarini. Tom Merry followed his glance, and smiled.

"Expecting to see the pater, Contarini?"

Contarini nodded.

"I hope so, Merry. I have, of course, already seen him when he first came to Wayland last week, but he has not been to the school to see me."

"Expect he's a busy man. Bit of a responsibility, too, having charge of a collection of pictures valued at a million," remarked Tom.

"My hat, yes! It's a wonder he doesn't have to contend with a lot of burglars and crooks, with prizes like these knocking about," said Clive.

Contarini nodded.

"There are criminals—plenty of them—who would stop at nothing if they saw a way of stealing the pictures. My father has to be on his guard all the time against these miscreants. If any of the works of art were lost he would be disgraced for life."

"My hat! Rotten job for the old chap! Hallo!" Digby broke off and looked towards the swing-doors. "Here comes Kildare, and your pater, too, if I'm not mistaken, young Contarini."

Contarini glanced round and smiled.

"Yes, that is my father."

The Italian junior made his way through the crowd, and advanced towards the newcomers.

The juniors glanced curiously at Contarini's father, whom they had not seen before. He was of medium build, and his dark, neatly-trimmed beard and moustache and vaguely un-English clothes gave him an unmistakably Continental appearance.

He seemed to be unaware that his son was approaching him until Contarini was level with him. Then he looked up with a start. From the distance the juniors could not hear what words were exchanged between the two. They could only judge what was happening by appearances. What they saw, however, was sufficient to tell them that the meeting between Contarini and his father had produced a very unexpected result.

It was all over in a second or two. Contarini advanced, smiling, with hand outstretched in greeting to his father.

Mr. Contarini started, then, ignoring his son completely, turned to Kildare, muttered something to him, and turned on his heel.

The whole incident was over almost before the onlookers had grasped that there was anything wrong about it. As Mr. Contarini rapidly walked away and disappeared through the swing-doors, however, there was no room left for doubt that the juniors had been witnesses of an incident that was, to put it mildly, rather peculiar.

Contarini himself was left standing, with arm still outstretched, staring after the retreating figure of his father as though he could not believe the evidence of his own eyes.

Kildare was looking first at one and then at the other, quite evidently surprised at what had taken place.

"Something wrong, there," remarked Tom Merry. "See what happened, you men?"

"Looked to me as if old Contarini deliberately cut his own son," said Jack Blake.

"Bai Jove! That's pweicely what I thought myself." "No affair of ours, I suppose; but it seems funny," said Tom, with a frown. "Let's get over."

The captain of the Shell led the way.

As the juniors drew near they heard Kildare speaking.

"Your father seemed to act rather strangely when you came up, Contarini."

Contarini bit his lip and nodded slowly.

"It is strange. I cannot understand. For what reason should my own father turn away from me—so? Ah, Tom Merry! You saw it? And you others also?"

"Couldn't help it, old bean! Have you done anything to upset him?"

"Nothing," said Contarini decisively. "The last time I saw my father he was most affectionate. He promised to come and see me at the school, but has never done so. And now he ignores me. I cannot understand."

The Italian junior looked from Tom Merry to Kildare with deeply-troubled eyes.

Kildare patted his shoulder encouragingly.

"Don't worry, Contarini. You must remember your father has great responsibilities here, and no doubt lots to worry about. Something important must have occurred to take him away at that moment."

"Perhaps that is so. But my father spoke to you, Kildare?"

Kildare nodded.

"He asked me to go back to see him in his private office. I'll go now, and probably clear up the mystery right away." And Kildare went off.

He was back again in a few minutes, accompanied by a uniformed guide, and by the cheery smile he gave Contarini, the juniors judged that he had good news.

"You have seen my father?" asked Contarini.

"Yes. It's quite O.K., kid. He apologises for having to rush away. As I guessed, the reason was that he suddenly remembered some urgent work he had left unattended. The guide here is going to take us round the exhibition in his place and your father hopes to have the opportunity of seeing you later in the week."

"Well, that's put that right," remarked Tom Merry, with satisfaction.

"Yes, that is all right," nodded Contarini.

But the troubled look remained in his dark eyes, and it was still there when the time came to leave the exhibition and return to St. Jim's.

Contarini was not satisfied.

CHAPTER 3.

Wayland!

"BEASTS!"

Baggy Trimble uttered that monosyllable in a tone of disgust.

As Monty Lowther had correctly surmised, the Falstaff of the Fourth had employed the time which should have been devoted to art studies in sampling the edibles in the bunshop opposite the station.

Despite his protestations of poverty earlier in the day, Trimble had sufficient money in his possession to pay for what he regarded as a fairsized feed—in other words, enough to satisfy half a dozen normal juniors. His anxiety to obtain a little more cash had really been anxiety lest he might not have quite enough to satisfy his gargantuan appetite completely.

Having consumed a quite appreciable proportion of the bunshop proprietor's stock, Trimble read a newspaper for a time, and eventually dozed off to sleep.

Next to eating, Trimble liked sleeping. Once asleep, there was no telling when the fat junior would wake up again. So it was not surprising that on this occasion he continued to sleep until the bunshop proprietor found that he was occupying space which might more profitably be occupied by other customers during the tea-time rush-hour.

Awake again, Trimble indulged in half a dozen pastries and a bottle of lemonade just to keep his pecker up, then rolled out into the Wayland High Street, and along to the Wayland Art Gallery, which was but a stone's-throw away.

"Beasts!"

It was after inspecting the Art Gallery and coming to the conclusion that the St. Jim's party had gone, that Trimble made that disgusted remark.

Trimble felt indignant.

After giving Tom Merry & Co. the benefit of his delightful company and entertaining conversation during the entire journey to Wayland, the least they could have done was to have waited for him.

Instead of that, they had gone—gone, as though such an important personage as Baggy Trimble had no existence. It was annoying. Trimble was a gregarious animal, and the prospect of a journey back to St. Jim's on his lonely own made no appeal whatever to him.

"You are looking for your friends, young gentleman?"

The fat junior started as a soft voice fell on his ears in the entrance-hall of the Art Gallery.

Looking round, he found himself face to face with a foreign-looking gentleman wearing a black, neatly trimmed beard and moustache. The gentleman showed a row of gleaming white teeth in a friendly smile. At least, it was evidently intended to be a friendly smile, though Trimble fancied for a moment that there was something unpleasant and a little sinister about it; but that impression, he decided, might have been caused by the black beard.

Trimble nodded in response to the gentleman's question.

"Yes. A big crowd of chaps wearing the St. Jim's cap, like mine. Seen 'em?"

"I have not only seen them, but also spoken to one of them—Kildare, I believe he named himself. But let me introduce myself. I am Mr. Contarini, the father of Contarini of your school. Perhaps you know him, my young friend?"

"Contarini? Why, he's one of my best pals!" declared Trimble, thereby deviating slightly from the strict truth. "Glad to meet you, sir!"

The Falstaff of the Fourth extended a flabby hand for Mr. Contarini to shake.

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"You know my son well?" asked Mr. Contarini, eyeing Trimble narrowly as he shook the flabby hand.

"Sworn pals!" said Trimble enthusiastically. "I'm not snobbish, or anything like that, you see. Some fellows might be down on him because he's only a rotten dago Italian, but I'm not like that!"

Mr. Contarini started slightly, and seemed inclined for a moment to make some comment on Trimble's praiseworthy lack of snobbishness. But he overcame the inclination and smiled again instead.

"Perhaps you will pass a message on to my son for me?" he suggested.

"Pleased to do so, Mr. Contarini. I'm an awfully obliging sort of chap!" said Trimble fatuously. "What is it?"

"I want to see him to-night in Wayland. You understand?"

Trimble blinked.

"To-night? I say, Mr. Contarini, that's rather a tall order, isn't it?"

"I mean early to-night, my young friend—at seven o'clock to half-past seven."

"But he won't be able to get away from the school to be in Wayland at that time—"

"He has not gone back to the school yet," smiled Mr. Contarini. "He and his friends have planned to take tea in the Swiss Cafe in Wayland before catching the train back. I heard them say so as they passed my office."

"My hat! The awful rotters are trying to dodge me!" said Trimble wrathfully. "Look here, sir, I'm going straight to the Swiss Cafe. Sorry I can't stop—Yarooogh! Wharrer you doing?"

Before he had taken half a step towards the street a grip of iron had descended on Trimble's podgy arm, causing him to yell out with pain. Swinging round furiously, he found that Mr. Contarini was holding him and looking down on him with a gleaming smile that quite definitely had something unpleasant about it now.

"One moment, my young friend, if you please!" said Mr. Contarini in his soft voice. "You are going to take my message?"

"Blow your blessed message—" began Baggy furiously; then he stopped. Something had happened to cause him to change his mind. It was something in the shape of a Bank of England note for one pound sterling.

"You will take the message, my young friend—just to oblige me?" smiled Mr. Contarini.

Trimble pocketed the note like one in a dream; then he grinned a podgy grin.

"Right-ho, then, I'll do it!" he grunted. "No need to grab my arm like that, though. Feels as if you've jolly well bruised it."

"Pardon, my young friend. It was, of course, unintentional," smiled Mr. Contarini. "Now I will give you a card with my private address where I stay in Wayland. You will give this to my boy, and ask him specially to call at this address to-night, without fail?"

Trimble took the strip of pasteboard and nodded.

"Rely on me, Mr. Contarini. I'm a fellow of my word, and when I say I'm going to do a thing I do it. You—you don't want me any more now?"

"Not now that you understand what to do. Take care not to fail me, my friend, or it may go hard with you."

"I won't let you down," grinned Trimble. "Anyway, I'd better buzz off now, or I'll miss them. Good-bye, sir! And thanks very much!"

The Falstaff of the Fourth, with a final nod to Contarini's father, rolled off—this time without interruption.

Trimble knew the Swiss Cafe. In point of fact, there was not one establishment in Wayland where tuck was sold which Trimble didn't know! After leaving the Art Gallery he rolled off towards the Swiss Cafe at express speed.

There was no sign of Contarini, or any other St. Jim's junior, however, when he arrived there. If the fellows had been there, they had obviously departed.

Trimble made inquiries of an obsequious waiter.

Yes, a party of St. Jim's juniors had been there for tea. They had departed about ten minutes before Trimble's arrival. An Italian boy? Yes, the waiter remembered him very well, being of the same nationality himself.

Trimble thought it probable that he would be in time to catch them at the station before the train left for Rylcombe.

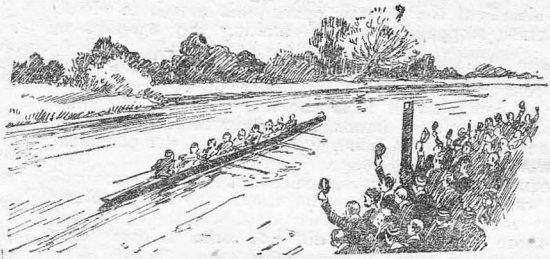
But there was a slight drawback about having to go to the station at this particular time. At least half an hour had elapsed since the fat junior's last meal, and he was beginning to feel peckish again.

On consideration, Trimble decided that in justice to himself he should partake of a snack before going in chase of Contarini. After all, who was Contarini? Only a third-rate Italian, not to be compared in any way with an English fellow like Trimble.

That was how Trimble looked at it, anyway, and the thought was sufficiently inspiring to induce him to stay on at the Swiss Cafe and "blue" quite a large proportion of

I ROW IN THE BOAT RACE!

By a "Varsity Blue."



MY greatest ambition when I went up to Cambridge was to obtain my "blue" for rowing. I knew that a place in the University eight was not easily gained, and that of all athletic honours, the blue riband of the rowing world is the most eagerly sought after. But I determined to win the coveted "blue," or perish in the attempt.

Hardly had I settled in my rooms than a member of the college boat club called upon me, inquiring if I intended to row. Intended to row? What a question! Of course I did. Whereupon, I was told to report next day for "tubbing" practice.

Never shall I forget that first practice in a "tub": the tub, by the way, is an ordinary beamy dingy, in which I and another "fresher" resolutely strove to hold an oar, keep a straight back, come forward slowly, get our legs down, shoulders over, and hands away smartly under a running fire of criticism.

That practice was enough to make me wonder whether I should ever succeed as an oarsman. But I stood up to it as best I could, until eventually I was transferred to an "eight."

The Next Stage—the "Eight."

The first outing of that raw "eight" on fixed seats was a harrowing experience. I felt sore for days afterwards! But gradually I became accustomed to it, and was soon taking part in novice races held between the various college clubs.

In January, the "Lent" races are held at Cambridge, and I was lucky enough to be allotted a place in one of the "eights." I felt that now I

was well on the way to fulfilling my ambition.

For several weeks before these races I went into strict training.

In May I found myself transferred to a sliding-seat, and discovered, too, that I had still a great deal to learn. But I was dead keen, and managed to squeeze myself into my college first boat. We were lucky enough to go "head of the river" in the subsequent May races, and so I was privileged to wear a May blazer, and a coveted Leander scarf.

The Chance!

At the end of my first year my captain told me that I was shaping well, and that if I kept on in the same way, and with the same enthusiasm, he would have no hesitation in putting up my name to the authorities as worthy of a place in the 'Varsity trial "eight."

That word of encouragement bucked me considerably, and I set to work with renewed energy and enthusiasm. At the end of another year I was given my chance, as I had been promised. I was chosen to take a position in one of the two 'Varsity trial "eights."

I must have shaped quite decently during practice, because I was selected to row in the University trials at Ely, thus assuring myself of a "Trial" cap, an honour second only to the coveted "blue."

Then came January, and the selection of the men who were to represent the University in the Boat Race in April. My heart thumped with apprehension. I knew that there were only four or five seats available for newcomers, the remainder being

filled by old "blues" still in residence, and I wondered if I was to be passed over for this year, perhaps for ever!

To my delight, however, my fears were groundless. I was chosen for a place in the 'Varsity boat during trial practices.

Hard Training—and the Race!

Then followed a period of hard training, and still harder practice. Rain, hail, blizzard, snow, nothing deterred us. Truly we lived laborious days. And all the time I was wondering whether I should croak at the last moment, whether measles or influenza or even a common cold would rob me of success.

At last the morning of the Boat Race dawned. I could scarcely believe that I was a member of the 'Varsity eight. It seemed too good to be true. All the morning I wandered about feeling in a blue funk, and when I paddled, in common with my colleagues, out to the stake post which marks the start I felt like nothing on earth.

Then we were away, and I forgot my troubles, forgot everything save that I was a machine, a rowing-machine, that my back was broken before we were half-way to Mortlake, that my legs were shattered, and that my muscles were crying out in agony. But I stuck it. I rowed on.

At last the race was over. I fell over my oars, a physical wreck, past caring what had happened, or who had won. It was only when news came that we had beaten our rivals that I sat up! We had won, and I was a "blue" at last!

the cash which the third-rate Italian's father had bestowed on him.

By the time he shook the dust of the Swiss Cafe from his feet Trimble was breathing rather hard, and looking shiny and completely satisfied.

He rolled across to the station and discovered that the last of the St. Jim's contingent had gone, and that there was not another train for half an hour.

Then he bethought himself of Mr. Contarini, and scratched his podgy chin reflectively.

The remembrance of Mr. Contarini's last words brought a worried frown to his forehead. Trimble's memory was not very retentive, but he remembered the warning that it would go hard with him if he failed. He hadn't quite liked the look on Mr. Contarini's face just then.

It was a little difficult to know what to do in the circumstances. Of course, it wasn't his fault that he had missed Contarini—obviously not. But the beast—meaning, in this instance, Contarini senior—might imagine that it was, unless some kind of explanation was forthcoming.

Perhaps it was advisable to trot along to the address given on the card and explain that he had been unable to locate Contarini, in spite of tremendous efforts. He had half an hour to spare; and by doing that he would be putting himself right with that somewhat sinister father of Contarini's.

Trimble glanced at the card. The address printed thereon was "27, Windcote Avenue, Wayland." He knew Windcote Avenue. It was in the residential part of the town; a quiet turning, not more than half built on yet.

Of course, it was an awful nuisance having the fag of walking there. But Trimble, remembering again that un-

pleasant look on Mr. Contarini's face, decided that he would feel better if he explained matters before returning to St. Jim's.

He rolled out of the station towards the residential part of the town.

Wayland was not a big town. Five minutes from the station, and Trimble was walking in quiet, unfrequented streets where the only sound to be heard was the sound of his own footsteps.

He saw Windcote Avenue in the distance, its occasional villas mostly hidden by trees. The only human beings in sight were two men standing beside a motor-car drawn up at the side of the road. Trimble did not give them a second glance.

Rather strangely, however, the two men gave Trimble a second glance.

Then a quick look passed between them.

They were not of a type frequently seen in the residential part of a quiet Sussex town like Wayland. Their olive skins and dark, flashing eyes would perhaps have seemed less strange in the sun-baked street of some town in Southern Europe. Baggy Trimble, however, was not observant enough to notice anything unusual about them. He rolled on, regardless.

The fat junior reached the corner and made to turn into Windcote Avenue.

He had not completed the first step before a soft pattering of footsteps on the pavement behind him fell on his podgy ears.

Trimble looked round.

Simultaneously, two dark figures rushed upon him.

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The Falstaff of the Fourth opened his mouth to shout. Sheer terror stopped him from making any attempt to escape.

But even as the cry rose to his lips, sinuous hands were at his throat, choking—almost strangling him.

Trimble's senses swam from the fear he felt. He knew that strong, relentless hands had whipped him off the ground and that he was being carried across the pavement to the waiting car.

Then came the roar of an engine. Trimble dizzily realised that he was in the car, and that they were racing along a country road to their unknown destination.

And those sinuous hands did not once release their deadly, throttling grip.

CHAPTER 4. Very Peculiar!

BAGGY TRIMBLE was not a courageous fellow. The Falstaff of the Fourth had a number of attributes. He had, for example, a profound belief in the importance of Baggy Trimble; he was, in a sense, generous—with things which he did not want himself, or which belonged to other people.

Courage, however, was not his long suit. Trimble would have run a mile from a fight and fainted at the mere thought of burglars.

But there is a point where the least courageous are forced to act. That point had been reached in Trimble's case now.

The attack had come with overwhelming suddenness. He had no idea what it meant or who were his captors. But whatever it meant and whoever they were, Trimble was up against it; that obvious fact stood out.

To submit with resignation to what was coming to him was, in the circumstances, impossible. Trimble's imagination was not, as a rule, very keen, but the lurid details of some of the stories of the "Shocker" variety which he had devoured recently, made him imagine all sorts of things.

Trimble pictured himself at the mercy of his captors—being subjected to the most diabolical tortures—and his hair stood up on end.

With the courage of despair, he began to struggle with the dark shadow of a man that was holding him down in the body of the car.

He fought frantically, kicking, biting, and punching wherever and whenever he could.

One bite got home on the wrist of the hand that was on his throat, and a sudden relaxation of his captor's grip, accompanied by a savage oath in some foreign tongue that Trimble did not understand, showed that it had been felt.

Trimble yelled.

"Help! Murder! Police! Help!"

There was a fierce exclamation from the foreigner.

"Silenzio, cane!"

"Help! Murder! Aaaaaah!"

Trimble's shouts died away as the grip tightened again. But terror drove him to fight on still.

A dark, evil face bent over him, and hissing words fell on Trimble's podgy ears.

Trimble could not translate the words—did not know even what language was being spoken. But it was not necessary to have a knowledge of foreign languages to realise the import of that hissing message. He was being threatened—ordered to remain still and silent, on pain of something very unpleasant indeed.

But that was the last thing on earth Trimble intended to do in this emergency. That evil face and the furious foreign words inspired him to greater efforts still. He struggled more fiercely than ever, and more by luck than judgment, landed a paralysing kick on his opponent's shin.

The man fell back in the seat, gasping with pain, and Trimble seized the opportunity to exercise his fat lungs again.

"Rescue! Fire! Murder! Help!" he shrieked.

The second man, who was driving, looked round, at the unexpected cries, and contracted his black brows in a scowl as he saw Trimble.

"Se vi rivoltate, vi uccidiamo!"

Trimble's only response was a louder chorus of yells.

"Help! Help!"

The injured foreigner was reaching out to drag Trimble down again.

At the fat junior's last words, however, he started, and dropped his hands again for a moment.

"Help! Save me!" roared the Falstaff of the Fourth, at the top of his voice.

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"Sapristi!"

The man fairly spat out the sibilant exclamation. With a sharp movement, he grasped Trimble's podgy arm and jerked him back into the seat.

Trimble gave a terrified roar.

"Help! Lemme alone, you——"

"Silence, fool!" hissed the man, lapsing into English.

"You will not be harmed One moment!"

He called out something unintelligible to the driver of the car, who thereupon applied the brakes and drew up at the side of the road.

When he had come to a stop, he turned round, his face the picture of bewilderment. A few swift words from his companion, and bewilderment had given place to dismay.

"Luigi! Questo non e Contarini; e un ragazzo Inglese!"

"Mio Dio!"

"Look here, you rotters," said Trimble. "I don't know what you're talking about or what rotten language you're speaking, but——"

"You no understand us, hey?" asked the driver.

"No, and I don't want to!"

"You are English—not Italian?"

"Me an Italian? I should jolly well think not!" snorted Trimble. "Look here, you rotters, I heard you mention Contarini just now. If you think I'm Contarini, you're jolly well mistaken. I'm Trimble."

A swift glance passed between Trimble's olive-skinned captors.

"You know Contarini, hey, Signor Trimble?" asked the one who had driven the car.

"Yes, blow him! If it hadn't been for his blessed pater, I shouldn't have fagged out to Windcote Avenue to-night to tell him that Contarini had gone back to the school. But look here, what's the blessed game, anyway?" asked Trimble inquisitively. "Have you kidnapped me in mistake for Contarini, or something?"

Another quick glance passed between the two, then Trimble's late opponent answered the question.

"It was, as you say, a leetle joke," he explained softly. "Signor Contarini, he tell us to wait for his son and capture him and take him for a ride in the car, just for the joke of it. He is a great joker, Signor Contarini."

"My hat! He didn't strike me as the sort of chap to go in for japes," said Trimble, in surprise. "Anyway, it's what I said; you've kidnapped me instead of that Italian rotter, Contarini."

"Not kidnapped—took for a ride, just for a joke!" corrected the driver softly. "Now, of course, it is all over, Signor Trimble. You will not be harmed; no need to be frightened."

Trimble, who was beginning to recover his sangfroid again, frowned a little.

"Who said I was frightened?" he asked, blinking loftily from one to the other.

"Ah, no! Pardon, signor! Of course, we see that you are brave, is it not so, Luigi?"

"Yes, yes. The signor is, as the English say, as brave as the lion."

"Glad you recognise it," said Trimble, with a lofty frown. "Now, look here, you fellows. All through you I've lost my train from Wayland, and now I shall be late for locking up, unless——"

"Unless we drive the brave signor back to the school?" suggested the driver.

Trimble nodded.

"Exactly. In the circumstances, it's the very least you can do. Apart from that, of course, I shall expect adequate compensation. I don't know how you go on in Italy, but in a civilised country like England, you can't go about assaulting gentlemen without forking out compensation."

"We pay the brave signor compensation with great pleasure," said the driver, producing a wallet from his pocket. "We geeve him a pound—hey?"

"H'm! Not too generous; but still, I'm easy-going over money matters. I'll take it," said Trimble promptly.

"You will, perhaps, not say too much at your school about this leetle ride?" suggested the driver, as he handed over the pound note. "It is, of course, merely the leetle joke, but others might misunderstand—see?"

Trimble pursed his podgy lips.

"Blessed if I can see why they should! But still, if you want me to keep mum, I will. Now drive to St. Jim's like the very dickens, or I shall be late for calling-over!"

Trimble's hosts seemed anxious now to make amends for their earlier behaviour. The driver, as requested, drove like the very dickens, and the other olive-skinned gentleman spent the time in entertaining Trimble—mostly by the simple process of listening to that fat junior's conversation.

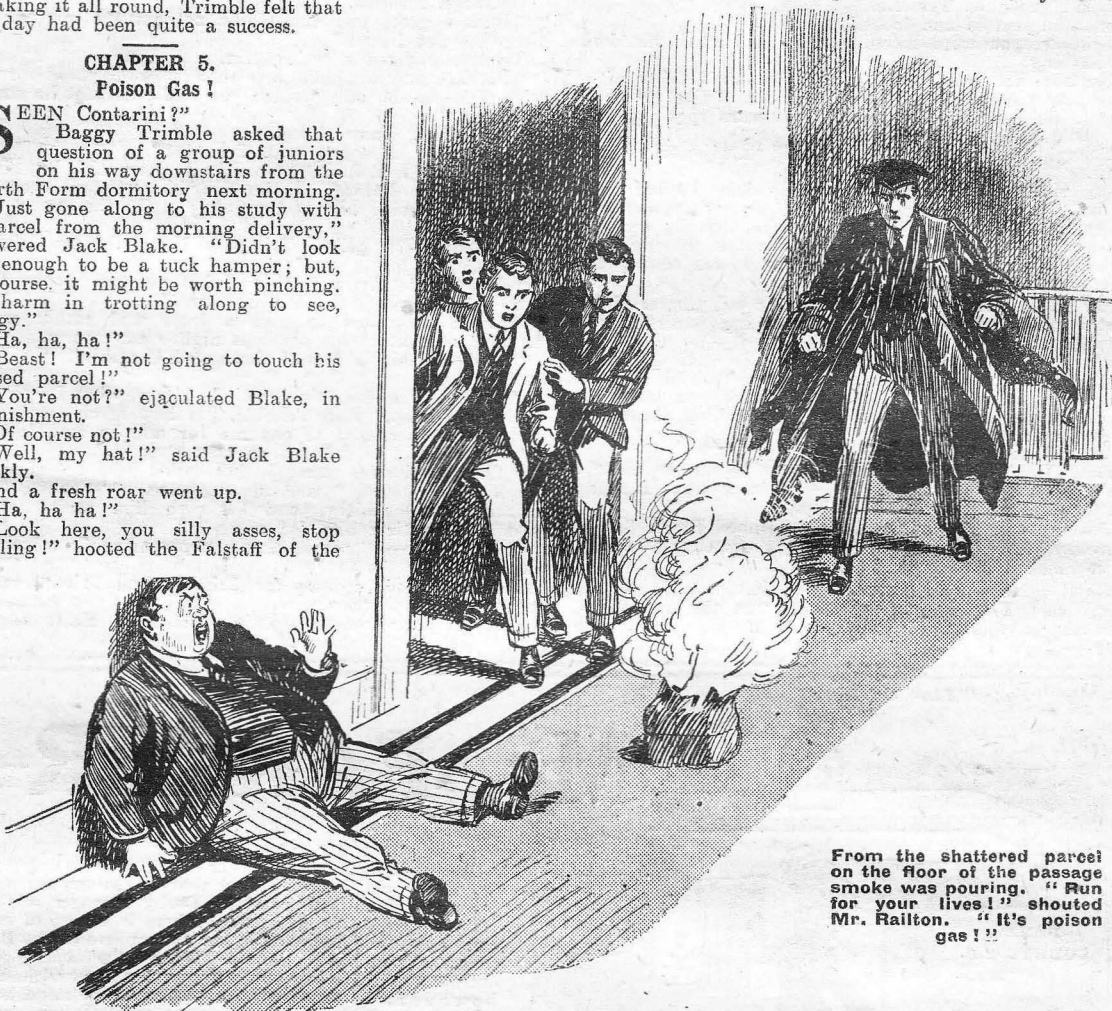
St. Jim's was reached, to Trimble's relief, a minute or so before calling-over. And so greatly had the foreigners succeeded in winning the Falstaff's confidence by that time that Trimble actually shook hands with them on parting.

Probably no other junior at St. Jim's would have been won over so quickly and easily as the fatuous Falstaff, but the pound note had made all the difference in the world. Fortunately for his peace of mind Trimble did not hear the string of furious foreign oaths in which his hosts gave vent to their feelings as they drove away from St. Jim's. He went in to calling-over, feeling at peace with the world. True, his podgy neck still felt a little sore where the Italian had handled him, but the crisp pound note that reposed in his pocket made ample amends for that. Taking it all round, Trimble felt that the day had been quite a success.

CHAPTER 5.
Poison Gas!

"SEEN Contarini?" Baggy Trimble asked that question of a group of juniors on his way downstairs from the Fourth Form dormitory next morning. "Just gone along to his study with a parcel from the morning delivery," answered Jack Blake. "Didn't look big enough to be a tuck hamper; but, of course, it might be worth pinching. No harm in trotting along to see, Baggy." "Ha, ha, ha!" "Beast! I'm not going to touch his blessed parcel!" "You're not?" ejaculated Blake, in astonishment. "Of course not!" "Well, my hat!" said Jack Blake blankly. And a fresh roar went up. "Ha, ha ha!" "Look here, you silly asses, stop cackling!" hooted the Falstaff of the

Trimble felt hurt when he found that epic tale greeted everywhere with scepticism and derision. It quite upset his evening for him, and almost kept him awake when he went to bed—almost, though not quite. In the excitement of relating the story to various incredulous groups of fellows and arguing against their objections, Trimble had forgotten the junior who had been unwittingly the cause of his amazing and incredible adventures—Giacomo Contarini. It was only after he had performed his not-very-extensive



From the shattered parcel on the floor of the passage smoke was pouring. "Run for your lives!" shouted Mr. Railton. "It's poison gas!"

Fourth furiously. "Dashed if I know what you're sniggering at! I wouldn't touch Contarini's blessed parcel with a bargepole. Matter of fact, I'm going to see him on business." "No good. I happen to know he's hard up." "Ha, ha, ha!" "Beasts!" With that, Trimble left the grinning juniors, and rolled off towards the Fourth Form passage. Trimble was not feeling in a very amiable mood on that bright spring morning. One contributory reason was that he had just had to turn out of bed. Getting up in the morning always did upset Trimble for the first hour or two of the day. The other reason was the attitude of the School House towards his adventures with the Italian kidnapers. Both the Fourth and the Shell had treated his thrilling account of the episode, which he retailed all over the House, despite his promise to "keep mum," as a highly entertaining piece of fiction. As related by Trimble the story certainly bore very little resemblance to the truth. According to him the kidnapers had numbered a round dozen—all armed with revolvers and knives. Despite the odds, which might certainly have been expected to make the stoutest heart quail, Trimble had fought coolly and calmly until he had knocked every member of the gang, in his own words, "into the middle of next week." Then he had returned to St. Jim's.

ablutions on the following morning that he suddenly thought of the Italian junior, and decided that he ought to take the earliest opportunity of seeing him. Trimble rolled towards the Fourth passage, wearing a thoughtful frown on his podgy face. He was beginning to feel that it was up to Contarini to repay him for all the trouble he had been put to. It was true that he had received a pound from Contarini's father, and another pound from the jocular kidnapers. But those payments did not altogether absolve Contarini himself from a certain amount of responsibility. After all, if Contarini hadn't belonged to St. Jim's, nothing could have happened. In a sense, therefore, the Italian junior was more responsible than the others had been. That was how Trimble looked at it, anyway. He rolled up to Study No. 7 in the Fourth passage, and tapped on the door. Receiving no immediate answer he poked his bullet head into the study. The three juniors who shared Study No. 7—Dick Roy-lance, Frank Smith, and Contarini—were all at home, standing round the table. Apparently a little discussion was going on—a discussion on a somewhat serious matter, judging by the frowns on their faces. Trimble's eyes wandered round the study and fixed inquisitively for a moment on an unopened postal parcel lying on a chair near the door. The acquisitive instinct which existed in an extreme form

in Trimble urged him momentarily to take that parcel before he was noticed and walk off with it, taking a chance as to whether the contents were worthy of his attention or not. But he overcame the temptation, and looked over to the table where the inmates of Study No. 7 were standing.

"It is strange," Contarini was saying. "I cannot forget it, my friends. Never before has my father treated me in that manner. I could hardly believe that it was he, yet I saw with my eyes that it was."

"H'm!" coughed Trimble.

Contarini started and looked round.

"Trimble, you were listening?" he exclaimed, his dark eyes flashing.

"Nunno; not at all, old chap! Wouldn't think of it under any circumstances!" said Trimble. "I've called to see you on business, Contarini. You were speaking just now about your pater—"

"Thought you weren't listening!" interjected Frank Smith.

"Oh, really, Smithy, a fellow can't help having ears, can he?" asked Trimble argumentatively. "Anyway, it's about Contarini's pater that I've called, funnily enough. You and Roylance know something about it, having been in the Common-room last night when I was telling the chaps what happened—"

"My hat! You haven't come here to tell Contarini his pater's mixed up with that kidnapping business you imagined last night?"

"Oh, really, Roylance, you know jolly well I didn't imagine it! Anyway, I shouldn't be surprised at anything concerned with old Contarini. Didn't care much for the old hunks, as a matter of fact. Something about him—a sort of sly look—"

"What!" roared Contarini.

"Ow! Don't deafen a chap! I mean he was an awfully nice chap for a blessed Italian—that was what I really meant, old chap!" explained Trimble.

"Just as well for you, perhaps!" grinned Frank Smith. "Anyway, fatty, if you've really got something to say, say it quick and buzz off!"

"Good mind not to go on, now; but I will, all the same," said Trimble considerably. "In the first place, Contarini, I wanted to give you a message from your pater—"

"A message from my rather?" exclaimed Contarini, with a start. "But, Trimble, how—"

"He spoke to me when I went back to the Art Gallery and found you all gone!" Trimble explained. "He wanted me to catch you up and give you the message before you left Wayland, but I couldn't do that."

"And the message?"

"He wanted you to call and see him at 27, Windcote Avenue, last evening?"

Contarini frowned.

"It is a great pity that I did not get the message in time, my fat friend."

Trimble grinned a podgy grin.

"Perhaps you wouldn't have thought so if you'd turned up. You see, he only wanted you really so that he could jape you."

The Italian junior stared.

"Jape me? Are you mad, Trimble?"

"No; but I shouldn't wonder if your old boy is!" sniggered the Falstaff of the Fourth. "Fancy a chap's own pater having him kidnapped, just for the fun of the thing!"

"Kidnapped?" yelled Trimble's three listeners simultaneously.

"Just that! Anyway, that's what the two rotters told me. I'll tell you just what happened."

Trimble proceeded to give a fresh and rather more truthful account of his previous night's adventures.

"And all this is true?" demanded Contarini, when he had finished.

"True as I'm standing here. And now, what I want to know, old chap," said Trimble, "is how much compensation you're prepared to pay me for all the trouble and inconvenience I've suffered on your account."

"Thought the fat rotter hadn't called here out of sheer kindness of heart!" snorted Roylance. "Gimme that cricket-stump, Smithy, and I'll give him compensation enough to satisfy him for a week!"

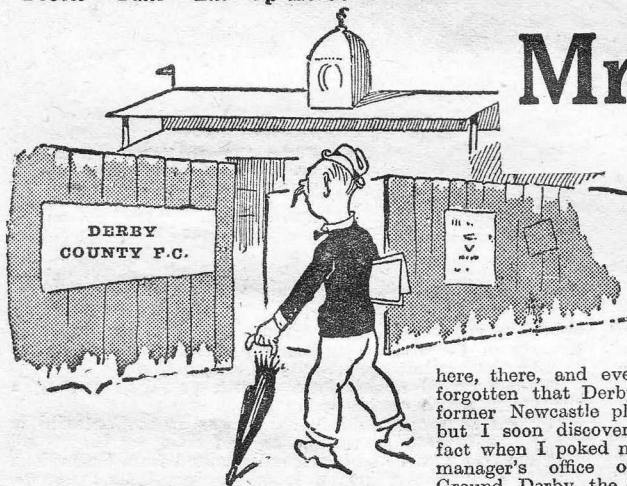
"Look here—" roared Trimble, preparing for a hurried departure.

Roylance made a jump for Trimble, and Trimble made a jump for the door.

The fat junior was outside in an instant. Hasty as was

(Continued on next page.)

Footer "Fans" Line Up Here!



Mr. PARKER—

A Job Going Begging!

POKING my nose into the managerial offices of the various football clubs up and down the country, I have discovered rather a strange thing. This is the surprising number of ex-Newcastle United players who now consider that managerial chairs are comfortable. There's no accounting for tastes, of course, and the managers of a football club is one of the jobs which I have never coveted and which I should never take.

I am in no danger of taking such a job, of course, because it will never be offered to me. For one thing, I have a soft heart, and no man with a soft heart ever made a success of the job of manager of a football club.

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here, there, and everywhere. I had forgotten that Derby County had a former Newcastle player as manager, but I soon discovered this to be a fact when I poked my nose in at the manager's office of the Baseball Ground, Derby, the other day.

The Boss!

MR. GEORGE JOBEY—you have to call them Mister when they get jobs as manager—was not one of the most famous players of Newcastle United in other days. But he did play for them in the old days, and you may take it from me that even if he wasn't one of the players chosen for his country, he has made one of the best of managers. He has a will of his own. When he is boss of a show he bosses it, and the things he has done for Derby County are quite remarkable. Derby are not included among the wealthiest clubs in the land, and I believe it is a fact that since he went to the side as manager Mr. Jobey has made more out of transferring players, season by

season, than he has spent in securing new players. And that is real management.

Because the Derby manager has the big personality: there is a sort of army discipline in the atmosphere of the Baseball ground. When the boss gives orders you can hear the heels click, as it were, and the players don't mind being bossed because they feel that the manager knows.

When I got there the first thing I asked, naturally, was about the chances of Derby County winning the championship. At that particular moment they happened to occupy the top place in the League table. "If we do win the championship," said Manager Jobey, "it won't be out of our turn." He was alluding, of course, to the fact that Derby County had never yet won the championship of the First Division, and he also told me—when I pressed him on the point—that they had not won the English Cup, either.

"However," said Manager Jobey, "if you must write something about Derby County, don't forget that the club holds one record."

Old Steve Bloomer Again!

IHAD forgotten that Derby County had a record opposite to their name, so I asked the manager what it was. "Well, we have been beaten in the final tie by a greater score than has ever been put up against any other club in the English Cup Final." Mr. Jobey was referring, of course, to the

his going, however, it was not so hasty as to cause him to forget Contarini's unopened parcel. As it seemed highly probable now that no cash would be forthcoming from the Italian junior, Trimble had somehow convinced himself that he had a sort of moral right to that parcel.

He leaped through the doorway; and as he leaped a podgy hand shot out and the parcel was whipped off the chair by the door.

Trimble was hopeful that his crime would be undetected.

That hope, however, was not fulfilled.

Even before he had reached the door of his own study, there was a shout from Royslance.

"Your parcel, Contarini! The fat burglar's boned it!"

Trimble heard a rush of feet behind him.

The Falstaff of the Fourth made a frantic jump to elude his pursuers.

What happened seemed like a nightmare.

He suddenly noticed Mr. Railton coming up the stairs on an early tour of inspection. Perhaps it was that that put him off his stroke and caused him to slip. At any rate, he certainly slipped.

Trimble's feet shot from under him.

Simultaneously, Contarini's unopened parcel flew out of his hands and described an arc through the air, to alight with a crash on the floor.

A dull, muffled sound followed—a kind of stifled explosion.

Trimble heard it as he fell, and, deeply occupied as he was by other matters, couldn't help wondering what it was.

He collided with the floor, yelling. Then he became aware of something beside which his other troubles paled into insignificance.

From the shattered parcel which he had taken from Study No. 7, a dense cloud of something that looked like smoke was pouring. As Trimble lay, winded, on the floor of the passage, he caught a whiff of it and turned almost green.

There was a scurrying of feet in the passage, and a buzz of excited voices. Then a cry from Mr. Railton—a cry that sent a shudder of horror through Trimble.

"Run for your lives! It's poison gas!"

CHAPTER 6.

By Whose Hand?

"POISON gas!"

The cry was taken up, and spread like wildfire through the passages and studies of the School House.

Startled juniors flew from the dark, menacing cloud that drifted along the Fourth passage.

Trimble, lying on his back on the floor of the passage, saw it coming, and was too paralysed to move, in the horror of the moment. Fortunately, willing hands were ready to seize him and rush him to the stairs. Contarini and Royslance and Smith were only a couple of yards behind him when Mr. Railton's warning went up, and their first move was to go to the aid of the terrified Falstaff.

Mr. Railton, after hastily tying a handkerchief round his mouth and nose, raced from study to study to make sure that nobody was left, then rushed to the stairs for safety, his eyes streaming from the effects of the powerful fumes which had so mysteriously been liberated.

A babbling crowd surrounded him at the foot of the stairs.

"What is it, sir?"

"Is it really poison gas?"

"May we ask if there is any danjah, Mr. Wailton?"

The Housemaster silenced his questioners with a gesture.

"Silence, boys! There is no need for alarm, but a quantity of gas has escaped in the Fourth Form passage which may be very harmful to breathe. Until I have got the measure of the situation, I must have the House cleared."

"Great pip!"

"Kindly leave the House immediately, everybody, and assemble in the quad for roll-call. Kildare, please have the fire-bell rung, and afterwards call the roll in the quad."

"Very well, sir!"

Kildare went off at the double, while the buzzing juniors flocked downstairs to the open air, as Mr. Railton had ordered.

(Continued on next page.)

POPS IN DERBY COUNTY.

time when Derby played Bury in the last round of the Cup, and were "buried" to the extent of six goals to nothing.

However, that is a page of history which should now be closed.

"I have as good and cheery a lot of lads as you will find anywhere," said the manager. "Players capable of maintaining the best Derby County traditions." This was high praise remembering that such famous players as Archie Goodall and Steve Bloomer have worn the colours of Derby County in the past. I ran up against the one and only Steve when I was at Derby, and he is still closely associated with the club, hunting around for likely local talent. With Manager Jobey he has been responsible for finding a nice lot of lads.

They won't get down in the dumps, either so long as they have Georgie Mee to keep them alive. The other name for Mee, who plays at outside-left, is "Shorty." The excuse for this nickname lies in the fact that Mee is quite short. But his talent, both on and off the field, is in inverse ratio to his size. He has made the Derby County team into the most musical of any with which I have been associated. Georgie Mee can sing any and all the latest songs and when he was at Blackpool he used to do his turn on the promenade for the entertainment of the visitors they get at that popular seaside resort. If "Shorty" can't find anybody to play for him he accompanies himself, and I don't mind telling you that he prefers to do so.

Musical!

THIS was a little reflection on the musical accomplishments of some of the other Derby players; those, particularly, who imagine that they can play the ukulele. There are several of them, and they carry these instruments about with them. They played for my benefit, but I got the impression—though in this I may be wrong—that if they took them on the field they wouldn't need to be such good footballers. Malloch a half-back who comes from Glasgow, says the lads should give up the ukulele for the bagpipes, but I express no opinion on this deep thought.

There are two very good goalkeepers on the books at Derby, Wilkes and Hampton, and I am not so sure which is the best. They are both young, and both good enough to make a name in football before they are finished.

The Defence!

MANAGER JOBEY believes in getting players young, and he relies on his judgment quite a lot. There was once a player with Port Vale, named Tom Cooper. He was only in the reserve team, but Mr. Jobey went to Port Vale and paid what might have been considered a ridiculous price for a reserve man. But since then Tom Cooper has played football for England, and will do so again.

His partner, George Collin, is almost as good a full-back who once tested the sea air at Bournemouth before getting

fixed up with Derby. Jimmy McIntyre is one of those half-backs who, so I was told in jest, typifies Euclid's description of a line—that is something with length, but without breadth. Well, there is certainly the lamp-post effect about McIntyre, but he is the man on the spot so far as football is concerned.

The centre-half is John William Barker and the story of how he was signed on is typical of the methods of the Derby manager. This lad was playing for Denaby United when Mr. Jobey and another manager went to see him. The game had only been in progress for twenty minutes when Mr. Jobey decided that Barker was "the goods." So he asked the secretary of the club to call a special committee meeting at half-time, made an offer, and before the end of the game all was agreed for the transfer of Barker to Derby. Imagine the feelings of the other manager, when, at the end of the game, he wanted to open up negotiations for this half-back.

Why The Rams?

SAM CROOKS, the little outside-right, is another England man in the making, and George Stephenson, brother of Clem of Huddersfield, has played for his country. He was secured from Aston Villa. Joe Bedford went to Derby from Blackpool at the same time as Mee, and he has scored no end of goals for his side. Bob Barclay was also secured as a lad from Scotswood, which club, incidentally, is the one with which the Stephensons used to be associated.

I wanted to put a last question to the Derby players as to why they are called Rams, but I suddenly got an idea that it was because they were so ready to go for anybody who asked too many questions so I butted out.

"NOSEX."

A few seconds later the brazen clang-clang of the fire-bell echoed through the School House, carrying its message of warning to every corner of the building. The passages and staircases filled with excited crowds, all making for the nearest exit, and loudly speculating as to the reason for the alarm.

Most of the fellows assumed that it was simply fire-drill, until the crowds coming from the direction of the Fourth passage enlightened them. Not unnaturally, they were simply staggered when they heard the truth.

"Poison gas?" yelled Tom Merry incredulously, when Jack Blake told him. "Can it, old bean! I wasn't born yesterday!"

"Fact!" said Blake grimly. "Baggy nearly got a dose of it, anyway."

"My hat, yes! I really thought my last hour had come!" groaned Trimble, who was walking along between Contarini and Roylance.

"But—but what the merry dickens—"

"Exactly. That's what we're all saying!" remarked Frank Smith. "Anyway, it's true enough. I was there when it happened."

"I say, you fellows, did I hear Railton say we'd all got to go out into the quad?" asked Trimble.

"Right on the wicket, fatty!"

"But what about brekker?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, it's no laughing matter! I'm jolly hungry, and it's breakfast-time now. What are we going to do about it?"

"Go without, by the look of things!"

"Groooogh!"

And the Falstaff of the Fourth almost collapsed for a second time, while the juniors roared.

Perhaps it was as well that there was something to cause a laugh here and there. In an emergency so unexpected as this there was an element of danger that panic might ensue, and an occasional laugh minimised that danger. The fellows crowded out of the School House in orderly fashion, and without undue alarm, and within a very short space of time a great crowd had assembled in the quad and was being marshalled by Form masters and prefects.

Kildare called the roll, and every man answered to his name. As he concluded, Mr. Railton came out of the House, accompanied by Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's.

"You have called the roll, Kildare?" asked Dr. Holmes.

"Yes, sir. There are no absentees."

"Excellent." Dr. Holmes faced the assembled School House and held up his hand for silence. "Boys! As most of you are by this time aware, there has been an escape of some kind of gas in the House. As a precaution, the building has been evacuated until the police arrive. I am making arrangements for breakfast to be served in the New House as soon as possible."

"Thank goodness!" murmured Trimble of the Fourth, unable to suppress his emotion; and there was a chuckle from those who heard him.

Trimble, for once in his fatuous career, had served a useful purpose by introducing a touch of humour to a not very humorous situation.

A few minutes later a motor-car came buzzing up the drive and drew up in front of Dr. Holmes and the group of masters surrounding him, to disgorge two uniformed constables and a police-inspector, whom many of the fellows recognised as Inspector Skeat from Wayland.

Inspector Skeat saluted the Head and glanced curiously at the crowd.

"Good-morning, sir! You have cleared the building?"

Dr. Holmes nodded.

"Nobody is left there. A very extraordinary business, inspector!"

"Most remarkable," agreed Inspector Skeat. "You say that a parcel arrived which exploded and sent out poison gas?"

"That is what I am informed by Mr. Railton."

"I'll go in and have a look round, then. Would you care to show me the way, Mr. Railton?"

"Very willingly. But I warn you, inspector, that you will be well advised to keep away from the fumes; and there is no telling where they may have spread by this time."

"I must risk that, sir. Follow me, men."

The inspector and the two police-constables followed Mr. Railton into the deserted House.

The crowd waited silently, watching for their reappearance. A sort of sinister aspect seemed to belong to the School House during the period of waiting. The thought of the familiar rooms and passages of the building they all knew so well being invaded by poisonous fumes was one

calculated to upset the steadiest nerve. Even the least imaginative found himself picturing the inside of the School House as it was now—silent and deserted, with some insidious poison creeping through it unchecked.

Mr. Railton and the police-officers were soon out again. Inspector Skeat was looking grim and rather pale, and the spectators could see at a glance that he had received indisputable proof of the presence of the poison gas.

The crowd watched the inspector draw the Head aside and confer with him in low tones for a few minutes.

Eventually, Dr. Holmes turned to them again.

"It has been decided to send for the Wayland Fire Brigade to take over the task of clearing the building of the fumes," he announced, in a voice loud enough to be heard by all. "The House will now dismiss and reassemble in the New House dining-hall for breakfast. Nobody must enter the School House building until the 'All clear' is given."

The Head then gave the signal to dismiss, and the orderly ranks broke up, the fellows proceeding in buzzing groups to the New House building.

Very little work was done at St. Jim's that morning. Classes were abandoned as hopeless, and curious crowds of sightseers spent the unexpected holiday strolling about the quad, discussing the amazing affair and watching the fire-engine which had brought a contingent of firemen from Wayland.

On one point everybody was unanimous. That point was that somebody had "got it in for" Contarini. Why anybody should have gone to the trouble of sending a parcel containing compressed poison gas to an inoffensive junior like Contarini was a mystery. But, whatever the reason, that unknown person had intended the Italian junior harm.

It transpired later that the gas was found, on analysis, to stop short of being actually deadly. A "dose" of it, however, would have been quite strong enough to bring on serious illness, and that was bad enough.

Contarini found himself the centre of attention during the morning. After breakfast, he was called to Mr. Ratcliff's study in the New House for an interrogation by Inspector Skeat and that visit was repeated just before dinner.

"Any news, old scout?" asked Tom Merry, when Contarini reappeared in the quad after this second interview.

The Italian junior shook his head.

"The police say nothing; but I judge by the inspector's manner that he is just as puzzled over the affair as I am myself."

"Can't you think of anything that would throw light on it?" asked Jack Blake.

"Nothing whatever. My father, unlike most Italians, does not concern himself greatly with politics. So far as I am aware, I have no enemies either at home or in England."

"Yet you must have; this bizney proves it," said Tom Merry, with knitted brows. "I suppose it's not possible that—"

Tom halted, as though finding it difficult to translate his thoughts into suitable words. Contarini looked at him sharply.

"Go on, my friend."

"I was just thinking of yesterday, as a matter of fact. The queer way your pater behaved when he saw you, I mean. Kildare explained it, I know, but somehow there was still something queer about it, even after that. I suppose it's not possible that your pater's strangeness had any connection with this affair?"

"My hat! Bit steep that, isn't it?" remarked Blake.

"Perhaps it is. Naturally, I'm not suggesting that your pater had anything to do with it, Contarini. My idea is that he possibly had some knowledge of danger ahead, and felt worried when he saw you. Anything in it, do you think?"

Contarini nodded slowly.

"Perhaps you are right, Merry. I may tell you that I was not satisfied with Kildare's conduct yesterday, and I discussed the affair with my friends Roylance and Smith this morning—just before the poison gas was freed, as a matter of fact."

"But what earthly connection is there between Contarini's pater being a bit off-handed and the arrival of a cylinder of poison gas?" demanded Herries, in his blunt way.

And the juniors had to confess that that problem was beyond them.

With the afternoon came the return of the School House inhabitants to their home, the firemen from Wayland having cleared the building of the noxious fumes.

With the departure of the firemen and the police, things began to assume a normal atmosphere once more. The

excitement, however, remained at fever-pitch all day. Juniors and seniors could talk of nothing else but the poisonous parcel which the morning delivery had brought to Contarini of the Fourth, and speculation was rife as to the identity of the scoundrel who had been responsible for the sending of that parcel.

Speculation, however, did not bring the matter any nearer to a solution. The evening brought only negative news from the Wayland police. It seemed more than possible that the identity of the criminal would never be known—that the mystery would remain a mystery always.

CHAPTER 7.

Vanished!

SQUAD, 'shun! R-r-r-right turn! Quick march!" Tom Merry, attired in Scouts' uniform and his full regalia as patrol-leader of the Lions, shouted out the commands, and the squad of Scouts before him in the quadrangle of St. Jim's obeyed him with military smartness.

Two sections had assembled for manoeuvres in Rylcombe Wood, representing the two Houses at St. Jim's. The School House section, composed of several patrols, was now marching to the woods to take up position there. The New House section, under the lanky patrol-leader Figgins, was due to leave St. Jim's in another twenty minutes, the idea being for as many of them as possible to get through the School House lines undetected.

"Meet you the other side of the woods when we've all got through!" called out Figgins, as the School House contingent marched off.

"Hear, hear!" came a chorus from his followers.

"Rats!" was the answering retort of half a dozen School House Scouts—a retort that drew a frown from Patrol-Leader Merry.

"Silence in the ranks, there!"

"Wight-ho, deah boy!"

"No talking, D'Arcy!"

"No feah, deah boy!"

"I said no talking!"

"Quite so, deah boy! I was merely assuwin' you that I was not goin' to talk."

"Then what the thump are you doing now?"

"Marchin', deah boy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The leader of the Lions gave it up.

The venerable figure of Dr. Holmes, the headmaster of St. Jim's, came into view as the School House Scouts marched down the drive towards the gates. Dr. Holmes made a sign to Tom Merry, and Tom brought the Scouts to a halt before him.

"You are spending the afternoon scouting in the woods, I believe, Merry?" inquired the Head.

"Yes, sir."

The Head nodded approvingly.

"An excellent variation from the usual games programme. I wish you all a very enjoyable afternoon, boys."

"Thank you, sir!" chorused the juniors respectfully.

The Head's eyes rested for a moment on Contarini.

"Before you set out I should like to utter a warning.

The events of yesterday are still fresh in our minds, and we are all unhappily aware that some dastardly person is at large who, for an unimaginable reason, has already made a treacherous attack on one of your number."

Contarini flushed, conscious that many curious eyes were on him.

"It is not my wish to curtail your liberty unnecessarily," said the Head mildly. "For that reason I am not interfering with the programme you have arranged. I must request you, however, to remain within easy reach of one another; it is unnecessary for me to say why. I may trust you, Merry, to see that this is done?"

Tom Merry nodded

"Certainly, sir. We shall spread over the woods in open formation, but we shan't be more than a few yards apart at any point. I will take special precautions in the case of the chap you mean, sir."

"Very well. That is all, Merry."

The Head, with a nod, went his way, while the Scouts continued their march, rather sobered by the Head's warning.

It was a pleasant march down the Rylcombe lane to the woods, and the Scouts enjoyed every step of it.

One incident occurred during the march, however, that nearly brought about a tragedy. Just before the woods were reached the squad was passing through a part of the lane where there was a bend considered rather dangerous by motorists. Usually pedestrians could rely on wheeled traffic slowing down until the bend was passed. On this occasion, however, there was an exception to the rule.

It was a big saloon car, and the juniors were hardly conscious of its approach before it was upon them.

It flashed round the bend, in the middle of the road, making straight for the School House squad.

Tom Merry gave a yell.

"Quick—into the hedge!"

It was a case of jumping for life. The orderly ranks broke up in wild confusion, and there was a desperate rush for the shelter of the hedge.

The car roared on for a second or two; then, with a screeching of brakes, skidded across the width of the lane almost on top of the scrambling juniors.

It was touch-and-go; but, luckily, all were able to jump out of the way in time. Tom Merry, from the other side of the road, looked anxiously across to assure himself that there were no injuries. Having seen that all was well, he ran towards the car, his face white with anger.

"Stop!"

The patrol-leader's voice rang across the leafy lane which had almost witnessed a complete disaster.

From the other side a crowd of dishevelled and indignant Scouts came swarming out of the hedge, also making for the car.

The car had stopped momentarily, and the juniors could see the occupants. They were three in number—two in the back, and the driver in front. All wore black soft hats pulled well over the eyes so that it was a matter of difficulty to distinguish their features very well; undoubtedly, however, they were of foreign appearance.

The St. Jim's juniors imagined from the fact that the car had stopped that it was the intention of the foreign-looking occupants to see the thing through and at least offer some kind of apology.

But there they were mistaken.

(Continued on next page.)



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The car halted for a few seconds only; then came the throbbing sound of the engine as the self-starter operated, and the car leaped forward again.

The interval had been the briefest possible. In those few seconds, however, an incident which was afterwards seen to be of great significance had occurred.

As the Scouts swarmed back to the road they saw the two men in the back of the car looking at them through the window. Then one of them pointed a finger, and two pairs of gleaming eyes were fixed for a moment on one particular Scout.

That Scout was Giacomo Contarini.

Another instant and the car was accelerating.

Tom Merry and his followers rushed after it, but it was already beyond their reach. It vanished round the bend and was lost to sight. The Scouts gave up the chase, and formed up in the road again, their faces angry and disturbed.

"The rotters!" said Tom Merry, gritting his teeth. "They might have killed half a dozen of us outright at the speed they were going."

"Bai Jove! People like that weally ought to be in pwison," remarked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy seriously. "By the way, Tom Mewwy, did you notice anythin' stwange just then?"

Tom Merry shot a glance at Contarini and nodded.

"I think I know what you mean. One of the fellows at the back pointed out one of our chaps to his pal."

D'Arcy nodded.

"Just what I thought, deah boy. I don't want to alarm anybody, but I wathah fancy the chap he was pointin' out was Contawini."

"You aro right, my friend," joined in Contarini in his soft voice. "I saw it myself. What is more, I could tell that those men in the car were Italians."

"My hat!"

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment; then Tom Merry spoke.

"Think we'd better abandon the manoeuvres? I'm willing, for one."

"Rests with Contarini," said Digby. "What's he got to say?"

The Italian junior smiled.

"I certainly do not wish the afternoon spoiled, my friends. I insist on going on. I am not afraid."

"Well spoken!" said Jack Blake. "All serene, Tommy?"

"Carry on, then!" nodded Tom Merry. "But I don't mind telling you I'm not very keen after that little bizney just now. I'm going to keep a jolly careful eye on you this afternoon, Contarini!"

"Please do not worry, my friend. Let us get to the woods, or Figgins and his men will be through before we have a chance to stop them."

Tom Merry saw wisdom in the Italian junior's words, and hurriedly gave orders for his men to fall in again and resume the journey at the double.

They arrived at the woods without further mishap, and, in accordance with their prearranged plan, spread out across the woods in extended formation.

Tom Merry saw to it that Contarini did not get beyond his range of vision during the early part of the manoeuvres. The leader of the School House Scouts felt considerably worried over the Italian junior, and did not feel like leaving anything to chance.

It was not to be expected, however, that the entire afternoon would pass without his relaxing his watch. Other things, naturally, claimed his attention; the New House fellows were advancing, worming their way through the thick undergrowth and long grass, seeking to get through the School House lines without detection.

Two or three New House men were captured, and after operations had been in progress an hour, word reached Tom Merry that Blake and D'Arcy between them had succeeded in making a prisoner of Figgins, the leader of their opponents. As time went on, however, it became clear that a good proportion of Figgins' followers must have passed through successfully.

Tom Merry decided to pass the word along the extended line to fall back a hundred yards or so on the chance that they might thereby rope in one or two strays.

He signalled to Contarini, telling him to give the word to the next man. The Italian junior nodded and plunged into the undergrowth that separated him from Herries.

A few moments later, Tom Merry started.

A faint cry had come from the direction in which Contarini had disappeared. It might easily have been the cry of one of the wood-pigeons which abounded in that part of the country; on the other hand, it might have been the cry of a human being.

Tom jumped to his feet from his hiding-place behind some bushes. The fact that thereby he might be the means of a New House Scout getting through, hardly occurred

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to him now. One question only was in his mind. Was Contarini safe?

He made a megaphone of his hands.

"Contarini! Contarini!"

No answer.

"Contarini!" shouted Tom Merry desperately. "Answer me! Can't you hear me?"

Herries of the Fourth made his appearance suddenly.

"Anything wrong?" he called out.

"I hope not. I'm trying to find out. Seen Contarini?"

"Not a sign of him," answered Herries, with a shake of his head.

"It's only a few seconds since he left to give you a



The big saloon car flashed round the bend, making straight for the

message, but after what we know, I'm afraid—" Tom Merry broke off to shout again. "Contarini! Contarini!"

The only answer was the echo of his own voice. Shortly after that, came the sound of other voices as Jack Blake and several others came up to find out what was wrong.

But still no sign of Contarini.

Then came another sound.

It was the soft purring of a motor-car engine, coming from beyond the thick undergrowth into which Contarini had disappeared.

Tom Merry started. Then, as a dreadful thought flashed through his mind, he made a wild rush for the glade which he knew to be on the other side.

Figgins followed him, and after the two patrol-leaders, sensing what had happened, came Jack Blake and a crowd of others.

Tom Merry was the first to break through into the glade. And as he did so, a groan burst from his lips.

He pointed a trembling finger in the direction of a big saloon car which was disappearing into the woods towards the road which lay beyond them.

"Look! That car!"

"Bai Jove! It's the cah that wan into us in the lane!"

"And Contarini's in it!" muttered Tom Merry, between his set teeth. "Follow them, chaps!"

The Scouts broke into a run. But the task was hopeless. Already the car was half-way through the woods to the road, and long before the pursuers had reached the road it had vanished in the distance.

Tom Merry & Co. did their best. They induced one or two passing motorists to go in pursuit, got on the telephone to the police, and also got in touch with the Head on the phone.

But all their efforts were fruitless. Contarini had gone—kidnapped!

CHAPTER 8.

An Amazing Revelation!

"PADRE—father!"

Giacomo Contarini stared in amazement at his father. For a moment, he imagined that he must be dreaming.

A confused recollection of his last conscious moments came to him. He remembered leaving Tom Merry and plunging into the thick undergrowth in the Wayland Woods.



St. Jim's Scouts. Tom Merry gave a yell. "Quick! Into the hedge!"

Then those two men with the soft black hats; he remembered seeing them crouching behind those bushes and starting back. After that, a blow felled him, and a consciousness that something with a faint, sickly odour was being pressed to his mouth and nostrils. Then—unconsciousness.

And now he had awakened, to find himself staring up at the sorely troubled face of his father. What did it all mean?

"You are well again, my son?" asked Signor Contarini, in Italian.

"I feel sick and heavy, father, but that will pass. I think I must have been drugged."

Contarini's father clenched his fists.

"The scoundrels! I can make allowances for their treatment of myself, but why was it necessary to attack my son also?"

Contarini raised himself on his elbow and stared round him curiously.

He was in a small room, containing two beds, a table, and a couple of chairs, though little else in the way of

furniture. There was but one window to the little room—an aperture set high up in the wall—on the other side of which Contarini could see what appeared to be iron bars. Of a door, he could at first see no sign; a closer examination, however, revealed the lines of a door in one of the walls, though there was little enough to indicate it, there being no door-handle or keyhole.

Contarini was a prisoner—of that, there was no doubt. Everything in the room pointed to it.

But in that case, what of his father?

"Father, what does this mean?" asked Contarini, turning sharply to the grave-faced Italian gentleman. "This is surely a prison?"

"The room is a prison, my son, though it is part of a private house."

"Then in that case, you are a prisoner also?"

Signor Contarini nodded.

"You are right, Giacomo—unfortunately. We are both prisoners; prisoners in the hands of villains whom I am ashamed to say are compatriots of ours."

"Then they kidnapped you after they had taken me?"

"They certainly kidnapped me, but you are wrong over the times, Giacomo. You have been here but for a few hours, whereas I have been their prisoner for days."

Contarini started.

"Days? But—but—"

"Surely my disappearance has been noticed?" exclaimed Signor Contarini.

The St. Jim's junior's eyes gleamed.

"Ah! Now I understand! I was suspicious all the time; now I know that my suspicions were only too well founded."

"What are you saying, my son?"

Contarini replied with another question.

"Were you at the Art Gallery the other day when our party came from St. Jim's to view the exhibition?"

"No! It was the day before you were due to come that I was waylaid and brought here."

"And it was not you who saw Kildare and who afterwards turned away from me?"

"Kildare? I know nobody of that name, and I have certainly not seen you in the exhibition," answered Signor Contarini, in astonishment. "Are you dreaming, Giacomo, or—or is it possible—"

He broke off, his eyes staring into those of his son as a sudden thought entered his head.

Contarini nodded.

"You have guessed rightly, father. Somebody is impersonating you as director of the exhibition—somebody who has disguised himself so well that he even deceived me, your son."

A hollow groan forced itself from the art-director's lips.

"Then all is lost—no hope is left!"

Contarini grasped his father's sleeve.

"Do not give way to despair, father! Tell me what has happened. Why has this man chosen to impersonate you and take your place while the exhibition is being held at Wayland?"

Signor Contarini's answer was slow and despondent.

"Because, my son, the gang which has made prisoners of us has planned to take every picture of value in the Wayland Exhibition."

Father and son were silent for some minutes—silent with the silence of despair. Contarini realised now what his father was up against—could see how bad the situation was.

"What I still cannot understand, father," said Contarini, "is why these men should have taken the trouble to kidnap me. With you, it is understandable. Now that you are out of the way, and one of them is in charge, they will be able to arrange for the pictures to be taken where they wish. But in my case, what is their object?"

Signor Contarini frowned.

"It is extraordinary. But stay! You say you saw this man who is supposed to be me when you visited the Wayland Art Gallery. What exactly happened on that occasion?"

Contarini described the events of that afternoon, and afterwards went on to tell of Trimble's adventure, and then of the arrival at St. Jim's of the cylinder of poison gas.

Signor Contarini listened, with a grim face. When the story had ended, he laughed harshly.

"You have solved the mystery yourself, Giacomo. All these troubles, you will note, date from your visit to the Art Gallery. The explanation of them is this: the men who have planned to rob me of the pictures in my charge were unaware until that afternoon that I had a son so uncomfortably near Wayland."

"Ah!" exclaimed Contarini, beginning to understand a little.

"Having made that discovery, it was recognised that your presence put them in a dangerous position. It was only necessary for you to penetrate that man's disguise for

the whole scheme to collapse. Exposure and arrest would follow for a certainty."

"That is so, father."

"Hence, the immediate flight of my impersonator, on hearing you call him 'father.' The danger was too great to permit him to stay; two minutes with you would have ended everything. So he fled."

"I begin to see daylight now," murmured Contarini. "And afterwards—"

"Afterwards, he and his confederates saw that it was essential to the success of their plans to get you out of the way. Your presence was a continual menace to them. So they sent for you to go to Windcote Avenue—which, as it happens, was my correct address—and waylaid your school-fellow in mistake for you."

"And the poison gas was sent to atone for their failure overnight," remarked Contarini slowly.

"Undoubtedly. Their hope was, of course, that you would be incapacitated for a long enough period to enable them to succeed in their designs without fear of your interfering."

"And, of course, their discovery that I was uninjured must have been made accidentally, when they ran into us in the lane. But how did they recognise me?"

Signor Contarini smiled a grim smile.

"One of the men in the car, my son, must have been the man who is impersonating me in Wayland—without his disguise. He must have recognised you, seen that you were unharmed, and seized the opportunity presented of kidnapping you that afternoon."

Contarini drew a deep breath.

"The explanation is complete. I understand everything now. What scoundrels!"

"And with what success they seem to be achieving their objects!" muttered Signor Contarini. "You know what value is placed on those pictures, Giacomo?"

"I know, father."

"Apart from monetary loss, too, the loss to Italy on sentimental grounds will be appalling. Giacomo, I fear that the loss of these pictures means ruin to me."

"But what can we do? Is there no way of escape?"

"None whatever, my young friend!" came a mocking voice from the door.

The two Contarinis looked round, to see the figure of a newcomer framed in the doorway. He was of the same

stature as Signor Contarini of practically the same build, and, to make the resemblance more striking, possessed features that were almost identical with those of the art director. A short, neatly-trimmed black beard, the falseness of which could not be detected, made him the living image of Contarini's father.

Signor Contarini's eyebrows contracted as he regarded his double.

"Scoundrel!" he exclaimed, half rising as though inclined to fling himself upon his captor.

The crook merely bowed.

"Thank you, signor! Please do not come any nearer, or I may be tempted to use this gun which I hold ready for emergencies in my pocket. I came to see if the young signor had recovered. You are all right now, my young friend?"

"I am quite well—well enough to get the better of you before the game is ended!" retorted Contarini.

The eyes of the Italian crook gleamed malevolently.

"You speak brave words my friend, but I may tell you that unless you are a miracle-worker, there is no escape from this room. The one window is well barred, and to drop from it, anyway, is to condemn yourself to a broken neck. The door, you will never move; but by way of additional precaution, I have a man outside in the passage carrying a loaded revolver, who is quite prepared for any

little tricks you are likely to get up to. Your position, you see, is not very encouraging."

"How long are you going to keep us here, you scoundrel?" demanded Signor Contarini.

"Perhaps weeks, perhaps months!" answered the crook, with a shrug. "It is a question of disposing of the pictures and making our escape, you see, signor. Ah! Would you?"

Contarini's father had suddenly flung himself forward. But quick as he was, the other was quicker.

There was a flash and a sharp report, then a groan as Signor Contarini fell, his leg seared by a bullet.

Contarini jumped to his feet, his eyes blazing. But a menacing revolver kept him back.

"Stand back, young man, unless you wish to share the fate of your father. You will find that he is not seriously injured. I aimed with the intention of grazing his leg. I will send a man up later on to see that the damage is not bad, anyway."

Contarini choked.

"You scoundrel! If only I can get you—"

"Pardon!" But I have no time for further conversation, signor!" said the man, with an icy smile. "Addio, signori!"

The door swung silently back into position, and the man was gone.

And the prisoners were left to ponder on the hopelessness of their plight.

CHAPTER 9.

Staggering News!

"WANTED in Mr. Railton's room, Master Merry!"

Toby, the page, poked his head round the door of Study No. 10 in the Shell passage, and made that announcement.

Tom Merry's study was crowded. In addition to the Terrible Three, who shared the celebrated apartment, Talbot and Kangaroo, of the Shell, and Jack Blake & Co., of the Fourth, in addition to Roycastle and Smith, and several others were there.

The juniors were discussing one subject—the only subject, as a matter of fact, that anybody seemed to have discussed at St. Jim's for a day. That subject was the disappearance of Contarini of the Fourth. Twenty-four hours had passed since the Italian junior's disappearance in Rylcombe Wood. During that period the

neighbourhood had been scoured by searchers, professional and amateur alike. The local police had followed up several clues, and indulged in a number of somewhat obscure investigations, so far with results that could be summed up in one small word—nil.

When Toby looked into Study No. 10, the discussion had been centring round the problem of what further steps the St. Jim's Scouts could take in the hope of finding Contarini. Tom Merry was particularly concerned over the unhappy affair. He felt that after the Head's warning the responsibility for the Italian junior's fate rested on his shoulders. That feeling was a very uncomfortable one, and Tom was desperately anxious to get on with the job, somehow, and find out what had happened to the missing Scout.

"Any idea what's wrong, Toby?" asked Tom Merry, after the page had delivered his message.

"Nothing wrong, far as I know, Master Merry. I think it's somethin' to do with Master Contarini. I jest showed his father up to Mr. Railton's room afore Mr. Railton told me to call you."

"Bai Jove!"

"Contarini's pater, eh?" said Tom Merry, his eyes gleaming with interest. "Perhaps he'll be able to throw some light on the mystery. Right-ho, Toby! I'll trot along."

Tom Merry quitted the study and hurried along to Mr. Railton's room.

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In response to his tap on the door, the Housemaster's deep voice bade him "Come in!"

Tom Merry entered.

Mr. Railton was sitting at his desk, and his visitor occupied a chair near him. Both looked up as the junior entered, and Mr. Railton greeted him with a nod.

"Ah, Merry! This is Mr. Contarini, the father of Contarini of the Fourth."

Tom inclined his head to the visitor, and eyed him a little curiously. He recognised at once the man he had seen in the Art Gallery at Wayland. The black beard and olive skin gave him rather a distinctive appearance to English eyes.

The impression Tom received on this, his second meeting with the Italian gentleman, was not altogether a good one. There was a slightly furtive look about the visitor's eyes, which Tom would hardly have associated with the parent of the open-faced Contarini of the Fourth.

"You have called about the—the disappearance of your son, sir?" ventured Tom Merry.

"Precisely. Mr. Railton telephoned me at the Wayland Art Gallery to inform me of the affair. Mr. Railton seems to fear that Giacomo has been kidnapped, and, though I am sceptical that anything so extraordinary has happened, I naturally called to ascertain the facts. What can you tell me, my young friend?"

Tom Merry eyed the Italian gentleman rather sharply. For the father of the junior who had vanished in such mysterious circumstances, Signor Contarini seemed to be treating the matter very lightly.

"I'm afraid the matter is a little more serious than you appear to think, sir," he said. "Unfortunately, there is every reason to think that your son has got into the hands of a pretty unscrupulous crowd of crooks. I will tell you what little I know."

And the Shell junior proceeded to relate briefly the story of the Scouts' afternoon in the woods, culminating in the cry from the bushes and the departure of the saloon car, which had undoubtedly taken Contarini away.

The Italian gentleman listened attentively, his slightly furtive eyes fixed narrowly on the speaker.

When Tom had concluded, Signor Contarini turned to Mr. Railton:

"And that is all that is known, Mr. Railton?"

"That is all, sir, so far as we are aware. Of course, the police are actively engaged in following up all available clues."

A peculiar smile flitted across the visitor's face.

"Exactly. But, really, Mr. Railton, after listening to all you have been so kind as to tell me, and to the story of our young friend here, I still do not feel inclined to take a very serious view of the matter."

Mr. Railton looked a little surprised.

"I am glad that you are optimistic, my dear sir; but I fear that I cannot share your optimism. I am taking into consideration not only the actual disappearance of your son, but also the episodes that preceded it—the arrival of that poison gas, and the encounter which took place between the Scouts and those men in the car."

Signor Contarini made a deprecating gesture.

"It is good to know that you are all so concerned, sir; but I cannot think that my son has been kidnapped."

"Then in what way do you account for his absence from school?" asked Mr. Railton, with a trace of sharpness in his voice.

The visitor shrugged.

"The boy is, as you would say, playing truant—is deliberately absenting himself from school for a few days for the purpose of taking an unofficial holiday."

The Housemaster shook his head decidedly.

"That theory may be dismissed, sir. I wish I could think you were right; but it is impossible. To begin with, the boy was in the uniform of a Boy Scout—which alone would be sufficient to betray him to any policeman he met. Apart from that, I am sure that your son is far too sensible to play such an absurd trick."

The Italian gentleman showed his gleaming teeth in a smile.

"How can we say, Mr. Railton? Is it not an English proverb that 'boys will be boys'? I am far more inclined to believe that he is playing truant than to accept any wild theory about his having been kidnapped."

Mr. Railton bit his lip. Throughout the interview he had found the visitor's complacency a little disconcerting. He was beginning to feel almost a sense of annoyance now. The Housemaster was a cool and sober-minded gentleman, not given to exaggeration, but he seriously took the view that Contarini of the Fourth had been kidnapped. To have that theory rejected in favour of the theory that the missing boy was merely playing truant was not at all pleasant.

"Then you do not wish any further steps taken, sir?" he asked coldly.

"No; not, of course, that it is possible to do much more than has already been done," said the visitor, smiling again—an irritating smile, Tom Merry found it.

"We are, of course, to keep you posted in news?"

"By all means. Telephone me at the Art Gallery if you have anything to report. But I feel sure that Giacomo will turn up safe and sound in a very short time."

"Very well. You may go, Merry."

Tom Merry bade the Italian gentleman a curt "Good-day, sir!" and went.

An eager crowd of juniors still awaited him in Study No. 10, anxious for news. Tom could only tell them that the interview had yielded nothing.

In point of fact, that interview in Mr. Railton's room succeeded only in deepening the mystery, from Tom Merry's point of view. Why the father of the missing junior should treat an obviously serious matter so lightly was at present beyond him. And the other fellows in the Lower School whom Tom took into his confidence were equally at a loss for an explanation.

Another day passed.

There was still no news of Contarini.

The anxiety among the Italian junior's friends did not diminish. On the contrary, with the passing of the hours, they felt more and more worried.

Then came the bombshell.

Trimble of the Fourth was the first to burst into the Junior Common-room with the news. Trimble usually was the first with news of any kind, true or untrue. This time he happened to have secured a sample of the former variety.

That something surprising had happened everybody could tell at a first glance at Trimble.

The Falstaff of the Fourth burst into the Common-room like a whirlwind.

"I say, you chaps—"

"Hallo, hallo! What's bitten you, fatty?"

"I say, you chaps—I say—" gasped Trimble.

"Carry on, Baggy! We've got the first part!"

"I say, you chaps—"

Trimble, who was blowing like a grampus and perspiring

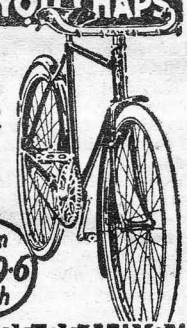
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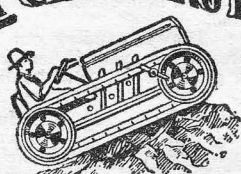
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with excitement, seemed incapable of getting beyond "I say" for the time being. The juniors crowded round him rather wonderingly.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Jack Blake. "Take it calmly and say it one word at a time!"

Trimble mopped his feverish brow.

"I say, you chaps, what do you think?" he hooted.

"Give it up!"

"Let's hear it, fatty!"

"Those pictures—"

"What pictures?"

"The pictures we went to see at the Wayland Art Gallery the other day," panted Trimble. "The Italian pictures they said were worth a million quid, you know—"

"Well, what about 'em?"

"They've gone!"

"Wha-a-at!"

"Gone! Vanished! Mizzled!" roared Trimble. "The whole lot of 'em! A million quid's worth, you know! And Contarini's pater's gone with 'em!"

"Eh?"

"It's the biggest robbery in history! A million-quid robbery—think of that! And old Contarini is the one who did it!"

"M-m-m-my hat!"

The juniors stared at Trimble, dumbfounded.

CHAPTER 10.

Tom Merry works it Out!

TOM MERRY grasped Trimble's podgy arm and shook him roughly.

"There's no mistake about this?" he asked sternly.

"You haven't imagined it all out of some piffing bit of hearsay?"

"Ow! Lemme g-g-go, Tom Merry! Of course I haven't imagined it. You ask Railton!"

"So you got this from Railton's keyhole?"

"Yes—that is to say, certainly not! I did, as a matter of fact, happen to stop a minute outside his room to tie up my shoelace—"

"Same old shoelace?" grinned Jack Blake. "Leave out that part, Baggy, and tell us about these pictures. How did they go?"

Trimble grinned a podgy grin.

"He, he, he! Old Contarini could tell you a tale about that! The police don't know much at present, except that the pictures were packed in a bank lorry and taken up to London. When they arrived, they were found to be all duds."

"Great pip!"

"The papers'll be full of it in the morning," grinned Trimble. "Railton got his information in advance from the Wayland police, but it'll be all over the world to-morrow. Nice show-up for St. Jim's—what?"

Tom Merry frowned.

"How the thump can it be a show-up for St. Jim's, you fat idiot?"

"He, he, he! Mean to say you still can't see through it?" sniggered the Falstaff of the Fourth. "The police have rumbled it, anyway. No wonder Contarini disappeared!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"The pictures, of course!" hooted Trimble. "It's as plain as a pikestaff now that the whole thing was wangled by Contarini and his blessed pater! They're the crooks—a St. Jim's chap and his pater! Nice thing for us fellows, ain't it?"

"Bai Jove!"

The juniors looked at one another with startled eyes. Most of them had liked Contarini, and the thought that the pleasant Italian junior could be associated with a criminal act came as rather a shock. But they could hardly deny that the circumstances were a little peculiar.

"You say the police hold this theory?" asked Tom Merry, whose brow had been corrugated with thought since Trimble's first excited announcement.

Trimble nodded.

"Yes, rather! They're sending out a broadcast description of the Contarini to every police station in the country. Funny to think of Contarini with handcuffs on his wrists—what?"

And Trimble chuckled at that cheerful thought.

Nobody kicked him. The fellows were still too amazed by the news to trouble about Trimble's little ways. They looked at each other, silent and uneasy, waiting for a lead from someone.

The lead came eventually. It was from Tom Merry. Tom suddenly brought his fist down on the Common-room table.

"Ye gods! I wonder—"

"What's bitten you, Tommy?" asked Jack Blake.

The leader of the Shell smiled.

"You must wait until I've sorted out my own thoughts

before I can tell you. It's just an idea, that's all. But the more I think it over the more feasible it seems. One thing I do know. Whatever the police say, I, for one, am not going to believe that Contarini of the Fourth had a hand in lifting those pictures!"

"Hear, hear!" came a murmur from the crowd in the Common-room—a murmur that became quite a shout before it died away. Now that a lead had come, there were a good many juniors who found themselves in hearty agreement with Tom Merry's opinion.

"Bai Jove! I'm with you all the way, deah boy!" remarked Augustus D'Arcy approvingly. "I weally cannot imagine old Contawini consentin' to becomin' a party to such an unscwupulous scheme of wobbewy. I think pewpaws I'll twot along an' see Waitlon on the subject."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, deah boys—"

"Leave it till after, Gus," smiled Tom Merry. "Better come along to Study No. 10 now—some of you other chaps, too—and we'll have a chew over things and see what we can make of 'em. Coming, Kangy? And you, Talbot?"

Kangaroo and Talbot were quite willing to join the committee, and made for the door with the half-dozen others who, as Tom Merry's particular intimates, had already decided to go.

Trimble rolled after them, a somewhat thoughtful look on his podgy face.

"I say, you chaps—"

"Roll away, fatty! No place for you on the committee; you take up too much room."

Trimble snorted.

"Blow the blessed committee! I don't want anything to do with it. But there's something else I meant to say before you went—something about Contarini."

"Buck up, then," said Tom Merry, pausing in the doorway. "Two minutes, and no more. Fire away!"

"Oh, really! Well, the fact is, you see"—Trimble eyed Tom Merry a little uneasily—"I was wondering whether, now that Contarini's done a bunk, you fellows might feel like making up between you some of what Contarini owes me!"

"What!" yelled half a dozen voices.

"Hem! You see, I never said a word while he was here," explained Trimble. "But, as a matter of fact, I was always lending Contarini money. I've forgotten exactly what it amounted to in all—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But it must be a tidy bit—pounds and pounds, anyway—and it doesn't seem exactly right that the burden should fall on one pair of shoulders, does it?" finished up Trimble argumentatively.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry took a pace forward, apparently with the intention of tweaking the fat junior's nose; but before he could fulfil that intention Monty Lowther waved him back.

"Half a minute, Tommy! Something in what Trimble says, after all, and I'm quite willing to help."

"Oh, good!" grinned Trimble. "Even if it's only a pound—"

"Not too fast, old fat bean!" grinned Lowther. "You're asking me to give you something of what Contarini owes you—that it?"

"Just it!"

"Here goes, then!" said Lowther genially. "I consider, after the way you've been talking about poor old Contarini, that he owes you at least a dozen good kicks. I've only time to give you half a dozen—"

"What!" shrieked Trimble.

"But if they're any good to you, you're quite welcome! Turn round, Baggy!"

"Yarooooop!" roared Trimble, as he was twisted round and a heavy boot took him in the rear. "Stoppit, you silly ass!"

"But I'm only giving you something of what Contarini owes you, as you asked. Stand still!"

"Whoooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from everybody in the junior Common-room—with the exception, of course, of Trimble himself.

"Still some more to come. Don't run away!" begged Lowther, as Trimble made a leap for the door.

But the Falstaff of the Fourth was deaf to the voice of the charmer. He shot out of the Common-room and down the passage as though electrified, leaving the onlookers yelling. Lowther did not have the chance of making any more contributions towards Contarini's debt to Trimble.

Tom Merry and his chums then made their way to Study No. 10 in the Shell passage.

Arriving there, they arranged themselves round the room as comfortably as the limited space at their disposal permitted. Tom Merry stood in front of the empty firegrate, his forehead still wrinkled in thought.

"Sorted things out yet, Tommy?" asked Manners.

Tom nodded.

"I think so. The idea must have been there all the time, I think, and just needed this picture robbery to bring it out. Remember that little scene at the Wayland Art Gallery, when Contarini's pater seemed to cut him?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then that's where my theory dates back. Since that afternoon I've seen the man again—in Railton's room yesterday."

"What makes you refer to Signor Contawini in that wathah diswepctful mannah, Tom Mewwy?" asked Arthur Augustus, regarding Tom Merry curiously through his celebrated monocle.

Tom smiled a little grimly.

"You'll see in a minute, old bean. To carry on; yesterday, in Railton's room, I had an opportunity of looking the visitor over thoroughly. I didn't like him. There was something fishy about his manner, and he didn't seem to be affected as you'd expect a father to be affected by the disappearance of his son."

The juniors listened with puzzled frowns on their faces, obviously unable yet to understand what their leader was driving at.

"Well?" said Blake.

"I came away, thoroughly dissatisfied with Contarini senior. And surprised; he wasn't in the least what I had expected him to be. But I think I know why, now."

"And pway what is the weason, then, deah boy?"

"The reason, I believe, is that he wasn't Contarini's father at all!"

Tom Merry's listeners jumped.

"Eh? Say that again!" ejaculated Jack Blake.

"I say he wasn't Contarini's father at all. And the more I think over it, the more I'm convinced of it. It was all a frame-up. Contarini's father ceased to belong to the Italian Art Exhibition days ago—possibly weeks ago. In his place has been masquerading the crook who has got away with the million pounds' worth of pictures."

"But—but Contarini recognised the chap as his own father in the Art Gallery!" objected Manners.

Tom Merry smiled again.

"He thought he did, you mean. That's merely a compliment to the crook's make-up. But we all know that as soon as he heard Contarini call him 'father' he bolted."

"My hat! If—if this wild idea is right, then, that would explain why he did bolt!" exclaimed the Kangaroo excitedly. "He knew that Contarini would rumble him in less than a minute."

"Exactly. Which would ruin everything. So that Contarini of St. Jim's, supposing my theory to be correct, would be the unexpected snag that might easily mess up the scheme to pinch the pictures. See?"

"Gweat pip! And your theowy, deah boy, would also throw some light on the mystewy of who sent Contawini the poison gas; and—and—bai Jove!—on the pwoblem of Contawini's kidnappers, too!"

"Why, of course!"

"Then you're suggesting that both Contarini and his father are the prisoners of the gang of crooks?" asked Talbot.

"That's it, in a nutshell. What do you think of it?"

"Think of it, why, it's great! It's IT; simply must be!"

roared Jack Blake. "Tommy, my boy, you've hit the nail right on the head!"

"Hear, hear!"

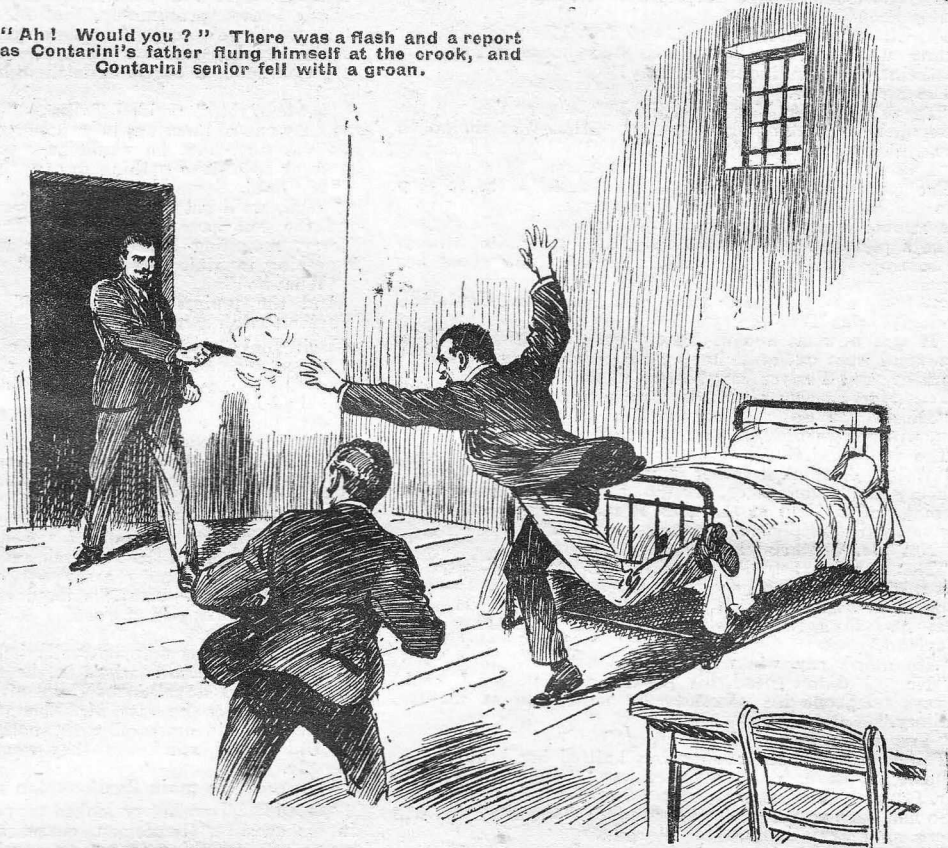
"Bwavo!" chirruped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "The only dwawback is, how are we goin' to pwove the twuth of the theowy?"

"By finding the prisoners," was Tom Merry's grim answer. "And before we stand an earthy in that direction, we shall have to find out as much as possible about the masquerader."

"And to do that?" queried Lowther.

"To do that, we shall have to go to Wayland. What I propose is this: that directly after lessons to-morrow

"Ah! Would you?" There was a flash and a report as Contarini's father flung himself at the crook, and Contarini senior fell with a groan.



morning, we buzz over to Wayland on our bikes and collect all the information we can from the Art Gallery, and then, if possible, from the house where the real Mr. Contarini stayed in Wayland, 27, Windcote Avenue, Trimble said it was. Half of us can do one place and the other half the other. Then we can meet at a central point and decide what to do. All in favour?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Nem. con.!" grinned Kangaroo.

And so it was arranged.

CHAPTER 11.

"SOS"

"TWENTY-SEVEN, Windcote Avenue—and a boarding-house. This looks like it," said Monty Lowther, with a critical glance at the trim villa before him.

It was the day after the meeting in Tom Merry's study, and in accordance with the arrangements, the Shell leader's party had gone to Wayland to make their investigations.

Altogether, there were nine in the party; the Terrible Three, the Study No. 6 quartette, and Talbot and Kangaroo.

The Terrible Three and Talbot had taken on the Windcote Avenue end of the task, while the rest had gone to the Art Gallery.

The juniors looked smart and business-like in their scouting uniforms, and their faces wore serious and determined expressions. They knew that the task they had set themselves was a big one—a task, in fact, which most

people would have regarded as utterly beyond their powers. Notwithstanding that, they had made up their minds to see it through.

"Do we all go in?" asked Manners, as he followed Lowther's example in "parking" his bike against the kerb, "H'm! Perhaps four is too many to go in at once," remarked Tom Merry. "Suppose Talbot and I go in while you two remain here?"

"All serene!"

And Lowther and Manners waited while their leader and Talbot entered the front gate of No. 27, and walked down the gravel path leading to the house.

Tom Merry rang the bell. The ring was answered by a maid, who looked rather surprised at the sight of a couple of Boy Scouts.

The St. Jim's juniors saluted, and Tom Merry set the ball rolling with: "I believe this is the house where Mr. Contarini has been staying recently?"

The girl nodded.

"That's right, sir. You mean the Italian gent that all the newspapers are talking about to-day? Missus had the police round about him last night."

"I wonder if we may see your mistress?"

The maid thought they might, and asked them to step into the hall while she went to inquire.

A minute later, the girl's mistress appeared. She proved to be a pleasant, middle-aged lady, and was quite willing, on hearing their mission, to say what she knew about her departed guest.

"When was the last time you saw Mr. Contarini, madam?" was Tom Merry's first question.

"It was a week ago at least," was the answer. "Mr. Contarini went out after having his breakfast as usual, one morning, and I never saw him after that."

Tom Merry's eyes gleamed. This was a good beginning. "Didn't you think it strange that he should have left you, without warning, in such a way?"

The lady hesitated.

"Well, I do think it rather strange, now that this dreadful robbery has taken place, though I still don't know what to make of it. But at the time it seemed quite all right; his secretary telephoned through, you see."

"Not Mr. Contarini himself?"

"No; I never actually spoke to Mr. Contarini after he left this house; but his secretary phoned, and called several times about letters which arrived here for him. He said that Mr. Contarini was staying with friends outside Wayland."

"He didn't say where?"

"No. I didn't need his private address, as I could always telephone his secretary or write him at the Art Gallery."

"You never suspected foul play?"

The boarding-house proprietress knitted her brows.

"I might have, in the ordinary way, for I never did like Mr. Contarini's secretary. But I heard from other people who had been to the exhibition that Mr. Contarini was still there, so I knew it must be all right."

"Did Mr. Contarini mention his son at any time?"

The lady smiled.

"He was always talking about his son being at St. Jim's. He must have been very fond and proud of him, I should think."

"You know of no reason why he should have dodged young Contarini?"

"I am quite sure that he would never have done such a thing. The last time he spoke to me he was looking forward to meeting his son and some other St. Jim's boys at the exhibition."

Tom Merry ceased his interrogation and looked across at Talbot with a smile.

"Well, what's your opinion?" he asked.

"Looks as if your theory is turning out dead right," was Talbot's reply. "Everything so far goes to uphold it, anyway."

"Just what I was thinking. Can you think of anything I've missed?"

Talbot shook his head.

"I fancy you've covered the ground pretty well, Tommy."

"Then we'll buzz."

And Tom Merry and Talbot, having rendered thanks to the obliging boarding-house proprietress, quitted the house and joined Manners and Lowther outside.

"Find anything?" asked Lowther, as the two came out of the gateway.

"Enough to satisfy me that Contarini's father was kidnapped a week ago!" was Tom Merry's reply; and he then gave Lowther and Manners a brief account of what they had just heard.

"Good enough!" was Lowther's comment at the finish.

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"Then we're on the right track, right enough—must be. The next thing is to find out where Contarini and his father are being held. Some job!"

Tom Merry wrinkled his brow.

"Well, it would be if it were a case of searching all England to find them. But I have an idea they may be hidden more or less locally. In which case, the area of search is narrowed down considerably."

"And why the thump should he necessarily be held locally?" asked Lowther. "I should have thought London would have been a better hiding-place than this neighbourhood."

"In ordinary circumstances, perhaps. But you have to remember that the peculiarity in this instance is that nobody knows, presumably, that Mr. Contarini is missing at all, so there's no need to take special precautions. And as the crooks, whoever they are, are operating in this neighbourhood, it surely suits their book to keep him with them?"

"Quite right!" nodded Talbot. "There's another point, too. As one of them has been impersonating Mr. Contarini, it stands to reason he would have to have the original in hand, or he'd have nothing to copy."

"My hat! Something in that!"

"Well, we'll get back into the town and see what Blake and the rest have found at the Art Gallery," said Tom Merry, mounting his bike. "We want to get going on something tangible this afternoon."

"What-ho!"

And the juniors remounted and pedalled back to the Wayland High Street.

Jack Blake and the rest were already waiting at the arranged meeting-place. By the cheerful expressions on their faces, Tom Merry & Co. judged that their investigations had not been fruitless.

"Any luck?" asked Tom Merry.

Jack Blake nodded.

"I think so. We've found out something that seems to support your brainy idea that Contarini's pater was kidnapped."

"And what is it?"

"Something we got out of the hall-porter at the Art Gallery. We found that, a week ago, the alleged Contarini started walking home in a different direction at night, just as if he'd moved. That fits in, doesn't it?"

"Perfectly. Anything else?"

Blake chuckled.

"Yes. And this may be really helpful. We got it from one of the attendants who's in the habit of dropping into the bar at the Royal Arms Hotel after he leaves here. He says that twice he saw Mr. Contarini get into a saloon car outside and drive off with another dark fellow."

"Did he say which way they went?" asked Tom Merry eagerly.

"Towards the main Southampton road."

"Good!" Tom Merry looked round with real satisfaction in his eyes. "Gentlemen, chaps, and fellows! I think we've got something to act on now!"

"We've only to search every house between Wayland and Southampton, and we're bound to find something!" grinned Lowther.

"Ass! It's not so bad as that. What we've got to look for is a well-sheltered, lonely sort of house where two prisoners could be kept for weeks without any suspicions being aroused."

"Bai Jove! But you forget, deah boy, that the cwooks' object had been attained now, and that they may all be gone—the pisoners included."

"Quite possible, of course," nodded Tom Merry. "On the other hand, if they found a really suitable place, they might elect to take the pictures there and hang out until the coast was a bit clearer."

"Very probable," observed Talbot, in his thoughtful way. "We know that the stuff must have been taken away in the course of the everyday removals that go on at the Art Gallery. It would be better from their point of view to have a short journey with such a valuable cargo than a long one. Anyway, who's for a start?"

"I am, for one," said Tom Merry.

"Same here!"

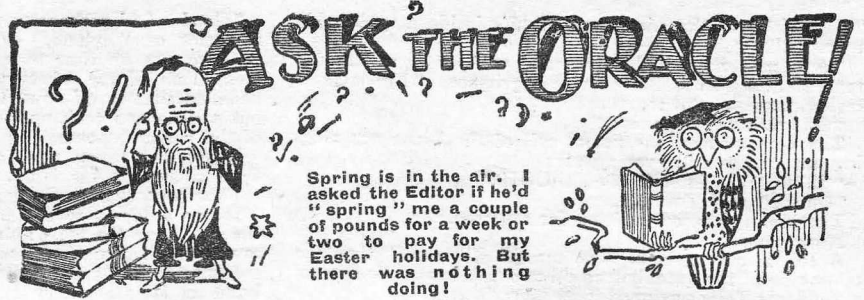
"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then off we go! And keep your eyes skinned all the way!"

The St. Jim's Scouts mounted their bikes once more and pedalled off two deep.

They soon found that they were on an errand that was going to be by no means easy. It was one thing to be optimistic in Wayland, but quite another to find any house in the countryside that could be said at a glance to be the headquarters of a gang of crooks.

Q.—What is a Marmot ?
 A.—Harry Wicks, of Tottenham, sends me this because he "thinks I'm a nut on Natural History." I've certainly got a lot of Natural History in my nut, chum! The Marmot is an animal, and is no relation to Marmite, which, I believe, is something you put on bread. The Marmot makes its home in the mountains, and burrows under the earth. Like my office-boy, it sleeps during the winter, but unlike him, is very alert and wide-awake during the summer. In America the Marmot is known as the "wood-chuck."



Spring is in the air. I asked the Editor if he'd "spring" me a couple of pounds for a week or two to pay for my Easter holidays. But there was nothing doing!

Q.—How does the Milk get in the Coconut ?

A.—Being rather busy with intelligent questions, J. Blackmore, of Blackheath, I have passed your query over to the office-boy. He says it doesn't! The coconut, according to the O.B., grows round the milk. He also says that coconuts don't grow on trees, as you seem to think, but on straight, upright sticks, in rows—each row growing taller than the row in front. He knows, because he has seen them that way on Hampstead Heath!

putty medal for dart-throwing, but I've had to give up both games, owing to extreme age!

Q.—What is Meerschaum ?

A.—Meerschaum is a mineral, Tom Beeton, and the name is German. Meerschaum means "sea-foam." They called it that because it is found floating on the Black Sea, and being white or cream in colour, it looks like sea-foam. Most of the meerschaum comes from Asia Minor, and its main use is for tobacco-pipes and cigar-holders.

the fish-shop. That's quite right, chum, they're caught in what are called lobster-pots, which are not pots like jam pots—but creels made of wickerwork, covered with netting, and with funnel-shaped openings which let the lobster in, but do not let him out. They are really like big traps, with bits of fish at the openings to entice the lobster inside—like the cheese on a mouse-trap. The pieces of fish are usually stale, as the lobster prefers it that way. The pots are sunk on ground known to be frequented by the edible crustacean (nearly lost my false teeth that time!), and left for the aforesaid to walk into.

Q.—What is a Cure for Toothache ?

A.—Extraction of the offending molar has been known to help. "Joyless Gemite." My office-boy says he knows a better cure than that, so I pass it on to you, chum. Fill your mouth with water, and sit on the fire till the water comes to the boil!

Q.—What is a Hamack Tree ?

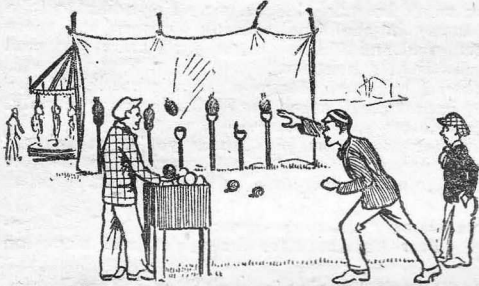
A.—A tree that grows in Brazil, Harry West, of Slough. The most interesting thing I know about this tree, Harry, is that the natives use the bark to make the nets in which they sleep, and from this we get our word "hammock."

Q.—How are Lobsters Caught ?

A.—Will Lessing, who passes a big fish shop every morning on his way to school, has been cogitating over this problem. He's heard that they're caught in pots, but he hasn't seen any pots in



The fisherman sets his lobster-pot, hoping that a nice fat lobster will walk in—and stay there.



One of the most popular side-shows at a fair is the coconut-shy.

Q.—What are Squails ?

A.—Only another name for a game like "Shove-ha'penny," "Puzzled, of Ilford." A similar game used to be played in the homes of the rich, and was called "Shuffle-Board." The idea in every case is to shove a disc or coin along a board into certain sections with different scores. I held the belt as Shove-ha'penny champion in my village for many years, also the

(Continued from previous page.)

The juniors, as instructed, kept their eyes skinned. Several times they pulled up at the roadside and took the measure of a house that seemed possibly suspicious. But disappointment came in each instance. Once an unfriendly farmer came out to inform them that camping on his land would lead to their incurring the direst consequences. As that announcement was backed up by a particularly ferocious bulldog, the juniors did not stop to explain matters to the farmer. They went.

On another occasion they scouted round a lonely house at the side of a country lane for quite a considerable period without seeing any sign of life. But when life did manifest itself at last it was in the form of a fellow named Oliver, from the Rylcombe Grammar School, and the Scouts learned, to their chagrin, that it was the home of a relative of his whom he had been visiting.

The hours went by. Dusk began to descend on the quiet countryside.

"Getting near locking-up time, you fellows," remarked Talbot, as they pedalled on.

"Bai Jove! We are wathah a distance fwom St. Jim's!" said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Think we'd bettah turn back pwetty soon, Tom Mewwy?"

Tom Merry nodded.

"I suppose so. Anything more about?"

"What's that over there?" asked Talbot sharply, pointing his finger in the direction of a dark, wooded patch across the fields.

The juniors pulled up and gazed at the patch.

At a first glance nothing could be seen except trees. On closer examination, however, it was just possible to dis-

tinguish in the gaps between the trees the outline of a building.

"Bai Jove! That place is well-sewenced, if you like, deah boys!" remarked D'Arcy.

"More so than anything we've seen yet," nodded Manners. "Let's push over. We're bound to be late for calling-over now, anyway. May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb!"

Led by Tom Merry, the little party wheeled quietly up the narrow lane that led towards the house. As they drew near the main entrance an incessant barking warned them of the presence of a dog, and at the big front gate they saw in the grounds the outline of what, in the dimming light, appeared to be a big mastiff.

"Quiet, boy!" murmured Herries, who, as the owner of a rather ferocious dog himself, was supposed to have some knowledge of the treatment of the canine species.

A deep, angry growl was the only response.

"Fancy we shouldn't stand much chance against that fellow if we were the other side of the gate!" remarked Talbot grimly. "By the look of his eyes, I imagine he's tasted blood more than once!"

"Don't like the look of the house, either," said Tom Merry, with a frown. "It certainly is a lonely sort of place."

"Not much light about it, either," observed Blake. "Just that one on the ground floor—and one in that attic behind the chimney. Hardly see it from here. What's the next move, Tommy?"

"Give the Lions' patrol call," answered Tom Merry.

"Contarini's in the Lions, and if he's inside may be able to reply."

"And may not be able to make us hear from the distance!" added Jack Blake, with a grimace. "No harm in trying, though. All together?"

"Oh, rather! Go ahead!"

The next moment the patrol call of the Lions was ringing out on the still evening air:

"EU-UGH! EU-UGH!—EU-UGH!"

"Quiet!" said Tom Merry.

The juniors paused, waiting for response.

None came.

A full minute passed. The mastiff still growled on the other side of the gate, but no other sound broke the silence. Suddenly Talbot gripped Tom Merry's arm.

"Look! What's that?"

As he spoke he pointed up to the partly-coloured attic window.

Tom Merry started. A steady light had been burning at that window when they first looked at the house. Now it was flickering.

The peculiar thing about it was that it was not a steady flicker. Sometimes the light would remain on for several seconds before going out, and at other times it would be just a flash.

"Why, it's Morse!" exclaimed Jack Blake excitedly.

"Bai Jove! So it is! There are three dots—"

The juniors watched, their eyes gleaming.

"Three dots; that's 'S,'" remarked Talbot. "Now watch; dash—dash—dash—that's 'O'—"

"Now the dots again, deah boys! Thwee of them! Oh, gweat pip!"

"My hat!"

"S O S!"

CHAPTER 12.

A Sceptical inspector!

"S O S!"

It was the Morse call-sign for help.

Tom Merry drew a deep breath.

"We've found them, chaps—or at least, we've found young Contarini!" he said. "Ye gods!"

"No doubt about that!" murmured Talbot. "That signal came in reply to the Lions' patrol call. Contarini's up in that attic right enough!"

"Bai Jove!"

It seemed almost too good to be true.

But there was no doubt now about its being true. Again and again the S O S flashed out from that little window up in the roof of the lonely house. It was no mere coincidence. The message was coming from their chum and fellow Scout, Contarini of the Fourth!

"What can we do?" muttered Blake.

It was a problem. After their first flush of delight at having "struck oil," the St. Jim's Scouts began to turn their minds to the problem of the next step. They looked to Tom Merry, wondering if he had anything up his sleeve.

The patrol-leader of the Lions caught their glance and shook his head.

"I haven't a plan ready made. Let's get away from this dog and chew things over."

They retreated down the lane for twenty yards or so, and took cover in the hedge, while they talked over the situation in low tones.

A brief consideration of the position was sufficient to show them that their chances of rescuing Contarini in spectacular fashion by their own unaided efforts were not rosy.

If Tom Merry's theory was correct, there would be at least four desperate and unscrupulous crooks in the house. Undoubtedly, those four would be armed. So that a clean-cut raid on the house would be, putting it mildly, a fool-hardy proceeding.

Anyway, there was the mastiff to be considered. Herries' opinion was that the mastiff was capable of doing as much damage as a man-eating tiger, and though Tom Merry and his chums were by no means weak-kneed, none of them fancied setting foot in the grounds of the house while that great animal was roaming loose.

"There's only one thing for it," said Tom Merry, at last. "We shall have to call in help. One of us will have to go to Wayland and fetch the police."

"Best thing to do," agreed Talbot, with a nod. "The rest of us can keep watch on the house and see if anything happens. How far is it to Wayland, Tommy?"

"Not far. We've been a long time getting here but, of course, most of that time was spent scouting round suspected houses and exploring byways. I can do it in half an hour."

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"Good. And perhaps you had better go, as you know the inspector of Wayland," suggested Jack Blake.

There was no time to waste, and without further argument Tom Merry wheeled his bike from the hedge and pedalled silently off down the lane while the rest extended out a little and took up strategic positions round the walls of the watched house.

Night had fallen now, and when he reached the road Tom Merry lit his lamp.

Then he bent over the handle-bars and began to scorch.

It was a lonely road, and traffic was scarce. In less than the half-hour the St. Jim's junior, hot from his exertions, arrived at Wayland and made straight for the police station.

Inspector Skeat was seated at his desk when Tom Merry burst in. He glanced up at the breathless Scout with a look of surprise on his keen face.

"Well, Master Merry! Rather late for you to be out, isn't it?"

"I've come for help, inspector," said Tom, plunging straight into his business. "You know the Contarini case—"

"The Contarinis? Why, I've just had news of them. What do you know about them?"

"I've found them—or one of them, at least."

Inspector Skeat jumped.

"Found them? Impossible!"

Tom smiled.

"I thought you'd be surprised, inspector—"

"I am more than surprised. Without wishing in any way to belittle your efforts to help the police, I must tell you, Master Merry, that I am incredulous."

"But you won't be much longer, sir. I'm going to take you to a house in the lane running between the main Southampton road and Abbotsford, where I know very well that Contarini is held prisoner."

"Impossible, I tell you, Merry—utterly impossible!"

"But why impossible?" asked the St. Jim's junior blankly.

"The Contarinis are still missing—"

"That, Master Merry, is just where you're mistaken," interrupted Inspector Skeat. "The Contarinis, to the best of my knowledge and belief, have both been found."

"What?"

"The news has only just come through from the Southampton police. Two Italians have been detained there on suspicion."

"But—but it can't be—simply can't!" said Tom Merry. "One thing I'm certain of is that young Contarini is imprisoned in the house I've just told you about. The Southampton police must have made a mistake."

Inspector Skeat chuckled.

"I think not, Master Merry. I may be prejudiced, but my experience is that the police don't often err in detaining suspects."

"They've done so this time, inspector; I'm sure of it. We've found Contarini—my chums and I!"

"Then why not bring him along?" asked the inspector with an amused smile.

"We couldn't—without help. There's a great dog to get by first, and after that, I imagine, a pretty desperate crowd of crooks."

Inspector Skeat laughed.

"I'm afraid your imagination is running away with you, my young friend! If I were asked to prophesy, I should say that the crooks in this case will be found to be your acquaintances, the Contarinis. But tell me more about this amazing discovery of yours!"

Tom Merry flushed crimson. He had been prepared for some show of surprise and incredulity on the part of Inspector Skeat. But complete scepticism like this came as a shock.

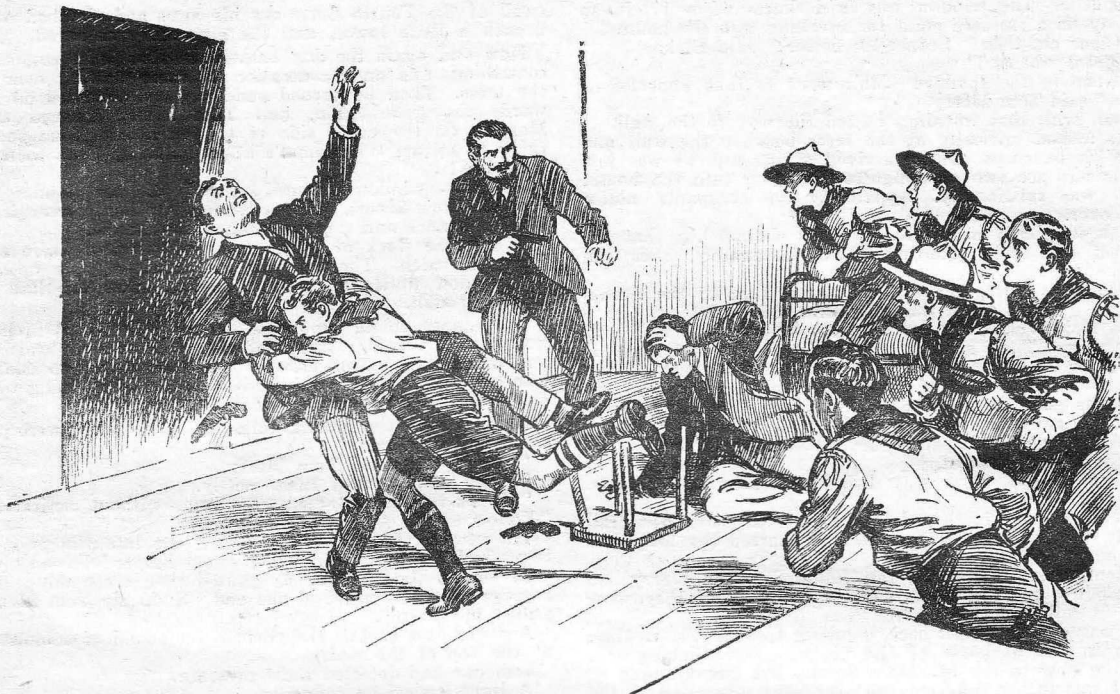
It was unfortunate that the news of the alleged finding of the Contarinis had come along at the very moment of his entry. Even Tom Merry was rather taken aback by the news.

But he still had sufficient confidence in his own reasonings to feel, despite the inspector's scepticism, that the Southampton police were mistaken and that the Morse message which had been flashed from that lone house across the fields had come from Contarini of the Fourth.

Tom Merry proceeded to describe briefly the events that had led up to their getting that dramatic S O S from the half-hidden attic window; he described the route they had taken and the position of the house among the trees.

The police-inspector listened with a smile; then with an occasional chuckle. Finally, when Tom had concluded, he laughed outright.

"Well, you certainly have had an enjoyable afternoon's scouting," he remarked. "I'll grant you, too, that you boys have shown a fine spirit in setting about the task so optimistically. But—"



Two of the Italians were floored, but one man was still left, his revolver in his hand. "Rush 'em!" shouted Tom Merry.

"You're going to help us, sir?" broke in Tom eagerly. "I'm positive this is no mare's-nest."

"But I'm sadly afraid that it is, young man," retorted Inspector Skeat. "I'm sorry, Master Merry; but I really can't send men right out into the country on such a vague sort of mission."

"But it's not vague, inspector—honestly it isn't! How else can you account for the SOS message?"

The inspector shrugged.

"Are you quite sure that it was an SOS message? I have heard of imagination playing tricks with the senses before; and in any case, there is always the chance that you have been hoaxed by some practical joker."

Tom bit his lip.

"So you're going to do nothing at all?"

"I might previously have done something, if it had not been for this message from Southampton. But now that these suspects have been detained, I think we may safely assume that your suspicions were ill-founded."

Tom Merry clenched his fists till the knuckles showed white. This firm though kindly rejection, after the excitement of that SOS and the ride to Wayland, was indeed a crushing blow.

"That's final, is it?" he asked huskily.

"I'm afraid so. Now, you take my advice, Master Merry—go back to your friends and tell them to return to the school with you. This affair may now be quite safely left in the hands of the police."

Tom was silent for a moment, his head downcast with bitter disappointment. Then he looked up again, a fresh gleam in his eyes.

"Very well, then, inspector. I'm sorry, but I can't take your advice. I'm going back to my chums, but not to take them to St. Jim's again. As you won't help us, we'll see the thing through ourselves without your help! Good-bye!"

"Stop——" began the inspector.

But Tom Merry was already half-way through the police station. And Inspector Skeat, after scratching his head and smiling rather wryly, resumed his work.

CHAPTER 13.

Scouts to the Rescue!

"THAT you, Tommy?"

The whispered question broke the silence of the dark lane as Tom Merry dismounted and extinguished his lamp.

"Yes," answered Tom. "Who's that?"

"Blake. Not a sound. There are one or two men prowling round the grounds from the house. The dog

brought 'em out. Where are the bobbies?"

"At Wayland still," answered Tom Merry, with a grim chuckle. "Let's join the others, and I'll explain."

The leader of the School House Scouts dumped his bike in the hedge and crept cautiously down the narrow lane with Blake.

The rest were waiting in a group, some yards away from the entrance to the grounds. Blake explained in whispers that they had thought it advisable to withdraw, owing to the suspicions that had evidently been aroused by the continual barking of the dog.

There was a subdued chorus of greeting from the Scouts as Tom Merry joined them.

"Back again, deah boy! Where are the police?" asked Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"Not coming, I'm afraid."

Tom explained briefly what had transpired in the course of his interview with Inspector Skeat.

It was disappointing news, and Blake and the others did not disguise their disgust over it.

"Bai Jove! It's weally wotten, deah boys!" remarked D'Arcy. "What happens now?"

Tom Merry gritted his teeth.

"Only one thing. We're going to pull it off ourselves."

"Bravo!"

"All the more kudos for us, in fact!" said Kangaroo.

"But it's a bit of a problem. There's that dog——"

Tom Merry nodded.

"I've been thinking it out coming back. We can't face that dog. It would mean a certain mauling for at least some of us."

"How else can it be done?"

"I've thought of a plan. You may think it's a bit wild, and it may not be possible. But from my recollection of the grounds, we may just do it."

"We're game, anyway!" said Digby. "Just name it!"

"I was thinking of the trees. At the end of the front wall surrounding the grounds there's a clump of trees extending right across to the house. It's a dangerous stunt, I know; but I think it's just possible for us to start from the wall and climb from tree to tree right to the house itself."

"Phew!"

"Bai Jove!"

"I know it's dangerous!"

"We don't mind that," said Herries.

"No feah!"

"Well, I think it's worth trying, anyway," said Tom Merry. "If I remember rightly, by climbing across the grounds we shall arrive at a window on the floor below

that attic. The window was in darkness when I left, so it may be a suitable point for breaking into the house."

"Come on, then! Sooner the better!" said Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Keep in the shadows—don't want to take unnecessary risks," said Tom Merry.

And, with that warning, he led the way to the wall.

He looked critically at the trees between the wall and his bearings. As he arrived at the top, he was just in time to see two dark figures disappear into the house. That was satisfactory. Apparently the occupants' alarm was over.

A keen glance across the grounds showed him that the mastiff was still prowling about—fortunately, near the gate.

"Quiet as mice, chaps!" whispered Tom to the Scouts below. "Don't want that dog over this way!"

He looked critically at the trees between the wall and the house. They grew in unusually thick profusion: if the house really was tenanted by the crooks it was easy to see that that was one of the reasons for their choosing it.

It was going to be a risky task. But Tom Merry knew his men, and felt sure that they could do it.

"All serene?" whispered Jack Blake from below.

Tom Merry nodded.

"One of you must stay behind—in case of accidents. Make it Herries!"

Then, without further delay, Tom swung over the wall on to the first strong branch, and started the long and arduous climb to the house.

Silently and swiftly the rest followed. Tom Merry had a sure eye for the best route, and they knew they were safe in following his lead.

It was a weird experience, climbing through the rustling trees in the darkness of the night. Tree-climbing was nothing new to the St. Jim's Scouts, but tree-climbing at night was rather different from the same operation in the cheerful light of day.

There were some narrow squeaks. In the peculiar circumstances, the juniors could hardly have hoped to avoid them. Once D'Arcy lost his footing, and Tom Merry's heart was in his mouth for a moment at the thought that he would crash to the ground. But the

swell of the Fourth flung out his arms and clutched at a branch a little lower, and the situation was saved.

Now and again the dog barked, as though he suspected something, and on one occasion he came trotting over to the trees. Then he turned suddenly and bounded off towards the gate again, and Tom Merry guessed that Herries, on the other side of the wall, had done something to attract the animal's attention away from them.

At last!

A dark window loomed ahead of the leader of the St. Jim's Scouts. Tom stretched cautiously over from the last branch and stepped safely on to the sill.

It was the work of a minute to whip out a knife and force the catch. Then, slowly and cautiously, he opened the window until there was sufficient space for him to crawl through.

One glance round the room in which he found himself was enough to show him that the room was unfurnished and untenanted. Tom gave a reassuring signal to Blake, who was the next man in the line, and Blake swung over on to the sill and was soon in the room also.

One by one the others followed, until they were all standing in safety.

"Fine!" whispered Tom Merry.

"What now?" asked Blake softly.

"Up to the attic!" answered Tom, without hesitation. "Follow me!"

He opened the door and tip-toed out into the passage into which the room led. Seven silent Scouts followed him.

In Indian file, silently as ghosts, they crept down the passage to the staircase at the end. Suddenly Tom Merry pulled up sharply.

A sound had broken the silence—the sound of a footstep at the top of the stairs.

Someone had detected their presence.

A light flashed on suddenly.

A tall figure came in sight round the bend of the stairs. Tom Merry and his men saw, with a thrill, that the man carried a revolver.

All doubts fled at the sight of that weapon. And when the man's face came into view the juniors knew that they were right.

For they all recognised him at once as the driver of the saloon car in the Rylcombe Lane.

There was no time for pausing to think out the situation. Action was what was needed in this emergency, and action, swift and sharp, was what took place.

One leap, and Tom Merry was half-way up the stairs. His left flashed out, and there was a dull sound as it met the point of the man's chin.

Speed had won! The man spun round and crashed on the stairs, before his finger could close on the trigger.

Tom Merry did not pause. He was up the remainder of the stairs in an instant, making straight for the attic, where he now knew that Contarini must be.

A door faced the top of the stairs. Tom examined it swiftly, looking for a means of opening it. For a moment he saw nothing, then his eyes fell on a small knob protruding from the wall.

He pressed it; the door swung back, and a moment later he was in the living-room where Contarini and his father had been held so well.

"Merry!"

It was a cry of utter joy from Contarini. Simultaneously, the Italian junior's father sprang forward.

"My dear brave boy, we are saved!"

Then there was a buzz as the rest of the St. Jim's party swarmed into the room.

Tom Merry turned round to the door again.

"No time for words!" he said briskly. "There are others in this house to deal with yet, and, if I'm not mistaken—"

"Hands up, or we shoot—and shoot to kill!"

It was a cry from the doorway.

The occupants of the attic swung round, electrified.

Standing in the doorway were three olive-skinned men, their arms extended and gleaming revolvers in their hands.

CHAPTER 14.

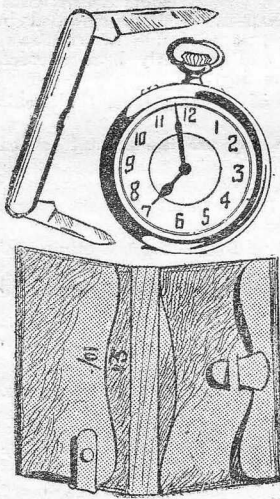
Victory!

TEN pairs of hands went up, unwillingly, but quickly, for it could be seen at a glance that the newcomers were not to be trifled with.

"Get back into that corner—the lot of you!"

The Scouts retreated, their arms still held above their heads. Their eyes were gleaming with anger, and each one of them longed for an opportunity of getting to grips with these grim-faced scoundrels. But it was difficult to see how it could be done, without risking death. There was no weapon with which they could meet the menace

(Continued on page 23.)



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"DOWN!" yelled Chick. "Down for your lives!"

All four dropped flat to the floor. Chick could feel his scalp rippling as he peered into the night, waiting for the next shot, that might find a human billet. But there was no other report. A moment later they heard the roar of a powerful motor-bike, that gradually faded away in the distance.

"He's beat it, whoever he was!" jerked Horace.

Paige's face was white and set as he picked up his hat and stared at the neat hole through the crown.

"Great gosh! There was someone out there!" gulped Herbert. "He tried to plug you, mister! What does it mean? Who could it have been?"

"I can only think of one person," said the lawyer grimly. "Burk Roscoe! He will stop at nothing to prevent me from finding Eustace Latimer! I had an idea someone was shadowing me this past few days. If he was outside he must have overheard all our plans, Chance. Now you realise what you are up against. Roscoe is a dangerous man!"

"The dirty skunk!" growled Horace. "If I could get my hands on him, I'd stretch his neck so's he'd want a ladder to put his hat on!"

There was a hard smile in Chick Chance's eyes.

"I think we will be able to deal with Mr. Burk Roscoe," he said confidently. "What sort of a bird is he, Mr. Paige, in case I run up against him?"

"I have only seen him once," admitted the lawyer. "He is tall and dark and soft-spoken. But there's one thing I did notice about him. He has a coiled snake tattooed on the back of his left hand. The cold-blooded scoundrel! He knows that if he shot me it would put an end to all attempts to rescue Latimer."

A few minutes later the big Rolls-Royce drove away on its journey back to London. Chick and his two friends grabbed hands and executed a wild war-dance of delight around the hut. Herb suddenly picked up a heavy hammer and moved towards the door.

"Here, steady on! Where are you going?" demanded the lanky Horace.

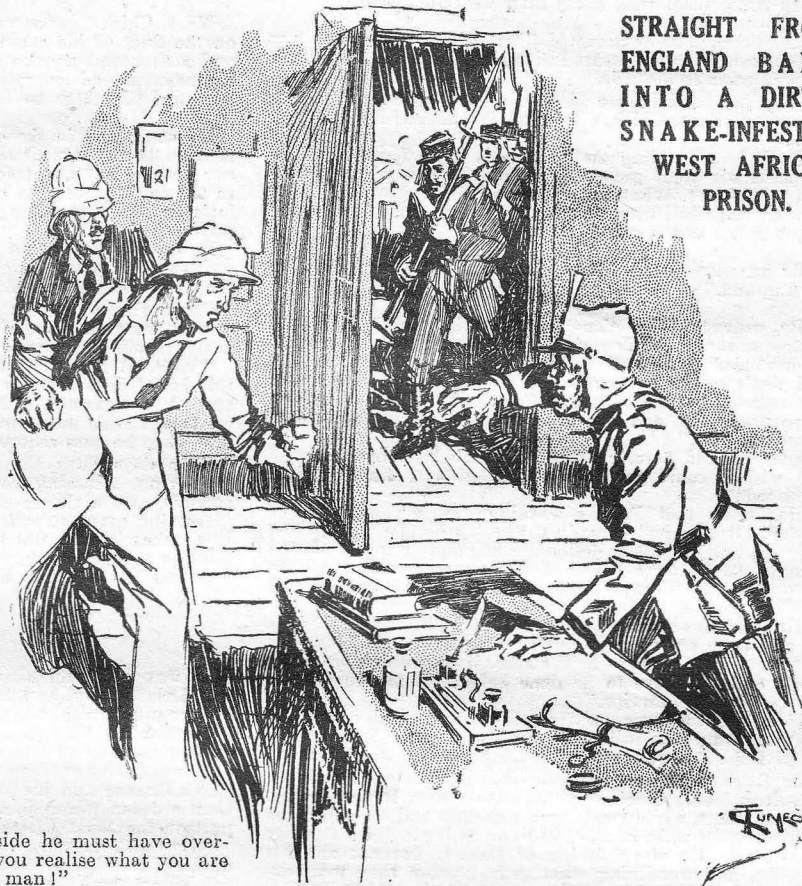
"I'm going to pulverise that old jigger of ours!" declared the little man. "It's wot I've been wanting to do for a long time, and I reckon it'll relieve my feelings. I'll give the danged old moustrap chewing-gum, corf-lozenges, and acid-drops! Woosh!"

The s.s. Arden Castle had passed through the Bay of

THE OPENING CHAPTERS RETOLD.

CHICK CHANCE, late Flight-Commander Chichester Chance, R.A.F., V.C., D.S.O., is flying his own taxi-bus when she suddenly stalls and he is forced to make a parachute descent. The chute catches on a bridge and Chick is left dangling over a railway line, the roar of an approaching train thundering in his ears. At the crucial moment he is rescued by Herbert and Horace, late air-mechanic and pilot-sergeant of Chick's old squadron. These two escort Chick back to his hangar, where a man named Howard Paige enters and asks Chick if he will fly to Central

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WEST AFRICAN
PRISON.



Biscay, and was steaming in fine weather towards the dimly-fashioned outline of the Portuguese coast. Thence away, to the illimitable wastes of the Sahara, and beyond that the forests and swamps and unknown mysteries of Central Africa.

There were many passengers aboard the Arden Castle, and most conspicuous were the three inseparable young men who paced the deck together.

Horace was looking somewhat pale. The Bay of Biscay had not been on its best behaviour, and he had spent most of the time huddled in his bunk, groaning and cursing, as Herbert entertained him with a glowing description of the meals that were served aboard the liner.

"I'll bet I don't weigh any more'n a starved humming-bird!" declared the lanky fellow mournfully, as he staggered to the rail and glared at the blue sea through his monocle. "I'm that empty I feel as though I'd been eating balloons all me life!"

"Your old dome-piece allus has been empty," agreed Herbert cheerfully. "How much longer before we hit Lakola, Chick?"

"About four or five days," answered the young airman, who looked particularly cool and comfortable in a white

Africa to look for a Professor Eustace Latimer, who has come into a fortune of half a million pounds, but does not know it. The stranger also informs Chick that if Latimer does not return within three months the fortune is to go to Burk Roscoe, an arrant scoundrel. Chick agrees to go, and Herbert and Horace offer to accompany him. Howard Paige is shaking hands with the three chums outside the hangar when there is a loud report and a bullet pierces his hat and crashes into the wall.

(Now read on.)

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,156.

flannel suit, with a peaked cap perched on the side of his curly head. "I'm like you fellows—just aching to get started on this job."

Packed away in the hold was the big, single-engine, passenger-plane in which they were to make their daring flight into the heart of Darkest Africa. Howard Paige had spared no expense to ensure the success of their enterprise. He had seen the three airmen off from Southampton, and had cabled ahead to Barron, the agent trader at Lakola, who was to equip them with everything they required.

"Mr. Chance?"

Chick nodded, as he accepted the sealed envelope that was handed to him by the smart-looking assistant wireless officer who had come to his side.

"What-ho! A blinking Marconigram!" grinned Herbert. "Congratulations, Chick, old bean! Wonder if it's a boy or a gal?"

"Don't be a howling ass!" Chick's smile faded, and his face suddenly went grave, as he opened the wireless message. "Phew! What do you fellows think of that?"

The message had been sent from London, and had Howard Paige's name at the end of it.

"Be on your guard. Burk Roscoe disappeared. Believe left England."

"By gravy! What does he mean by that?" muttered Horace uneasily. "You don't suppose Roscoe is aboard this boat along with us?"

"I don't see how he could be, unless he's sailing under false colours," said Chick doubtfully. "His name's not on the passenger-list, and I've been on the look-out for anyone resembling him."

Horace glared fiercely around through his monocle.

"I wish I could get hold of that gink! I'd fling him overboard!"

Chick knew that Paige's warning was not one to be ignored. Roscoe had already shown his hand when he had made his cold-blooded, deliberate attempt to put a bullet through the lawyer's head. Such a man would resort to any depths of villainy to secure himself a fortune of half a million pounds.

"He may be aboard; but even if he is, he'll probably lie low and keep out of sight until we reach Lakola," decided the lad. "That's where he'll strike, if he intends to strike at all; and it'll have to be done before we get in the air and start for the interior."

Chick had his eyes on the alert all that day, but he spotted no one who tallied in any degree with the description of Burk Roscoe that Howard Paige had given him.

The three chums occupied adjoining first-class cabins on the saloon-deck. Chick was the last to turn in that night. He stood for a while smoking a cigarette and watching the phosphorescent wake of the big liner as it ploughed steadily on its way. He was thinking of Eustace Latimer and his daughter, and wondering what grim horrors they were enduring, helpless captives in the savage depths of the Belgian Congo.

Were they dead? Would he arrive too late? Or would he never reach his goal? The slightest mishap would bring disaster and certain death to himself and his two companions.

Finally, he went to his cabin, and was sound asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. It might have been an hour, or two hours, later, when he suddenly found himself wide awake, staring up at the ceiling overhead. He knew that it must have been some unusual sound or movement that had broken his slumbers. Certainly it was not the steady throb-throb of the great turbines as they forced the vessel through the water.

Instinctively he knew that he was not alone in the cabin. And he remembered that he had neglected to bolt his door when he had gone to bed.

Cautiously the lad turned his head, and a thrill of excitement trickled along his spine as he saw the thin white beam of an electric torch playing backwards and forwards across the floor by the side of his bed.

With one lightning movement Chick Chance flung back the clothes and hurled himself out into the centre of the cabin. There was a hoarse, startled cry as he collided with a human form, and the electric torch dropped to the floor, still spilling its light in the darkness.

Chick grunted fiercely as he grappled with the man, and they rolled over and over on the floor. His opponent seemed to be made of steel and whiplash. They fought in silence. Chick grabbed a wrist and hung on like grim death. Cold, muscular fingers clutched at his throat and forced his head back. He rolled over and pinned the hand he was holding flat to the floor. Here it came in line with the bright beam of the fallen electric torch, and what he saw knocked Chick

clean off his mental balance and held him paralysed with amazement.

Tattooed on the back of the man's hand was a beautifully coloured coiled snake with open jaws and slitted yellow eyes. He remembered what Howard Paige had told him.

The mysterious intruder was Burk Roscoe!

Something hard and heavy crashed down on the back of the lad's head and everything went black.

When Chick Chance next opened his eyes he lay huddled on the floor of his cabin, with his throat as dry as a bone and a thousand needles of pain stabbing through his head. He remembered everything at once. With difficulty he managed to totter to his feet and switch on the electric light.

He was alone in the cabin. There was no sign of Burk Roscoe, the man with the tattoo on the back of his hand; nor had he left any trace of his recent presence. Nothing in the cabin seemed to have been disturbed, though he was later to find that a single document was missing from his pocket.

It was the letter that Barron, the trader at Lakola, had written to Howard Paige, informing him of the arrival of the native bearer with Eustace Latimer's message of distress.

Chick glanced grimly at himself in the mirror. He was unhurt, save for several livid bruises on his throat and a nasty, throbbing lump on the back of his head.

"Well, at any rate, I know now that Roscoe is aboard this boat," mused the lad, as he sat on the edge of his bed and lit a cigarette. "No use trying to root him out. I'll let things slide until we reach Lakola. I'm bound to spot him when he goes ashore, and when I do—"

Four days later the s.s. Arden Castle glided into the sweltering, steaming harbour of Lakola and dropped her anchors with a clatter and a splash.

Leaning over the rail, with Horace and Herbert flanking him on each side, Chick Chance stared towards the straggling, sun-blistered town and realised that the great adventure was just about to begin.

The Trap!

IT was early morning when the big liner steamed into Lakola Bay, and the sudden stopping of the turbines, coupled with the roar of the anchor-chains as they rumbled through the hawse-pipes, brought many curious passengers swarming on deck.

The majority of them were bound for the Cape. Including Chick Chance and his two companions there were not more than a dozen whose journey ended at this lonely, sun-baked port on the West African coast.

"So that's Lakola, is it," said Horace, as he appeared on deck, wearing a khaki shirt, shorts, puttees, an enormous sun-helmet, and the inevitable monocle screwed in one eye. "A nice cheerful-looking place, I don't think!"

"What did you expect to find? A pier, with a band, and a row of wheel-stalls on the beach?" queried Herbert scornfully.

"We're not here for a holiday," remarked Chick grimly. "And we won't be staying at Lakola a moment longer than we can help. You chaps keep your eyes open, and see if you can spot this fellow, Roscoe, among the passengers who will be going ashore."

It was only that morning that the young airman had told his two chums of his fierce encounter with the strange man who had broken into his cabin a few nights previously, and all three were consumed with impatience to get ashore and look up Frank Barron, the agent, who had been warned of their impending arrival.

"This guy, Roscoe; all we know about him is that he's got a tattoo-mark on his left hand," exclaimed Horace. "But he must be a mighty determined sort of a customer if he's followed us all the way here. What do you think his game is, Chick?"

"To stop us from finding Eustace Latimer, of course. Half a million is a lot of money," said Chick meaningly. "But once we get the old plane assembled, and take to the air, I don't think we will have anything more to fear from Mr. Burk Roscoe. So let's hustle along to Barron, and see if he's got everything fixed up for us."

A number of boats had already left the shore, and were speeding across the bay towards the anchored liner. Amongst them was a big, flat-bottomed lighter, to which was to be transferred a certain amount of cargo, passengers' luggage, and the huge wooden crates, in which were packed the dismantled aeroplane which was to carry Chick Chance

and his chums on their daring flight into the heart of unknown Africa.

The first craft to come alongside was a steam launch, flying the Belgian flag, and containing a number of men in uniform.

"By Gosh! What's this bunch coming aboard?" exclaimed Herbert curiously. "Just look at that little gink all smothered with gold braid and medals!"

"Must be the Customs officer, or some other port official," guessed Chick. "Lakola's a Belgian possession, and I suppose there'll be a certain amount of red-tape before we're allowed to land. Still, our passports are in order."

The officer came strutting pompously up the gangway, with jangling sword, jingling medals, and an expression of supreme importance on his swarthy face. He left two of his men on guard at the head of the gangway, bowed stiffly to the captain of the liner, and drew him to one side, talking volubly and waving his gloved hands.

Chick Chance, lounging against the rail, surveyed the few passengers who were lined up with their luggage, waiting to go ashore. They were all men, but if Burk Roscoe was amongst them, it was impossible for him to identify him by the slender description that Howard Paige had supplied. It was equally impossible for him to demand if any one of the men had a coiled snake tattooed on the back of his left-hand.

"Perhaps Roscoe doesn't intend to land at Lakola," mused the young airman. "He may realise that—"

"Mr. Chance!"

It was Captain Clay, the skipper of the liner who had called him by name. Chick walked across, Horace and Herbert close at his heels.

"This gentleman is Major Vigon," introduced Captain Clay, indicating the Belgian officer. "He has reason to believe that your luggage consists of a certain amount of contraband goods, which it would be illegal for you to introduce into Belgian territory."

"What!" Chick Chance stared incredulously. "Contraband goods? There is not a word of truth in it!" he declared indignantly. "Major Vigon has evidently been misinformed."

The Belgian shrugged his shoulders, and twirled the spiked ends of his black moustache.

"I am not at liberty to expose the source of my information," he said stiffly. "But it is reliable."

A sudden suspicion of foul play and trickery leaped instantly into Chick Chance's mind. His lips tightened as he stared straight into the officer's muddy-brown eyes.

It was imperative that he should go ashore at Lakola! Unless he did so it meant the utter abandonment of his quest for Eustace Latimer. The long voyage from England, and all the money that Howard Paige had expended would be completely wasted! Was this some cunningly designed ruse to deter him from going ashore at Lakola?

"This information you speak of, Major Vigon," he said slowly. "Does it happen to have been supplied by an individual named Burk Roscoe?"

The Belgian's eyes flickered for a moment.

"The name is not known to me," he denied pompously. "You have your choice in this matter. I am not asking that you come ashore with me."

"No. That's just it." Chick smiled as he tilted his sun-helmet further back on his head. "I don't think for one moment that you particularly want me to come ashore, but I am quite willing to take the risk of landing."

"Hear, hear!" agreed Horace and Herbert sturdily. "There's something queer about this business, Chick."

"Very good, Mr. Chance," Captain Clay shrugged his shoulders regretfully. "I'll give instructions for your belongings to be transferred to the lighter that is waiting—I hope everything turns out all right for you."

The other passengers for Lakola had already entered one of the boats, and were on the way towards the shore.

"Ten to one Burk Roscoe is amongst them!" declared Chick bitterly. "We're up against a dangerous enemy, boys. I'm pretty certain that Roscoe is at the bottom of this attempt to prevent us from landing, though I'm hanged if I know how he wangled it; unless he's got friends at Lakola."

"Perhaps this dago here, with the fancy-dress uniform and the tin sword, is a friend of his?" suggested Herbert. "But he won't be able to hang anything on to us. He'll have to let us go once he's examined our luggage."

Chick Chance sincerely hoped so, but a vague uneasiness was stirring at the back of his mind. He didn't like the sneer on Major Vigon's face, nor the spiteful gleam in the man's dark eyes as he strutted up and down, watching the big, wooden crates being lowered into the lighter that lay alongside the liner.

His subordinates had already taken possession of the three airmen's personal luggage, and a few minutes later they all entered the waiting launch and sped away across the oily waters of the bay. Chick felt a sudden sense of depres-

sion as he glanced back at the great liner, and realised that they were no longer under the protection of the Union Jack.

Major Vigon's launch deliberately avoided the wooden jetty where other passengers from the liner had been landed. A small crowd of natives and white men were gathered there, and Chick had no doubt that Barron was amongst them, waiting to greet the adventurers whom Howard Paige had sent out to go in search of the lost explorer.

They were landed five hundred yards away along the beach, and conducted to a substantially-built building that flew the Belgian flag and had a couple of armed sentries posted outside.

In a cheerless, barely-furnished room that was as hot as an oven, and vibrant with the drone and buzz of countless flies and other winged insects, Major Vigon gestured towards a hard, wooden bench, and seated himself at a document-littered table.

"Well, gentlemen, your passports are perfectly in order," he conceded, lighting a thin, black cigar. "But I am afraid I shall have to detain you until my men have examined the contents of the extremely bulky crates that bear your name."

"The contents of the crates," said Chick firmly, "are exactly as described in the bills of lading. What on earth do you imagine that they contain?"

The Belgian did not answer. Leaving a sentry guarding the door, he strutted out into the sun-baked courtyard in front of the building. There followed a sound of hammering and banging, and the squeal of stout planks being wrenched apart.

"By gosh, if that greasy scoundrel does any damage to that plane, I'll screw his darned head off!" vowed Chick fiercely.

He broke off as Major Vigon came jingling back into his room, his swarthy face flushed with triumph, and a file of soldiers trotting at his heels.

"You lying dogs!" he snarled, levelling an accusing finger at the bewildered airmen. "You thought you could bluff me, did you? No contraband, eh? Nothing but rifles, automatic-pistols, two machine-guns, and five thousand rounds of ammunition! Just toys to amuse the natives, I suppose? You're under arrest for gun-running, and by thunder, I'll see that you get ten years' hard labour on the breakwater for this!"

Chick Chance stared aghast at the Belgian. The seriousness of the accusation almost took his breath away.

"Great Scott, man, you must be crazy!" he exploded, at length. "Those firearms are for our own use, and there was no attempt to conceal them. You must know what we're here for? We're going five hundred miles into the interior in search of Eustace Latimer, the missing explorer. You don't expect us to fly into an unknown and hostile country armed with pea-shooters and pop-guns, do you?"

"A likely story!" sneered Vigon contemptuously. "Those guns were intended for the native tribes we are at war with in the Belgian Congo. With an aeroplane you could deliver them in a few hours, and fly on into British territory!"

"What I've told you is the truth, and I can prove it!" declared Chick desperately. "Send for the British Consul!"

"There is no British Consul within six hundred miles of Lakola!"

"Then send for Frank Barron, the British trader here!" Major Vigon made a gesture of impatience.

"You have plenty of time in which to think up a better story than the one you have told me," he smiled meaningly. "You will have to cool your heels here in prison in Lakola for at least a couple of months before you can be brought to trial. And then—well, gun-running is a serious offence!"

Chick's lips tightened, and his fists knotted as he stared into the man's mocking, muddy-brown eyes.

"Vigon! By James, I believe this is a put-up job!" he exclaimed thickly. "You know darned well you're faking a false charge against us, and there's a man named Burk Roscoe behind the whole thing!"

Vigon dodged nervously behind his desk, and uttered a shrill command to the soldiers who stood in the doorway. In an instant, Chick and his two chums found themselves staring into the gaping muzzles of half-a-dozen rifles.

"Put up your hands! You're under arrest!" snarled the major. "Make a single false move, and I'll give the order to fire!"

(It's a terrible set-back to Chick's great adventure isn't it, chums. But he won't take it lying down, believe me. He'll be up and doing with a vengeance in next week's gripping instalment.)

"The Message in Morse!"

(Continued from page 24.)

of those gleaming revolvers. Or, at least, there seemed none to most of them.

As things turned out, there was one. Kangaroo saw it as he moved backwards with the rest.

It was a wooden stool that stood in the corner.

The Australian junior took particular notice that he was standing just behind it when he came to a stop.

"Now, listen, you English puppies!" snarled the leader of the ugly trio. "You think you've won. That is a mistake. I am going to show you that. You have changed my plans, admittedly; but I win, still—understand?"

Silence. Kangaroo moved his foot slightly—ever so slightly, then braced himself up ready for his effort. His eyes rested on the three Italians. He thought they were not taking particular notice of him.

"Now you know, my friends, that you are not going to succeed, after all," went on the hissing voice. "Within one hour from now—"

Crash!
The crook's sentence was not completed. With a suddenness that staggered, for a moment, prisoners and captors alike, the stool that was standing in front of Kangaroo shot through the air straight for the speaker.

At the same moment Kangaroo flung himself forward, and made a dive at one of the others.

Tom Merry uttered a yell.

"Rush 'em!"

It was a sharp affair while it lasted. The three Italians were desperate and fought like wild cats. But the end was inevitable, with the odds in the Scouts' favour, and soon the three men were helpless and done for.

The fight was won!

Tom Merry mopped his perspiring face and grinned down cheerfully at the vanquished picture-robbers.

"Well, we've done it, chaps!" he remarked. "We've done the rescuing stunt and collared the crooks."

A sudden, sharp report from outside the house brought the cheering to a stop.

The juniors stared at each other wonderingly.

"A revolver shot!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "What's happening, I wonder?"

A few moments later there was a violent banging from

the direction of the hall. Then the listeners heard a voice coming from outside the house.

"Open, in the name of the law!"

There was a shout from the Scouts:

"The police!"

"Inspector Skeat must have changed his mind," said Tom Merry. "That shot was the last of the mastiff. The police have come in at the finish, after all!"

And so it transpired. In less than a minute Inspector Skeat, of Wayland, and half a dozen constables were crowding into the room, with Herries bringing up the rear, and the inspector was listening to Tom Merry's story of their victory, and himself explaining that he had changed his mind.

While the explanations were going on, Signor Contarini was exploring the house. In a very short time he returned, his face radiant, to report that the missing pictures, apparently unharmed, were all within the house.

Tom Merry and the rest of the St. Jim's party, including Contarini, returned to St. Jim's, bikes as well, in cars provided by Inspector Skeat.

It was bed-time when they reached the old school, and the excitement at the appearance of the juniors with Contarini in their midst was tremendous.

The Head and Mr. Raitlon, who had become seriously concerned over the party's continued absence, were so pleased with the happy turn of events that neither of them so much as remembered to mention the misdemeanour the juniors had committed by remaining out so late.

Long after bed-time that night the dormitories of the School House continued to buzz with talk. The affair of the missing works of art had undoubtedly provided for St. Jim's a sensation that was not likely to be forgotten for a very long time.

As for Tom Merry and his chums they were satisfied to know that they had cleared the name of their Italian colleague and his father.

But modestly as they took their blushing honours they could hardly deny themselves that they had, in the words of Dr. Holmes, shown the world they were Scouts who lived up to the fine old Scouting motto: "Be prepared."

THE END.

(There will be another rollicking fine story of Tom Merry & Co. in next week's GEM, entitled: "GRUNDY, THE PROTECTOR!" You can only make sure of reading it, chums, by ordering your copy WELL IN ADVANCE.)

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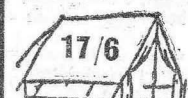


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