

LOOK THE SCHOOL in the CLOUDS! THE CRIMSON RACER! THE FIGHTING MIDDY!
The Oracle—and Potts, the Impossible Office-Boy

INSIDE!

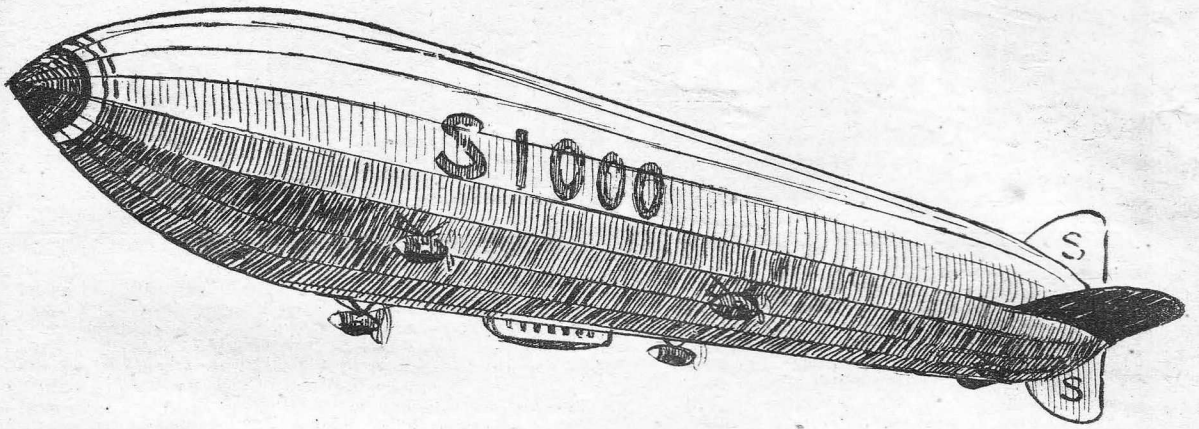
The GEM

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EVERY
WEDNESDAY.



A Duel in an Ancient Castle! Kidnapped by Mountain Bandits—



The SCHOOL in The CLOUDS!

BY MARTIN CLIFFORD

CHAPTER 1.

An Amazing Proposal!

"WELL, Dr. Holmes!"

Dr. Holmes, the dignified and scholarly headmaster of St. Jim's, glanced at his visitor uneasily as he paced his study carpet with rustling gown.

"I—I scarcely know what to say, Sir Napier! This—this is such an amazing suggestion that you have made—"

"Unusual, I agree," nodded Sir Napier Wynter, smiling.

"But a very excellent suggestion, believe me!"

"Possibly, my dear sir—possibly!" gasped the Head.

"But—"

He resumed his restless pacing, a deep frown on his handsome old face. He came to a halt by the window, staring out into the quad. It was a grey, damp November morning, with a hint of rain in the air, and a cold wind was blustering round the ancient buildings.

And in their various class-rooms the St. Jim's fellows, seniors and juniors, were hard at work, little dreaming of the momentous decision being made at that moment in the Head's study.

The Head glanced up at the sky uneasily.

"This—this air-vessel of which you have been telling me, Sir Napier," he exclaimed, as he turned from the window.

"I presume it is a perfectly safe mode of transport?"

"Oh, yes!" smiled Sir Napier. "No doubt about that! As I have explained, the S1000 has been constructed by the company, of which I am chairman, in order to fly regularly between England and New York, for commercial purposes. Its trials have been eminently successful. But the company feels that in order to interest the public and persuade them of the efficiency of the dirigible, a round-the-world flight would be an excellent demonstration. That is why I want you to agree to letting forty or so boys from St. Jim's fly round the world in the dirigible on an educational tour—"

"Educational?" broke in the Head. "Surely, Sir Napier, this—ah—proposed air voyage could not help but interfere with the boys' school work! That is my chief objection!"

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educational experience of visiting many foreign lands. The Continent, India, Africa, America—"

"I—I see!" the Head nodded, frowning. "Of course, if it could be arranged for their school work to continue, that is a different matter."

He resumed his thoughtful pacing. But after a while he halted abruptly. His face had cleared. His mind was evidently made up at last.

"Well, Dr. Holmes, do you agree?"

Sir Napier's voice was eager. His strong, pleasant face, lean and tanned, was eager. He rose to his feet, his keen, grey eyes fastened upon the scholarly face of the headmaster of St. Jim's, awaiting his answer.

Sir Napier was an uncle of Eric Kildare, the captain of the school, and an old friend of the Head's. Knowing Dr. Holmes as he did, though he had expected a little opposition to his proposal at first, he felt sure that in the end the old Head would agree.

His surmise was right.

"Yes, Sir Napier, I agree—on one condition."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Sir Napier, with gleaming eyes. "Splendid! I felt sure you would. The condition?"

"My condition is that two masters from the school accompany the boys, so that their school work will be interfered with as little as possible. I cannot help but see that a tour

round the world in this wonderful airship would undoubtedly be of high educational value—"

Sir Napier grasped the Head's hand enthusiastically.

"Splendid!" he repeated.

"We should have no difficulty in finding two masters to accompany us, I feel confident. All that remains, therefore, is to select the

boys. Naturally, I shall wish my nephew, Eric Kildare, to be of the party, and his friend Darrell. I should also like to take a number of the junior boys, who are by way of being old friends of mine—Tom Merry and his three chums, and Blake and his friends from Study No. 6. The choice of the rest I should like to leave to you."

"Very well," agreed the Head. "You have already named ten boys. That leaves thirty or so to be chosen in addition. Of course, there should be representatives from each Form?"

TOURING THE WORLD BY AIR!
Tom Merry & Co., the chums of St. Jim's,
get mixed up with an ancient feud
in Rome!

—Trapped in a Dynamited Dungeon! Amazing Adventures of Tom Merry & Co.!

"Certainly."

"I feel that a ballot would be the fairest method of selection, Sir Napier."

The baronet nodded.

"And it would be a good idea, doctor, to ballot by studies where possible, rather than by individuals, eh? A pity to break up groups of friends, you know."

"I agree," nodded the Head. "Let me see—I think you said that you wished the airship to commence its—er—voyage in a week's time?"

"Yes. The airship is ready at the mooring-mast at Fenleigh Aerodrome, and I should like to have all details arranged at once, so that the trip can start next Tuesday."

Across the quad came the clang of old Taggles' bell, announcing that morning classes were over. A minute later a swarm of juniors came streaming down the steps of the School House, eager for the most part to punt a footer about until dinner-time.

Sir Napier glimpsed Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. and other familiar faces in the crowd, and smiled.

"This will be a bit of a surprise for the youngsters, eh, doctor?"

"Undoubtedly!" agreed the Head. "Undoubtedly!" And he, too, smiled. "But a very pleasant surprise for the lucky ones, I have no doubt!"

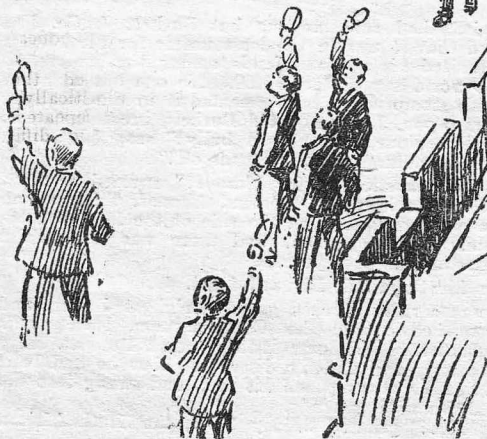
"Come in!"

The voice of Mr. Linton, the master of the Shell, was decidedly acid as he replied to the knock that had come upon the door of his Form-room.

Afternoon classes were in full swing, and the Shell fellows had been having rather a rough time of it. Mr. Linton seemed to be in a very irascible mood for some reason, and lines had been falling thicker than leaves in Vallombrosa!

Heads turned towards the door as it opened in response to Mr. Linton's acid invitation. The rosy countenance of Toby Marsh, the School House page-boy, was framed in the doorway.

"Which the headmaster wants the whole school to



hassemble in Big 'All—hat once!" announced Toby importantly.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Linton, in astonishment. "At once, Toby?"

"Hat once!" said Toby firmly, and departed, leaving Mr. Linton looking thoroughly astonished. The Shell fellows looked astonished, too; but their astonishment was mingled with delight.

The surprising summons to Big Hall could not have come at a more opportune moment! Mr. Linton's present acid mood made the prospect of freedom from the Form-room a wonderful stroke of good fortune.

"My hat, what a bit of luck!" breathed Monty Lowther to Tom Merry jubilantly.

"Ripping!" grinned Tom. "But what the dickens does it mean?"

"I guess it's queer," muttered Cyrus K. Handcock, the junior from the land of skyscrapers and chewing-gum.

It was queer. There was no doubt about that. Had the Head not some extra important reason, he would have waited till afternoon classes were over before summoning the school to Big Hall.

"Boys!" barked Mr. Linton rather reluctantly. "You may dismiss! Leave the Form quietly, and go straight to Big Hall!"

In the passage outside, the Shell fellows found the Fourth already crowding out of their room. There was a buzz of excited talk. Everyone was asking questions, which no one could answer! Blake, the leader of the Fourth, caught sight of Tom Merry & Co. and pushed his way towards them, followed by Herries and Digby and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

"What on earth's up?" cried Blake eagerly.

"Goodness knows!"

"It's vevy queeah, deah boys!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, the swell of St. Jim's, surveying Tom Merry & Co, through his gleaming monocle with a very puzzled look on his aristocratic face. "Fwightfully queeah!"

"Pr'aps someone's in for a public flogging!" sniggered Baggy Trimble, the Falstaff of the Fourth, excitedly. "He, he, he!"

"Oh, dry up, you fat porpoise!"

"Oh, really, Lowther—"

"Perhaps Baggy is right for once," drawled Ralph Reekness Cardew, the handsome slacker of the Fourth. "Mellish, dear man, are you expectin' to get flogged this afternoon?"

Mellish, the sneak of the Fourth, jumped. Mellish's conscience was never very clear, and he turned rather a sickly hue for a moment. Then he realised that Cardew was joking, and he glared at the slacker of the Fourth angrily.

"Oh, rats!" muttered Percy Mellish.

Cardew grinned.

Though it was beneath their dignity to look excited, like the juniors, even the lofty Sixth were looking decidedly puzzled as they entered Big Hall with the crowd of School House and New House fellows.

"What's in the wind, do you think?" murmured North of the Sixth, to Baker, another member of that lofty Form. "Dunno," returned Baker, shrugging. "Unless it is that the Head's going to announce a whole-day holiday in honour of Sir Napier Wynter. Kildare's giddy uncle is here to-day—I saw him drive into the quad this morning. He had lunch with the Head."

With tramping feet, the fellows took their places. Almost at once, the appearance of Dr. Holmes on the big dais, accompanied by Sir Napier Wynter, brought a sudden hush.

"I have an important announcement to make," began the Head quietly, glancing over the silent ranks of the assembled Forms. "Sir Napier Wynter, with whom many of you are well acquainted, has put before me a proposal of an unusual nature—but one to which I have, on reflection, agreed enthusiastically!"

He glanced at the tall figure beside him.

"Perhaps, Sir Napier, you will yourself acquaint the boys of the—er—nature of your proposal?"

"Certainly, Dr. Holmes."

Sir Napier stepped forward, and there was an instant excited murmur in Big Hall that was quickly suppressed by the Head's upraised hand.

"As some of you may know," began Sir Napier, going straight to the point with an abruptness that left his hearers almost dazed with astonishment, "I have at my disposal an airship, the S 1000. It is to make a flight round the world; and I have suggested to Dr. Holmes that a number of St. Jim's fellows shall go with it for an educational tour. He has agreed. It only remains, therefore, for the boys in question to be selected, and the con-

sent of their parents or guardians obtained. Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom have agreed to accompany us on this trip, and—"

But Sir Napier Wynter got no further.

A deafening cheer had crashed out, drowning his words, as the fellows recovered from their first dumb astonishment.

Again and again wild hurrahs echoed beneath the lofty roof of Big Hall at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER 2.

The Fortunate Forty!

THE school had never, perhaps, known such wild excitement as prevailed at St. Jim's that evening.

There was not a fellow in either School House or New House who was not thrilled through and through at the idea of the world-flight of the S 1000—the School in the Clouds, as Monty Lowther had humorously nicknamed it. And since forty boys were to go in all, everyone stood a good chance!

In Common-rooms and studies, passages and even on stair-cases, seniors and juniors, from the lordly Sixth to the inky-fingered Third, could talk of nothing else.

St. Jim's was jubilant!

In all the delight and excitement that reigned, there was only one disagreeable voice to be heard. That was the voice of Frederick Burkett, the bully of the Shell.

Burkett had entered the junior Common-room in the School House that evening with a surly expression on his rugged face, to find an eager crowd of juniors gathered round the fire, in high spirits at their chances of being on board the S 1000 when the great airship left its moorings at Feneleigh Aerodrome. No one took any notice of Burkett, who was accompanied by his chum and studymate, Gerald Crooke, until Burkett planted himself by the fire, glared round, and said truculently:

"Blessed favouritism—that's what it is!"

"Eh?" said Levison of the Fourth, with a glance at him.

"What is?"

"Why, Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. going on this trip anyhow, while the rest of us have to take our chance in the ballot to-night!" growled Burkett. "Blessed favouritism!"

"Hear, hear!" chimed in Mellish, who always toadied to the bully. Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. were not present.

"Oh, rats!" said Levison impatiently. "They're old pals of Kildare's uncle—it's natural he should invite them. Nothing unfair in that."

"Of course not," agreed Kerruish of the Fourth.

Burkett glared at them.

"What's that?" he roared, frowning darkly. "I say it is unfair—thundering unfair! If anyone wants to contradict—"

He pushed back his cuffs meaningly. Levison shrugged. "Oh, we know you can lick most of us," he said with cool contempt. He was not afraid of Burkett. "But that won't alter my opinion that you're talking like a cad to complain because Sir Napier has specially invited Tom Merry and his pals!"

"What?" yelled Burkett. "So I'm a cad, am I?"

Levison's friends began to close up.

Tom Merry was the only fellow in the junior school who could deal with Burkett single-handed. But the juniors did not mean to let Burkett touch Ernest Levison, all the same.

As Levison had said, no one but Burkett & Co. had complained that it was in the least unfair for Sir Napier to have invited his special friends among the juniors, to go on the world-trip of the S 1000. No one but a fellow of Burkett's stamp would have resented it in the least.

"I'll thrash you, Levison!" said Burkett, breathing hard.

"Leave him alone, you blessed bully!" snapped Clifton Dane, the Canadian junior. "Hands off!"

"Can't Levison stick up for himself?" sneered Burkett.

And before Levison could defend himself, Burkett had dealt him a stinging blow on the side of the face with his open palm. Levison reeled, and there was a wrathful shout from the crowd of juniors.

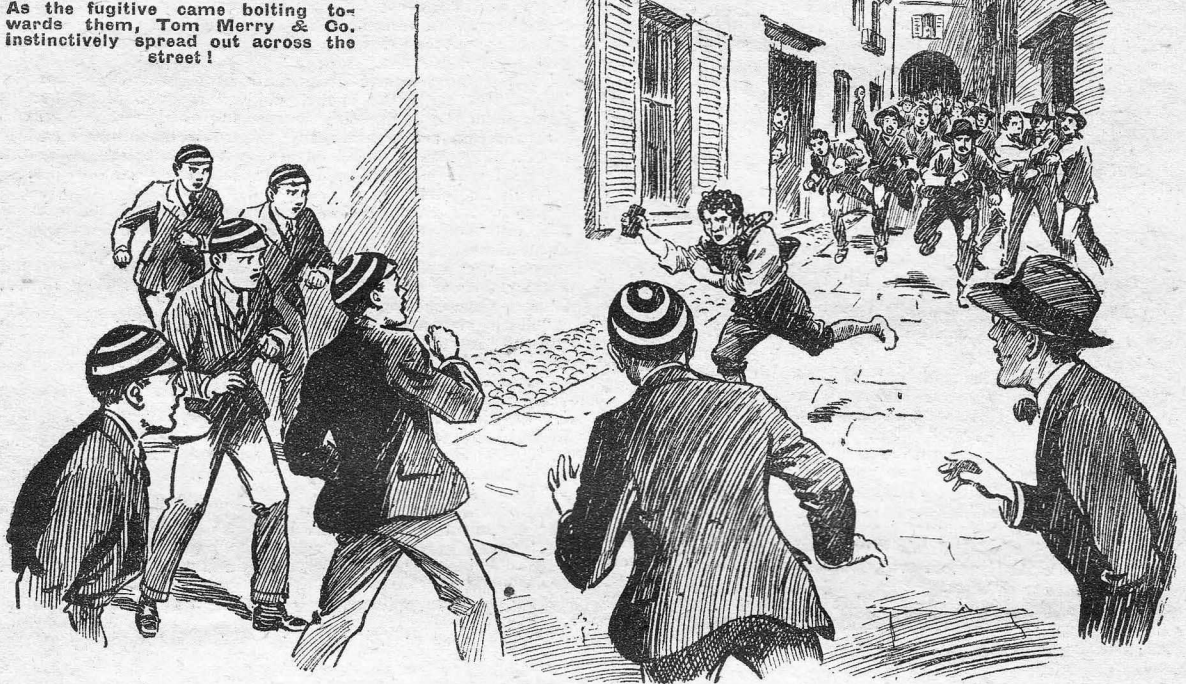
"Collar him!" yelled Bernard Glyn.

There was a rush. Crooke gave a frightened gasp, and hastily vanished out of the Common-room, leaving his hefty chum to fight his own battles! And Burkett, hefty though he was, had already discovered that he had been very rash. He was swept off his feet, and swung into the air by a dozen willing hands.

"Bump him!" grinned Sidney Olive, the South African junior.

"Leggo!" yelled Burkett, beside himself with rage. "I'll thrash the lot of you—oh! Oh, my hat! Yow!"
 Burkett roared as his big figure smote the floor.
 Bump, bump, bump!
 "Oh! Whoops!"
 Bump, bump, bump!
 "Yaroooooooooop!"

As the fugitive came bolting towards them, Tom Merry & Co. instinctively spread out across the street!



Burkett's roars echoed round the Common-room as the excited juniors bumped him mercilessly.

"Going to thrash the lot of us?" chuckled Kangaroo, the Australian junior.

"Yes!" shrieked Burkett. "I—I'll—oh crumbs! Ow! Yaroooooooooop!"

Bump, bump, bump!
 "Still going to thrash the lot?" chortled Dick Julian.

"No!" gasped Burkett. "I—I won't! Yarooooop! Leggo! Stoppit!"

The grinning juniors released him, and Burkett lay sprawling breathlessly in the centre of the crowd. He scrambled up, bruised and aching. With a ferocious glare at the grinning faces, Burkett turned towards the door without a word, and stamped out of the Common-room. A yell of derisive laughter followed him. Ernest Levison chuckled.

"Well, let's hope Burkett isn't lucky in the ballot for this giddy world flip!" he grinned.

The departure of the discomfited Burkett had cleared the air in the Common-room, and the juniors returned with excited faces to the great topic.

"It's just great!" breathed Reginald Talbot of the Shell, with shining eyes. He glanced at his watch. "The Head and Sir Napier and Mr. Railton are doing the ballot bizney now—the result ought to be out soon!"

"My hat, rather!"

"I say, I hope I go!" squeaked Baggy Trimble excitedly. "A tip like this would suit me down to the ground!"

"Why, you fat porpoise, the blessed airship couldn't even float with you on board!"

"Oh, really, Julian—"

The door swung open suddenly, and the excited face of Roylance was revealed. Roylance seemed out of breath.

"The ballot's finished!" yelled Roylance. "Kildare's just come from the Head's study with the list of chaps to go on the flight—he's pinning it up on the board now!"

"Come on!" gasped Levison.

There was a wild stampede for the door, and Baggy Trimble was knocked flying in the rush. The juniors trampled over him in a surging mass—leaving an utterly winded Baggy seated on the linoleum blinking round dazedly, counting the positive solar-system of stars that seemed to be floating round his bullet head.

"Oh!" groaned Baggy. "Grooooh! Yah! Beasts!"

But already the "beasts" had poured out into the passage, on the way to the Hall, where the tall figure of Eric Kildare could be seen turning away from the notice-board, where he had just pinned the long list of fellows who had been lucky in the ballot, and were accordingly to go on board the S 1000 when the giant dirigible left its moorings at Fenleigh Aerodrome for its world flight!

"It seems almost too wondahful to be twue, deah boys! Think of it—wound the world in an airship! I feel I must be dweamin'!"

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy gazed through his gleaming monocle at the fellows gathered in Study No 10 of the Shell passage with shining eyes.

It was later in the evening, and Study No. 10 was crammed. Most of the School House juniors who had been chosen by Sir Napier Wynter, or selected by the luck of the ballot, to go on the S 1000, had collected in Tom Merry's study to discuss their glorious good fortune. They were seething with excitement.

In accordance with the suggestion made by Sir Napier, where possible the balloting had been worked by the studies. In the Fourth, the lucky ones had proved to be Ralph Reckness Cardew and his two chums, Levison and Clive of Study No. 9, and Kit Wil Drake, Percy Mellish, and Baggy Trimble of Study No. 2. In the Shell, the lot had fallen upon Studies Nos. 7 and 9; so that Reginald Talbot, Herbert Skimpole, the freak of the Shell, and Gore were eligible, and Burkett and Crooke. But since George Gore was away from the school, ill, his place had been balloted for afresh, with the result that George Alfred Grundy was to go in his stead.

In the New House, Figgins, Kerr, Fatty Wynn, Redfern, and his two chums, Lawrence and Owen. Figgins & Co. were in Study No. 10 now, House rivalries being shelved in the feverish excitement that prevailed!

"Yaas, I weally feel I must be dweamin', deah boys!" repeated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy solemnly. "I feel I need pinchin' in ordah to be quite suah I am weally awake! I considah—oh! Yow! Yawoooooooooop!"

Arthur Augustus had leaped into the air with a sudden yell.

Monty Lowther had taken the swell of St. Jim's at his

word, and administered a hearty pinch to Gussy's aristocratic leg. The swell of St. Jim's glared at him.

"You uttah boundah, Lowthah! You pinched me——"
 "But I thought you wanted someone to pinch you, old chap?" queried Lowther innocently.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 The juniors coared. Arthur Augustus choked.
 "You—you uttah boundah! I have a vewy good mind to administrate a feahful thwashin'——"

"I guess there isn't room enough in here for that, Cuthbert, with this crowd," grinned Cyrus K. Handcock.

"Bai Jove! My name is not Cuthbaht——"
 "Oh, ring off, Gussy, for goodness' sake!" groaned Figgins. "This is no time for giddy rows! Think of it, you chaps—on Tuesday we'll be off on the S 1000 to fly round the world! My hat! Just think of it! Old Gussy's right—it's almost like a blessed dream——"

There was a tap on the door. It opened to reveal the stalwart figure of Eric Kildare.

"Bed-time, kids! Buzz along!"
 At sight of the captain of St. Jim's there were eager, excited exclamations from the crowd gathered in Study No. 10.

"Good old Kildare!" yelled Kit Wildrake.
 "Hurrah!"

"Three cheers for Kildare and his uncle, you chaps!" cried Tom Merry breathlessly.

But Kildare held up his hand in quick protest.
 "Thanks, kids," he said hastily, "but steady your hosses! You've made enough row in here to-night already!" His eyes twinkled. "Cut along to bed now!"

"All right, deah boy!"
 "Pleasant dreams!" grinned Kildare, as the crowd made their way out into the passage, their faces still alight with excitement. "Next Tuesday will soon be here!"

"My hat, rather!"
 "What-ho!"

The captain of St. Jim's stood watching with smiling eyes as the excited juniors crowded round the stairs on their way to the dormitories.

He could guess well enough that sleep would be a long time coming to some of the fellows in the junior dormitories that night!

CHAPTER 3.

Good-bye to England!

"HERE she comes!"
 A huge crowd was gathered in the old quad of St. Jim's.

After what had seemed the slowest week on record to the fellows who were booked for the world-trip in the S 1000, Tuesday had come at last!

That morning, the forty odd seniors and juniors in question had gone off with their luggage, watched by the envious eyes of those who had to stay behind. With plenty of noise on the part of the lucky juniors, and cheerful smiles on the faces of the seniors, the fortunate forty had driven away in taxis to the railway station, together with Mr. Railton and Mr. Lathom, to take train to Feneigh Aerodrome. Their jubilation had been so infectious that even the fellows left behind had overcome their disappointment, and had given them a rousing cheer in a real sporting spirit as they departed.

It was early afternoon now. The S 1000 would fly over the school to say good-bye before turning southwards to cross the English Channel, and the quad was crowded with eager fellows on the look-out for the great airship.

The masters, too, had gathered in a group by the steps of the School House, Dr. Holmes among them, watching the sky for the first sign of the dirigible.

"Here she comes!"
 The excited shout broke first from a Fifth-Former standing on the New House steps. He flung out a pointing hand.

Over the trees a glittering silver shape was humming steadily through the air towards St. Jim's. Far off though she still was, the huge black figures painted on the silver skin could be made out clearly—S 1000.

"Here she comes!"

The shout was taken up on all sides, deafeningly, scaring the rooks out of the old elms. A sea of faces was turned skywards, and a forest of hands began to wave excitedly.

With purring engines, steady as a ship on a calm sea, the great air liner drew swiftly nearer across the distant stretch of Rylcombe Woods. A tremendous cheer greeted it as it passed across the quad, circling slowly above the grey old buildings, while the fellows below waved their caps and handkerchiefs in wild enthusiasm. The masters were waving their mortar-boards—even the Head! Old

Taggles was excitedly brandishing his broom, and from the doorway of the sanny Marie Rivers, the pretty school nurse, waved an apron with eager delight.

Tiny faces could be seen staring down from above, waving back, as the airship circled above the quad, its engines droning rhythmically.

"Lucky dogs!" chuckled Kerruish, of the Fourth.
 "Hallo! What's this?" cried Rushden of the Sixth.

A dark shape had fallen from the airship, was swooping down into the quad. There were excited shouts—and then a great yell of laughter.

For the object dropping from the S 1000 into the old quad was a gleaming topper!

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been wearing it as he leaned out with the crowd of juniors who were staring down from the promenade deck of the airship—and someone had reached out a hand and tipped it off his aristocratic head! The swell of St. Jim's, with a startled yell, had clutched wildly at his falling tile, but had been too late.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The crowd below rocked with merriment at the sight of that polished article of headgear floating down through the autumn sunlight. There was a rush to catch it—and Gussy's topper vanished into the midst of a struggling, chortling throng. When at last it was collared by Mulvaney minor, it was unrecognisable as a topper at all.

"Here you are, Gussy, me darlint!" yelled the Irish junior, flinging the battered tile on high as if to return it to the airship above.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 Again the gleaming dirigible turned, to encircle the quad for the last time. Then it turned away over the playing-fields, heading south. A terrific cheer followed it.

"Good-bye, and good luck!" shouted somebody, and the good wishes were taken up on all sides.

"Good luck!" yelled St. Jim's.

Smaller and smaller grew the glittering silver shape in the sky; fainter and fainter grew the drone of the engines. At last the great airship vanished altogether in the autumn haze—with only the ruin of Gussy's best topper left behind for a souvenir.

The flying schoolboys were on their way at last!

"Well, I guess that's good-bye to the old college for a spell, buddies!" chuckled Cyrus K. Handcock, standing by the mica windows in the long starboard promenade deck of the S 1000.

The buildings of St. Jim's had been lost to view in the distance, among the trees, as the airship droned on its way.

"No, we shan't set eyes on St. Jim's again for quite a while," nodded Tom Merry. "I——"

"Look heah, I want to know who tipped off my toppah——"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy, about that blessed topper!"
 "Wats! I considah that tippin' off a fellow's toppah is an act appwoachin' wuffianism and hooliganism——"

"Never mind, old chap!" grinned Monty Lowther.
 "You've got plenty more toppers with you! I saw about fifty hat-boxes in your luggage!"

"Bai Jove! I have only twelve hat-boxes with me——"
 "Twelve?" shrieked Jack Blake.

"Yaas, only twelve. And there are only six toppahs. Considewin' that we shall pass through the twopics, I ordahed a numbah of sun-helmets and othah kinds of hats that might pwov' necessawy on our twavels. I wepeat, I insist upon knowin' who tipped off my toppah!"

And with a wrathfully gleaming eye, Arthur Augustus surveyed the crowd of grinning juniors gathered in the promenade deck, and breathed very hard.

But his question went unanswered! The juniors were too busy by far watching the countryside below them, as the airship, mounting steadily, swept on towards the distant Channel.

As yet they had not fully explored the airship by any means. There would be plenty of time for that later. On the dirigible there were numerous lounges and saloons, as well as a huge dining-room; four promenade decks, two on either side, one above the other; numerous corridors lined with sleeping-berths and a tiny gymnasium! In addition, of course, there were the big kitchens and crew's quarters.

Sir Napier Wynter and Mr. Railton had already explained that the lower starboard promenade deck was for the exclusive use of the juniors—that was where they were gathered now. The deck above was the select domain of the Fifth-Formers and the Sixth. The five fags who were with the party—Wally D'Arcy, Reggie Manners, Frankie Levison, Curly Gibson, and Jameson—had quarters more or less to themselves, as well.

"Isn't this just great?" breathed Talbot, as he stared down at the woods and fields and rivers that seemed to drift by beneath like toy models.

"Look heah, about my toppah——"

"Oh, ring off, Gussy!" yelled Wildrake.
 "Wats! I considah—" said Arthur Augustus was seized and bumped, despite his yells—after which he gave up the problem as to whose hand had tipped off his cherished tile!
 "Hallo, you chaps!" It was the booming voice of George Alfred Grundy, who had stepped out on to the deck from one of the saloons. "We ought to be at Paris in less than a couple of hours at this rate! That's where we're stopping first, you know, before going on to Italy!"
 "We know that, ass!" said Levison.
 Grundy tapped himself on the chest.
 "I'm the chap you'd better hang on to when we're in these foreign countries, you know," he said impressively, glancing round the crowd of juniors. "I'll show you round!"

"Bai Jove! Gwunday, you uttah ass—" said Figgins.
 "Why, you—you burbling idiot!" gasped Figgins.
 Tom Merry chuckled. The idea of George Alfred Grundy taking the others under his wing in the foreign lands they were to visit struck him as decidedly comic.

Grundy sniffed.
 "You asses don't realise the difficulties, you know!" he said loftily.
 "These foreign lingoes, frinstance. Now, in France, for example, you'll need a French scholar like me to do all the talking for you. S'pose you're in a cab and you want the Froggy driver to buck up, you have to say 'Vitement, cochon!'"

"What!" yelled Manners.
 "O h, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 The juniors shrieked. Grundy, apparently, was thinking of "cocher," the French word for "coachman."
 "Cochon," however, meant "pig," and if Grundy began addressing French cabmen as "pig" the result would probably be well worth watching.

"What are you cackling at?" roared Grundy. "Just because you don't understand French you laugh at a chap who can, you blessed ignorant dummies! I tell you, you'll need me. When we get to Italy, now, you'll need me to talk to the Italianos in Latin—"

"Latin!" shrieked Dick Redfern, of the New House.
 "Oh, my giddy aunt!" grinned Tom Merry. "You don't talk Latin in Italy, you ass!"
 "Of course they do!" roared Grundy. "I shouldn't display your ignorance like that, Tom Merry. Latin's what the Romans talked, ain't it? And ain't Rome the capital of Italy? Well, then—"

"But, my dear Grundy," broke in Herbert Skimpole, the freak of the Shell, blinking at Grundy through his glimmering spectacles beneath his bulging brow, "I can assure you that Latin, though once, indeed, the language of Rome, is now a defunct tongue. The modern Italian language, though somewhat akin to the Latin of the ancients—"

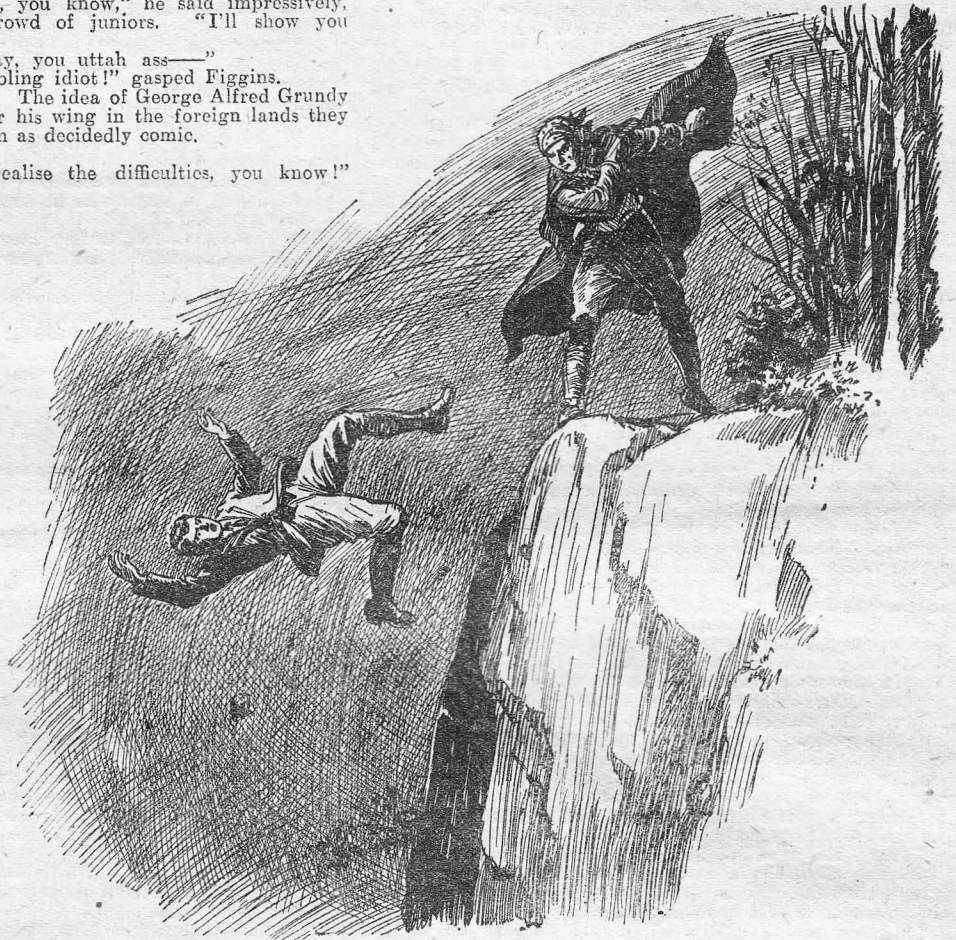
"He's swallowed a dictionary!" growled Herries.
 "Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Oh, ring off, Skimpole!" growled Grundy. "Of course they all talk Latin in Italy! I'd have thought you knew that much, Skimpole, you ass! Dash it all, what was good enough for Julius Cæsar ought to be good enough for any Italian, oughtn't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 There was evidently no use arguing with the great George Alfred Grundy! So the juniors gave it up, and

returned to the long windows beside them, eagerly watching the countryside below. From Jack Blake there broke a sudden excited cry.

"Look! The sea!"
 Ahead of them could be seen the blue waters of the English Channel, with the ships upon it looking like toys. There was a step behind them. It was Mr. Railton. The young master's face was cheerful and smiling. It was evident that he was enjoying the prospect of their world-flight as much as the juniors on board!

"Yes, we'll be saying good-bye to good Old England soon!" he exclaimed, with a laugh. "We'll be out over the Channel very soon now!"



The next moment Lowther was hurried backwards over the rocky brink!

"Oh, good egg!" squeaked the excited voice of Baggy Trimble.

"Isn't this great, sir?" grinned Ernest Levison.
 "It certainly is!" laughed Mr. Railton. "We have a wonderful trip in front of us!"

But neither Mr. Railton nor the excited juniors dreamed, as the great airship swept high above the white cliffs of England, out over the sea, of the amazing adventures that the future held in store for the boys of the School in the Clouds!

CHAPTER 4. Count Roma!

IT took several days for those on board the airship to grow more or less used to their life on board.

It was a queer mixture!
 After the first day usual school hours were observed on board, whether the S 1000 was in flight or at rest at one of the foreign places they were visiting. The Shell fellows and the Fourth-Formers were for the time being working as one Form under Mr. Lathom, and Wally & Co. of the Third occupied the same "Form-room," although they were given different work. The fags had never been

so proud in their lives before as they were now, at finding themselves at lessons with the Fourth and Shell!

Mr. Railton took the Fifth and Sixth-Formers in another of the big saloons.

It was certainly curious, the juniors found, to be busy with algebra or Latin high among the clouds, with the drone of the airship's engines in their ears, and the floor of their Form-room swaying a trifle every now and again! But they became used to it after a few days, and so did Mr. Lathom, to the unfortunate extent of awarding lines to his pupils when necessary, just as though in his own Form-room at St. Jim's!

But lessons were shelved altogether sometimes, when the juniors went on sight-seeing excursions from various airports. They had a great time in Paris, and during their brief stop at Monte Carlo. After that the S 1000 crossed the frontier into Italy, and called at Venice and Florence. A little more than a week after leaving St. Jim's the world-fiers found themselves in Rome.

At Rome, to his great astonishment, Grundy discovered that the Italians did not seem to speak Latin, after all! Even if they had, it was perhaps a little doubtful whether they would have understood Grundy's Latin!

The S 1000 came to its moorings at an aerodrome on the outskirts of the ancient Italian capital early one afternoon. By tea-time Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co., Talbot, Levison, and Clive were strolling across St. Peter's Square sight-seeing, and enjoying themselves thoroughly.

Cardew had not accompanied Levison and Clive. The slacker of the Fourth had decided that he felt too lazy just then, and so they had left him, to their deep disgust, reclining languidly on a couch in the juniors' lounge on board the airship, his eyes closed, and a cushion behind his elegant head.

"Fancy the blessed slacker not coming out!" snorted Clive indignantly, returning to the question of Cardew as the little party of juniors sought out a cafe and settled themselves at two or three little tables overlooking the street, while Tom Merry ordered tea and cakes. "Of all the slacking asses—"

"Well, we're staying in Rome a week, I believe," grinned Talbot. "I suppose Cardew thought there was plenty of time to see the place!"

"Wome looks wathah a wippin' spot to me, deah boys," murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, surveying the sunny street through his famous monocle. "I'm glad Sir Napiiah has awwanged for us to stay heah a while."

As the juniors enjoyed their tea they watched the busy life in the little Italian street in which the cafe was situated. Dark-skinned men and women, with smiling faces, white teeth, chattering in rapid Italian, passing to and fro; the policemen, always in pairs, with the Napoleon-like hats, and swords and cloaks; Italian motor-cars, looking queerly modern in contrast with the medieval atmosphere of the buildings, with their flat, shuttered windows; it was all very foreign and interesting to the juniors from England.

"I say, this wouldn't half be an easy place to get lost in!" remarked Blake suddenly, as they were strolling away from the cafe a little later, threading their way through a maze of narrow streets.

"I guess you've said a mouthful!" agreed Cyrus K. Handcock. "These 'vias,' or whatever they call their streets in this burg, look all alike to me!"

A few minutes later Tom Merry, who had a map, came to a halt.

"Blessed if I don't think we're pretty well lost already, you chaps!" He glanced up at the name of the street they had just turned into—a narrow, crooked alley running between high, flat-fronted houses, with olive-skinned Italians lounging in some of the rather dingy doorways, smoking cigarettes. "This is called the Via Galeotta, but I'm blessed if I can see it marked on the map!"

Arthur Augustus glanced a trifle uneasily at the figures lounging in the doorways near them. They certainly looked like thorough desperadoes for the most part, with their glittering black eyes and soft, black hats and their cigarettes.

"Bai Jove, Tom Mewwy, deah boy! I twust we shall not get weally lost!" murmured the swell of St. Jim's nervously. "They are wathah a tough-lookin' c'woud awound heah!"

"Oh, they're all right!" grinned Tom. "Decent enough Italian workmen, back home from their day's job, most of 'em, I expect!" He chuckled. "They do look like brigands, p'r'aps!"

"Bai Jove! I twust you are wight, deah boy, and they are simply ordinawy workin' chaps!" breathed Arthur Augustus anxiously. "I considah—"

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The swell of St. Jim's did not finish his words.

From down the narrow, crooked little Italian street had come a sudden startling shout. The juniors glanced round swiftly, and a breathless cry broke from Tom Merry.

A handsome, old Italian gentleman whom they had noticed passing them a minute before, was racing after an olive-skinned little figure that was tearing up the street towards the juniors, something clutched in his hand.

It was clear enough what had happened. It was a case of pickpocketing.

The Italians in the doorways were watching the scene with startled surprise, but so far none of them had made any attempt to try to intercept the scoundrel's flight, despite the excited cries of the gentleman who had been robbed.

He was a tall, dignified figure, with a flowing white moustache, dressed in black. As he ran after the thief, who had taken his notecase, apparently, he gave an excited shout in Italian at seeing the rat-like little figure of the pickpocket miss his footing and sprawl headlong. He quickened his speed desperately, and pounced upon the pickpocket as the latter was scrambling up.

"Look out!" yelled Tom Merry—the instinctive cry breaking from him in English as he saw a sudden flash of steel in the sunlight.

The little scoundrel, seeing himself almost caught, had snatched out a glittering stiletto and hurled it at his would-be captor.

It struck the old gentleman in the left shoulder, and he staggered, with a cry of pain, the knife quivering where it had struck. The rat-like little Italian who had flung it turned and fled up the street again, bolting for the narrow cross-roads at which the St. Jim's juniors were standing.

"Collar him!" gasped Blake.

By now the street was filled with excited, running figures, and breathless torrents of Italian, as the loungers in the doorways woke to life, some of them going to the aid of the old gentleman, who had dropped against the wall, his face deathly white, others racing after his assailant. But that the little scoundrel would have made good his escape without much difficulty was certain, had it not been for the St. Jim's juniors!

As the snarling fugitive came bolting towards them, they spread out instinctively across the street. He tried to get through by swerving between Herries and Sidney Clive. But the juniors were too quick for him, and the next moment the rascally little Italian was struggling on the ground, with Herries and the South African junior on top of him, and the rest of the party from the airship closing in.

He was as wiry as an eel, and somehow succeeded in getting free from Herries and Clive. But then he was collared by Tom Merry, Talbot, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and Handcock, and held, despite his struggles, while a torrent of evil abuse burst from him—fortunately in Italian.

"Got him, bai Jove!" panted Arthur Augustus.

"I guess so!" grinned Handcock.

"Diavolo!" shrieked the little Italian, struggling frantically, dropping the stolen notecase in his excitement. "Per Dio—"

"I guess I dunno what that means, buddy," cut in Cyrus K. Handcock, "but I don't like the sound of it! Put a sock in it—see?"

Tom Merry stooped quickly and picked up the fallen notecase.

"Hold him, you chaps!" he said curtly.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"We've got him!"

As if realising that he could not escape from the grasp of the athletic juniors, and seeing a couple of cloaked police hurrying down the street, the ratlike little man stopped his torrential abuse, and began to whimper and whine. The juniors could not understand a word; but if their captive was asking to be freed, he was likely to be disappointed, as Monty Lowther remarked, with a grim chuckle.

A little way along the pavement the injured gentleman had been helped to his feet. He was standing now coolly dabbing at his wounded shoulder with a white silk handkerchief. Fortunately, it had not been a very severe wound that the stiletto had inflicted.

He strode towards the juniors, and swept off his hat, speaking in Italian. Tom Merry held out the notecase.

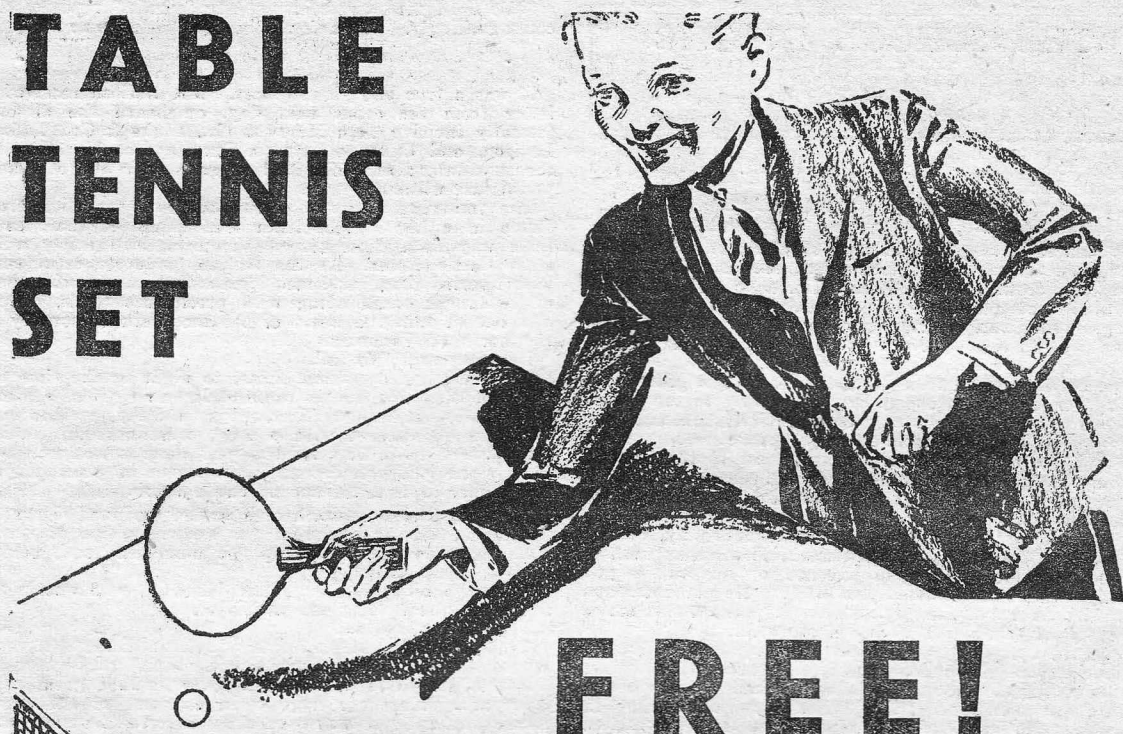
"I am sorry, we do not speak Italian, signor," he said, with a smile, wondering if the man with the white moustache would understand.

"Of course—I see you are English, my young friends," came the prompt reply, spoken in almost perfect English,

(Continued on page 10.)

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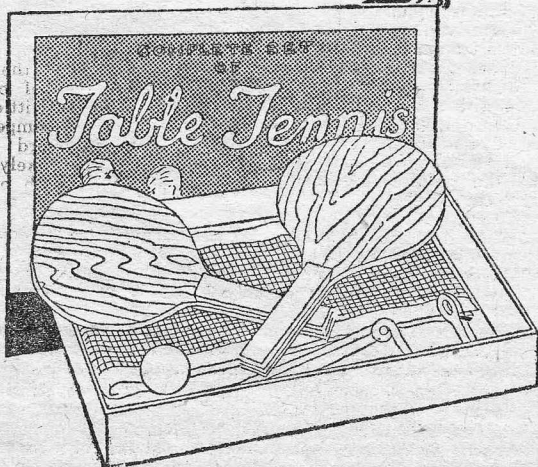


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THE SCHOOL IN THE CLOUDS!

(Continued from page 8.)

though with a trace of soft Italian accent. "I thank you from my heart!"

"It was nothing, signor!" said Tom Merry. "We just happened to be here, so, of course, we collared the rascal!"

By now the two police, in their surprising uniforms, had arrived on the scene, and taken the pickpocket in charge. An excited crowd surrounded the chief actors in the breathless little drama, and it was clear from the flashing smiles and grins that were directed towards the English youngsters, that they had made themselves quite popular in the Via Galeotta.

The old gentleman took his notecase, with a grave bow, from Tom Merry's extended hand. Turning to the policemen, he spoke for a few moments in liquid Italian, and presented them with his card. The pickpocket was marched off, and the old gentleman turned again to the juniors, who were beginning to feel a little self-conscious at being the centre of the voluble crowd, and were wondering about slipping away.

"Let's hop off!" muttered Digby uncomfortably.

"But no!" smiled the old gentleman, who had apparently heard the words. "I beg of you not to 'hop off,' as you call it, until I have thanked you fully!" He glanced round in rather an imperious way. "Though perhaps this crowd annoys you? To be sure! Let us leave this spot."

With the upright figure of their new acquaintance marching beside them, his handsome, eagle features and glittering eyes as composed as though he had never had a narrow shave from a stiletto in his life, the juniors turned out of the Via Galeotta, followed by a shout of applause from the excited crowd of blue-chinned Italians.

In a cafe on one of the fashionable thoroughfares of the city, not far from the famous ruins of the Coliseum, the juniors learnt something of their host, who—despite the fact that they had just had tea—had insisted upon giving them refreshment.

They had already guessed, from his distinguished manner and bearing, that he was a "somebody"—probably an aristocrat of some ancient Italian family. Their surmise was correct. He was, they learnt, Count Roma. And in the course of conversation they found that he did not live in Rome, but at an ancient castle in the mountains, a hundred miles from the city, which his family had occupied for centuries.

It was evident, as he talked, that his shoulder was giving him pain. But when Tom Merry suggested that he should visit a doctor, he brushed the suggestion aside almost haughtily.

"It is nothing—a mere scratch!" He glanced round the little party of juniors. "You are visiting Rome for long?"

"For about a week," said Monty Lowther. "We're here on an educational trip, you see."

Briefly Lowther explained about the world-flight of the S 1000. The count, who had apparently seen the airship fly over the city on its arrival, was keenly interested, and asked numerous questions.

"So," he said at last, "you are here for a week, my young friends? I have a suggestion to make. If your tutors will grant permission, would you stay with me for a few days in the mountains? Will you visit me at Castle Roma?"

There were eager, breathless exclamations from the juniors.

"Bai Jove! That would be wippin', sir!" breathed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy excitedly.

"Just swell!" grinned Handcock.

"You're awfully kind, sir!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "We'd love it!"

Count Roma glanced round at their shining eyes with a smile. His handsome old face, white-haired and aquiline, was pleasant and kindly, despite the look of austere hauteur that it could wear as they had seen.

"Buono!"

From his pocket Count Roma took a pen and paper, and wrote down Mr. Railton's name, as Tom Merry told him. He returned it to his pocket, and rose.

"And now, I regret deeply, I must leave you, my young friends. But we shall meet again, I know—at Castle Roma!"

He held out his hand, and the juniors grasped it in turn. They left the cafe together, and said good-bye in the golden Italian sunlight.

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"We shall meet again, my young friends," repeated the count smilingly. "In a few days—at Castle Roma!"

It was a true enough prophecy. Mr. Railton received a letter from the count next day, on board the airship, formally inviting Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., Talbot, Levison, and Clive to spend a few days at his castle in the mountains; and Mr. Railton gave them the necessary permission without demur.

The following day the eleven of them travelled from Rome in a big Italian train that deposited them at a little wayside station named Vannoza, still thirty miles from Castle Roma. At the station three powerful cars, with liveried chauffeurs, met them and drove off with them at breakneck speed along wild precipitous roads, deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountainous country to the north of Vannoza.

Darkness began to fall.

The dusk had deepened almost to night by the time the party of St. Jim's juniors came at last in sight of a black, romantic-looking pile outlined against the sky, perched high amid the mountains, with a long, winding road leading up to it—a road that twisted past deep precipices, over little stone bridges, through black woods of pines, higher and higher towards the ancient castle above.

"I guess this is a peach of a castle," grinned Cyrus K. Handcock, staring ahead at the nearing shape of Castle Roma, as the cars swept up the mountain road, behind glaring headlamps.

"Looks a bit grim," suggested Manners, who was in the same car—the leading one of the three.

Tom Merry laughed.

"It'll be cosy enough inside, I'll bet! But it all looks more like the fifteenth century than the twentieth, I will say!"

At last the three purring cars drew up in a great stone courtyard, before the huge main entrance of the castle. Almost instantly it was opened by a liveried manservant. The tall, upright figure of the count was outlined black against the light within.

The juniors piled out cheerily.

But their faces might, perhaps, have been grave as they mounted the wide flight of steps towards the lighted doorway had they known then all that was to occur within and around the walls of the great castle that frowned down upon them like some mountain fastness of the Middle Ages!

Count Roma came down the steps to meet them, his hand outstretched.

"Welcome!" cried the count. "Welcome to Castle Roma!"

CHAPTER 5.

The Vendetta of the Romas!

"BUCK up, Gussy!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"Get a move on!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Hewwies! I am tyin' my tie—"

"That's just the trouble," groaned Digby. "You've been tying it for the last ten giddy minutes, you dummy—and you aren't ready yet! And we've got to be down to dinner in about two seconds or we'll be late!"

"Yaas, but—"

"And we aren't going to keep the count waiting for you, either!" snorted Blake. "Finish tying that rotten tie, and come on!"

"I am bein' as quick as I can!" sniffed Arthur Augustus. "I insist upon havin' my tie cov'wectly tied!"

Blake, Herries, and Digby groaned in unison.

The chums of the Fourth were gathered in the spacious room which they were sharing during their few days' stay at Castle Roma. Though it was lit with electric light, it was like a room from a past century, with its tapestried walls and shadowy arched ceiling, and dark old furniture, and the pointed window that were hidden now behind great curtains.

"There, deah boys!"

Arthur Augustus had adjusted his natty tie to his complete satisfaction at last.

"Come on, then, dummy!"

"Bai Jove! I wufese to be alluded to as a dummay, Dig!"

"You can refuse if you want to—but come on!" snapped Robert Arthur Digby, opening the heavy old door and leading the way out into the corridor.

With Arthur Augustus glancing at his chums very frigidly Blake & Co. descended the wide staircase to the huge hall of the castle, where softly shaded lamps illumined the splendours of the marble-flagged floor and the lofty painted ceiling. Tom Merry & Co. were already standing by the

fireplace, with Talbot, Levison, and Clive. Despite the warm Italian sunshine that had been flooding down all day, it was cold in the mountains after nightfall, and the roaring fire of pine logs was very welcome.

A minute later Count Roma appeared and led the way into the spacious dining-room, where a long table, glittering with silver, was laid for the meal, while liveried footmen stood silently waiting by the shadowy walls. Dim paintings of dead and gone Romas stared down from the panelling as the count and his schoolboy guests took their places.

"Yes, those are my ancestors," smiled their host, noticing the eyes of some of the juniors fastened with interest on the big paintings, after the meal had commenced. "That one there," he added, indicating the portrait of a man in highly-ornamented armour, "was a Count Roma, who lived in the seventeenth century. He was killed in the courtyard of this castle, treacherously, by an enemy."

"Who was the enemy, sir?" queried Talbot, with interest. "His name was Count Santana."

It seemed to Tom Merry that there was a queer note in Count Roma's voice as he spoke that name.

"And who is the one beside him, sir?" asked Blake. "His son," came the answer. "He killed the man who had slain his father, and was killed in his turn by the next Count Santana."

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "Wathah a wuff pewid of histowy—what?"

"Yes, those were rough times," nodded Count Roma gravely. "A time of blood-feuds and vendettas!"

"Must have been pretty exciting!" grinned Herries. "But it's a good job they're over, isn't it?"

Count Roma smiled. It was a queer smile. "Perhaps they are not entirely over, my young friend,"

he answered sadly. "In England, yes; but here in Italy I regret to inform you there are still those who are foolish enough—wicked enough—to keep alive the vendettas of the past. My own family—"

He broke off with a shrug. The juniors glanced at one another. It was Talbot who broke the sudden silence.

"Surely, sir, you don't mean that—that you—"

"Myself, I bear enmity to no man," said the count quietly. "But I am by no means sure that there is not a man who bears bitter enmity towards me on account of the centuries-old vendetta that has existed between the Santanas and the Romas. For hundreds of years, you must understand, the Romas and the Santanas have slain one another—by poison, by knife, or by flying bullet! My own father died at the hands of a Santana, in a duel fought forty years ago. I am the last of the Romas. By the laws of vendetta, it is for me to avenge the death of my father by taking the life of a Santana!"

"M-my hat!" breathed Manners, with a startled glance at Tom Merry.

The count glanced round the table, with a quiet shrug. The shaded lamplight lit up his fine old face. He rose to his feet and crossed to one of the great windows, drawing aside the heavy curtain. Outside, the mountains were bright with moonlight.

Count Roma flung out a pointing hand. Across the deep valley, on the farther line of hills, a distant castle could be seen—a jagged hump against the stars.

"That, my young friends, is Castle Santana!"

A queer, inexplicable thrill ran through the juniors as they turned in their chairs, some half-risen to their feet, and stared through the great window at the far-off castle across the valley, outlined black against the sky—the castle whose occupants had for centuries waged a relentless feud against the occupants of Castle Roma!

The count let the curtain fall into place, and returned to his chair. He smiled.

"I can assure you, my young friends, that, so far as I am concerned, that feud shall die for ever! Count Santana is no friend of mine." For a moment his eyes became shadowed. "But he has nothing to fear from me. The vendetta between the Romas and the Santanas will never be revived by the last of the Romas!"

There was a moment or two of silence in the great dining-room, broken by the soft footsteps of the servants. "Is the present Count Santana the last of his line, sir?" asked Tom Merry curiously, after a while.

"No," the count told him. "Count Santana has a nephew, who is his heir, to carry on his name. I—I envy him." He smiled again sadly. "Strange that, by the laws of vendetta, it is my duty to avenge the death of my father at the hands of a Santana by slaying either the present Count Santana or his nephew—someone of his blood. A 'duty' which I shall never carry out, pray Heaven—"

He broke off sharply. The door of the room had swung open, and a man in livery, evidently striving to suppress his keen excitement, hurried into the room. He crossed quickly to the count's chair, and spoke rapidly in Italian.

A queer change came into the face of Count Roma.

He answered briefly, and the servant withdrew. For moments the count sat staring straight before him. His fingers were holding the stem of his wineglass, and suddenly the slender stem snapped.

"Count Roma, there's nothing the matter?" exclaimed Tom Merry anxiously, started.

The count glanced at him with a queer look. For a moment he did not speak. When he did his voice was almost unnaturally level and steady.

"My servant tells me that Count Santana's nephew has been found on the mountainside an hour ago—with a knife in his heart!"

CHAPTER 6.

Count Santana!

"GOOD heavens!" breathed Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove!" The swell of St. Jim's tone was incredibly startled. "How tewwible!"

"Yes," nodded the count. "Terrible!"

"And—and how queer!" put in Clive breathlessly.

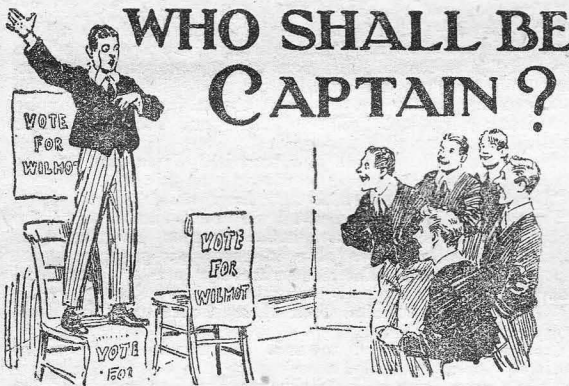
"After we had just been talking about—about—"

"About the vendetta!" cut in the count. "Yes, it is strange enough. And tragic!" His eyes became shadowed.

"If Count Santana should imagine that I am responsible for his nephew's death—"

"Great Scott!" muttered Tom Merry, shooting the count a startled look.

He understood now the reason of the perturbation that Count Roma had displayed on first learning of the tragic



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news. The count was anxious for the age-old vendetta between his family and the Santanas to die out. If Count Santana believed that his nephew had been murdered by Count Roma, as was possible, since the vendetta existed, the old blood-feud of the two families would be revived at once with all its old bitterness.

"Who can have killed the count's nephew, signor?" asked Tom Merry quickly.

Count Roma shrugged.

"Who knows? Perhaps the Red Eagle!"

"The Red Eagle?" echoed Blake. "Who on earth—"

"Of course, you will not have heard of the Red Eagle," nodded the count. "You are fortunate! He is a brigand—a murderous scoundrel, who haunts these mountains from Vannoza to Manaccio. His lair has never been discovered, though time and again soldiers have been sent to rout him out. As well search for a needle in a haystack, as the English proverb says! Even the identity of the Red Eagle is unknown. No one knows his true name. He is the Red Eagle, that is all! They say that few of his own cut-throats know who he really is, or have even seen his face, for he wears always a silken scarf, in colour scarlet, across his evil countenance."

"For the love of Mike," ejaculated Cyrus K. Hancock, "whadya know about that?"

"And you think that it is the Red Eagle who killed Count Santana's nephew?" breathed Digby.

The count shrugged.

"Who knows? It is very possible that one of the Red Eagle's bandits, wandering on the mountainside, attacked Ridolfo Santana—that is the nephew's name—and thrust a knife into his heart before robbing him of any valuables that he carried." Again he shrugged. "I am sorry; though, in truth, Ridolfo Santana was a worthless fellow—a gambler and a rake, like all the Santanas."

"You don't think Count Santana'll think you killed his nephew because of the vendetta?" broke in Herries excitedly.

"Who knows?" replied the count quietly. "Pray Heaven he does not!"

He rose to his feet. The meal was over. Count Roma led the way out into the huge, marble-flagged hall. The juniors gathered round the log fire, most of them watching the count's handsome, eagle-like face, lit by the dancing flames, shadowed with a scarcely veiled anxiety.

There was a sudden thunderous knocking on the great door near them. The count started, his flashing eyes fastening upon the door questioningly. A liveried servant appeared, and crossed noiseless behind them and swung the door open.

A tall figure came striding in, thrusting the servant aside—a man in black riding-breeches, with a velvet coat, and a wide black hat drawn down over his lean, sallow face.

A pair of glittering black eyes swept round the hall. From Count Roma there broke a breathless exclamation:

"Conte Santana!"

Count Santana! Tom Merry felt a queer cold thrill run down his spine as, for a moment, his gaze met the glittering eyes of Count Roma's hereditary enemy. Santana swept off his hat, revealing fully his dark, handsome, evil face. He strode towards Count Roma, halted before him, and bowed stiffly.

"Pardon my intrusion, your Excellency!" His voice was harsh; he spoke in Italian. "I have come here to-night to return to you your knife. No doubt you value it. It was found in the heart of my nephew!"

Count Roma drew himself to his full height. Never for a moment did his eyes leave those of Count Santana.

"Your Excellency, you are grievously mistaken," he answered quietly. He did not even glance down at the knife that the other was holding out towards him on an open palm. "That is not my knife. I know nothing of your nephew's death! Believe me, I regret his death most deeply!"

"Indeed?" sneered Santana. "Your Excellency, I regret to tell you that you lie!"

Count Roma stiffened as though from a blow in the face. His eyes flashed. But he controlled himself astonishingly, so that not even by the flicker of an eyelid did he betray his feelings after the first moment. He answered in calm tones:

"Count Santana, I repeat that you are mistaken. I know nothing of your nephew's death."

"Count Roma, I repeat that you lie!"

Roma shrugged helplessly.

"This is mere deadlock, your Excellency," he said quietly. "I beg of you to believe me. Surely you know that I have no dearer wish than that the feud between our names shall come to an end? Has there not been enough blood needlessly shed during the last five hundred years between our families? In Heaven's name, let this tragic folly cease!"

Count Santana laughed. It was a cold-blooded sound. He tossed the knife contemptuously at Count Roma's feet.

"You cannot deceive me with this talk, Count Roma. Your Excellency cannot escape the consequences of this crime! I, the last of the Santanas, shall exact vengeance—to-night!"

Count Roma seemed about to speak. But the words did not come. His face had grown queerly haggard.

Evidently he realised that further protest of his innocence was utterly useless.

He bowed stiffly.

"You speak of vengeance, Count Santana—"

"Per Bacco—I do!" snarled the other, his lean, sallow face, with its thin nose and glittering eyes glaring into those of Count Roma. His gaze swept round the hall, resting upon two crossed swords that were hanging on the wall. Your words have been cowardly—perhaps your Excellency dares not fight? Take your choice, then, of fighting or dying like a dog!"

He strode to the wall and snatched down one of the swords, with the taunting words still on his lips.

"G'weat Scott!" gasped Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Though the juniors had not been able to understand the words that had passed between the two men, knowing what they did they had been able to guess fairly correctly all that had been said. Their faces were pale as they watched Count Roma take down the second sword in silence.

"Good heavens!" cried Tom Merry hoarsely. "We must stop them!"

Count Roma glanced towards the horrified group of juniors with a set smile.

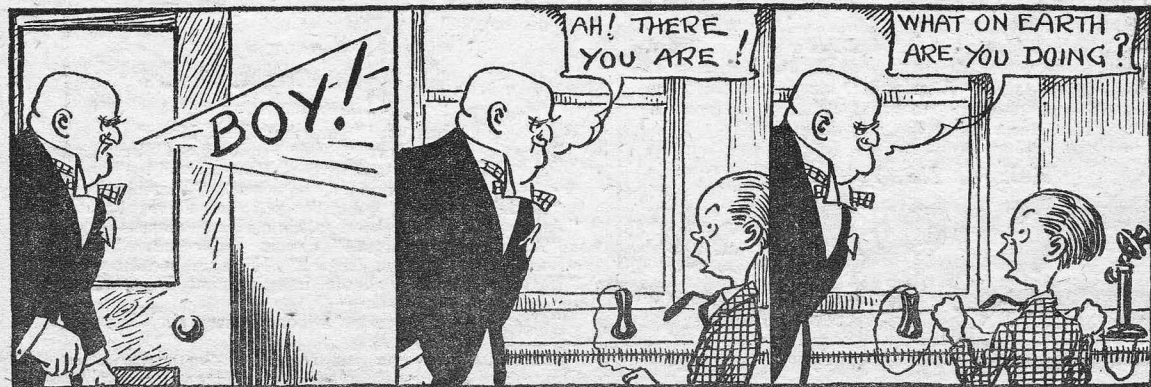
"My young friends, I deeply regret this occurrence," he said in English. "It is none of my seeking. I must fight to defend myself. Perhaps you would wish to withdraw?"

"But, count, for Heaven's sake, you are innocent of his nephew's death, so—" began Hancock, taking a quick step forward. But Count Roma waved him back.

"I am afraid nothing can be done to prevent this duel, my young friend."

"Then we stay here!" snapped Hancock. "Eh, buddies?"

Potts, The Office Boy!



"Yes," said Tom Merry quietly. The juniors did not mean to desert their friend at such a time. If the duel had to be fought, they meant to be there to see fair play, at least, for their elderly host. Whether Count Santana understood English or not, he took no notice of the juniors. His eyes had never left Count Roma's face as he flung off his coat.

"I await your Excellency!" he cried harshly in his own tongue.

"I am ready, Count Santana."
"Then guard yourself!" snarled Santana, and lunged forward with his sword.

The next moment the glittering blades were engaged, dancing and darting like ribbons of light, and the clash of steel echoed beneath the painted ceiling of the great hall of Castle Roma!

CHAPTER 7.
The Duel!

WITH fascinated eyes, Tom Merry & Co., Blake & Co., and Levison, Clive, and Talbot watched the leaping swords.

Cut and thrust and parry, quicker than light! The two antagonists were clearly both expert swordsmen. If Count Santana had expected an easy victory over his elderly opponent he was being very disappointed.

Despite his age Count Roma was as lithe and agile as Santana himself—a fact which brought a wave of relief to the watching, breathless juniors.

The clashing swords danced and flickered. The two men were circling slowly, Santana attacking with a cold fury that forced Count Roma to give ground at last. But he stood his ground again, and with an energetic attack drove Santana back in his turn, till the latter was fighting with his back to the wall, a shadow of fear appearing in his black evil eyes.

Count Santana was realising that he had met more than his match in swordplay!

There was a sudden crash. With a sudden twist of his weapon, Count Roma had sent his antagonist's sword spinning from his hand. A choking cry broke from Santana, as Roma's sword hovered over his defenceless heart. But the white-haired figure stepped back, lowering his sword.

"Pick it up!" he said quietly. Santana, his face bathed in cold perspiration, went to where his sword had fallen, and snatched it up. There was no gratitude in his face. It was quite clear that he considered his enemy to be a fool to have given him his life.

His sword-hilt tight in his fist again, Count Santana sprang forward, attacking with renewed ferocity, forcing his enemy back. Round and round they circled, the music of the steel ringing out unflinching.

In a dead silence they showed their desperate anxiety, the juniors watching with dry lips.

The end came suddenly. Count Santana parried a thrust and lunged forward. The point of his blade tore through Count Roma's sleeve; but the next moment the latter's slim blade had run Santana through the shoulder. He reeled, with a gasp, the blood streaming down his shirt, and the sword clattered to the flagstones from his hand.

"Oh, well done!" breathed Tom Merry hoarsely. Count Roma lowered his sword-point, bowed stiffly, and glanced towards a group of excited menservants that had

appeared in a distant doorway, watching the duel with startled eyes.

"Attend to his Excellency!" he ordered quietly. The servants came hurrying forward. Count Santana turned upon them with a snarl.

"I need no attention from these dogs!" he snarled chokingly. "Per Dio! This is not the end yet, Count Roma!"

He dragged his coat over his uninjured shoulder. With a trail of blood staining the flagstones, he strode towards the door. A servant quickly opened it, and without a last glance at Count Roma, Santana vanished into the darkness.

The door closed behind him. The juniors heard the clatter of horses' hoofs on the stones outside. Evidently Santana had come in some kind of carriage. The sound died away.

"And that's that!" muttered Monty Lowther, with a shaky grin.

"Bai Jove! What a howwible wottah Santanah appeahs to be!" breathed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Count Roma had laid down his sword. He turned towards the fireplace where the juniors were standing, and approached them with a smile that belied the shadow in his eyes.

"I feared as much, when first I heard of the death of Ridolfo Santana," he said quietly. "And this, I fear, is not the end. Count Santana believes I killed his nephew. The vendetta is revived, so far as he is concerned, with all the bitterness of five hundred years behind it!"

"Rotten!" muttered Herries. The old count's handsome face broke into a smile. For the sake of his guests, he evidently meant to dismiss the whole matter.

"I regret that this should have happened during your stay beneath my roof, my young friends, more than I can say. But let us forget it. Let us have music. During my last visit to Rome I purchased the very latest type of wireless-set. Let us tune-in!" He laughed. "Perhaps we may hear London."

It was queer indeed, Tom Merry felt, ten minutes later, to be listening to dance music from a London hotel, there in that old mountain castle, surrounded by the atmosphere of the Middle Ages—and across the valley Castle Santana and its sinister master and the vendetta of centuries!

Count Santana had met his match that night. But he had declared that the blood feud of the Romas and Santanas was alive again!

Listening to the cheery music, it was hard for the juniors to believe that the thrilling scene they had witnessed had not been all a dream.

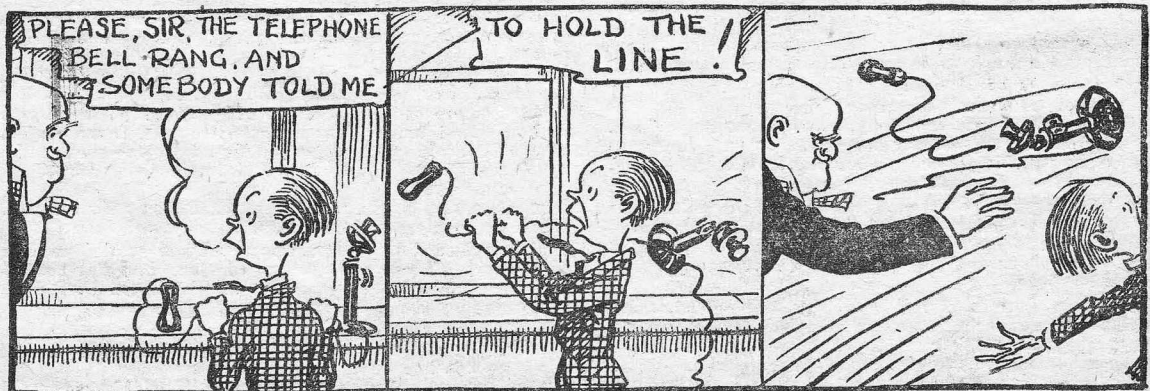
But they knew that it was no dream, but true enough. It was the twentieth century; but here in these wild, lonely mountains of sunny Italy they had stumbled upon a relic of the evil Middle Ages of Italian history—a blood-feud, grim and merciless!

CHAPTER 8.
The Mystery of the Dungeons!

"LISTEN to that!"
"Talk about a giddy thunderstorm—"
"My hat!"

Talbot, Levison, and Clive, sitting up in bed in the room that they were sharing at the castle, glanced at one another with breathless ejaculations. It was after midnight, and the three had been awakened by the crash of

The Live Wire!



thunder, to find that a storm was raging across the mountains, with heavy rain driving against the windows of the room, and flickering lightning glaring in through the wet glass almost continuously.

"Talk about a giddy thunderstorm!" repeated Sidney Clive. "My aunt! Just listen to it!"

Peal upon peal of thunder was crashing across the sky. Clive slipped out of bed and crossed to the window, peering out.

So vivid was the lightning that it revealed quite clearly the black shape of Castle Santana, miles away across the valley, through the mist of rain. Clive turned to the others.

"Well, we can't hope to sleep till this storm moves on," he said, with a rueful grin. "What about looking up Tom Merry & Co. in their room? They're bound to be awake, too."

"Good wheeze!" nodded Talbot.

He and Levison jumped out of bed, put on slippers and dressing-gowns, and followed the South African junior to the door.

"Well, I'm jolly glad I'm not that bandit the count was telling us about to-night!" grinned Levison. "What was his name? The Red Eagle! If he's prowling about in the giddy mountains to-night, he'll be getting about as wet as—"

Levison broke off sharply.

The three had emerged into the wide passage, lit with the intermittent glare of lightning that fell through the arched windows at the end. As they had turned towards the room occupied by Tom Merry & Co., Levison had caught sight of what looked like a furtive, shadowy figure vanishing round the corner: at the far end of the passage.

Talbot and Clive had glimpsed it, too. From Clive there broke a quick ejaculation.

"Who on earth was that?" he breathed.

The three stared at one another with rather startled faces. There had been something of an eerie shock in seeing what looked like a prowling figure in the lightning-lit passage at that hour! It was possible that it had been one of their St. Jim's friends, also awakened by the storm; but there had been something oddly furtive, so they all imagined, about the moving shadow that they had seen.

"Come on!" snapped Levison. "Let's look into this!"

Their soft footsteps drowned by the crash of thunder, the three juniors hurried along the passage and round the corner at the end, by the tall windows where the rain beat. Suddenly Talbot flung out a pointing hand.

"Look!"

They had not been mistaken. A dim figure was hurrying along the passage ahead of them. The passage was dark and gloomy, and they could make out very little; but it was certainly not one of their own chums. And the odd furtiveness of the mysterious midnight prowler's hurrying gait seemed to preclude the chance of it being one of the castle servants.

Who could it be who was stealing about secretly by night in Castle Roma?

It was a question which Talbot, Levison, and Clive meant to answer. They broke into a run. But even as they did so the figure ahead seemed to vanish into the wall. They heard a faint click, as of a closing panel; and, but for themselves, the passage was empty!

The three juniors came panting up and halted, utterly bewildered. Solid wall met their gaze at the point where the mysterious moving shadow had vanished so abruptly.

"My giddy aunt!" breathed Talbot. "There's a secret panel here—there must be!"

"Who the dickens can it have been?" gasped Clive.

Levison was already running excited hands over the ancient, ornamental panelling, but without result. There was not even a crack to be seen. He turned a bewildered face to Talbot and Clive.

"I suppose we weren't dreaming?" he muttered.

"I'm certain we saw somebody," nodded Talbot grimly. "We couldn't all three have imagined it!" He began to examine the panelling eagerly, searching for a secret spring. "My hat! I've found it!"

His exploring fingers had pressed a knob of the ornamental carving. There was an instant click, and the knob moved slightly beneath his fingers. Without another sound a section of the panelling slid sideways, revealing a yawning opening.

The three juniors stared into the well of darkness revealed with wondering eyes. Of what strange secret were they on the track? Talbot stepped forward, peering into the gloomy opening. The air within seemed cold and dank.

They listened. But there was no sound from beyond the opening. Talbot put out a doubtful foot to step through

into the darkness. But Levison laid a quick hand on his arm.

"Steady! Can't go in there without a light!" he muttered. "But we've got to find out what it all means—who that shadowy figure was—where he's gone! Ought we to wake the count?"

"I don't think so," Talbot shook his head. "It may be something he knows all about, after all. It looks fishy, but may be all right. It's up to us to find out if there really is something wrong before we disturb the old chap."

"That's so," nodded Levison. "Look here, Blake's got a torch! Let's go and tell the others. If you and Clive wait here, I'll bring 'em along."

Levison vanished along the passage, leaving Talbot and Clive peering into the black opening with faces that were still puzzled and startled. He was back soon, and Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. were with him, their faces excited.

"Bai Jove!" muttered Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, elegant in a purple silk dressing-gown. "This is vewy wum! What-eh-ah—"

"I guess this is a peach of a castle," drawled the voice of Cyrus K. Handcock. "Secret passages get me where I live! I guess I'm crazy about 'em!"

Blake held an electric torch. He sent a ray of vivid light darting through the opening. It revealed the head of a flight of winding stone steps, that vanished down into a well of blackness.

"Come on!" he breathed excitedly. "We'll track that mystery man down, whoever he was!"

"Yaas, wathah!"

It was an eerie business, creeping down the winding stone staircase in single file, Blake leading the way with the darting torch. Colder and colder grew the air as they descended, and from above the rumble of thunder grew more and more muffled and faint. At last they came to a great stone chamber, with damp walls of huge blocks of rock, and a floor that seemed to be of the natural rock of the mountainside. The juniors gathered in an excited group by the foot of the stairs, peering round as Blake flashed the torch over the mildewed walls.

There was no sign of anyone but themselves. But a low, arched doorway in one corner of the underground room caught their attention almost at once.

"That's where he's gone!" breathed Tom Merry.

With Blake's torch lighting their way, the juniors crowded across to the doorway. A stone passage led from it between walls of roughly hewn stone blocks. Ancient wooden doors, many of them rotting on their hinges or lying broken altogether, lined one side of the passage.

It was clear that the juniors had descended to the old dungeons of the castle—dungeons which in ancient times must have held many a miserable captive in durance vile! But a thorough search of them revealed nothing more than a few rusted chains hanging from the walls. Of the mysterious figure that Talbot, Levison, and Clive had seen—or thought they had seen—there was no sign!

They returned at last to the big stone chamber at the foot of the stairs. A huge fireplace, with iron bars across it to a height of ten feet, seemed to indicate that it had been the old torture-chamber. Tom Merry shuddered. He did not care to picture some of the scenes that must have taken place within those four walls in the evil days of past centuries.

"I guess you guys were dreaming," muttered Handcock, glancing at Talbot, Clive, and Ernest Levison.

"Rats!" said Clive. "I'm sure we saw someone—or something."

"It would be too much of a coincidence to have found that secret panel at just the point where we thought we saw someone vanish into the wall," pointed out Talbot quietly.

"Waal, that's so, I guess," agreed Handcock. "But whoever it was, he's made a slick getaway!"

"But where can he have gone?" breathed Tom Merry, in bewildered tones. There was a troubled frown on his face. "I think we ought to tell Count Roma—at once!"

"Rather!" nodded Digby. "It looks too jolly fishy!"

"Heah, heah!"

"Let's get up again, then," grunted Blake, with a shiver. "This place gives me the creeps!"

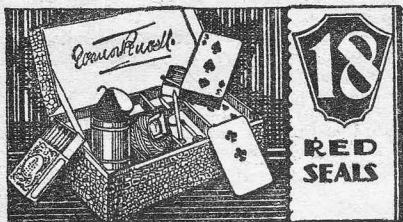
They returned up the winding stairway to the corridor high above. There was not one of them who did not experience a feeling of relief on emerging from that dank stairway into the shadowy corridor.

The storm seemed to be passing. The thunder was fainter, and the lightning that flickered in at the arched windows was less vivid.

"You chaps wait here," muttered Tom Merry. "I'll

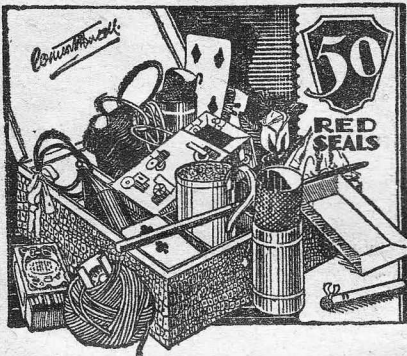
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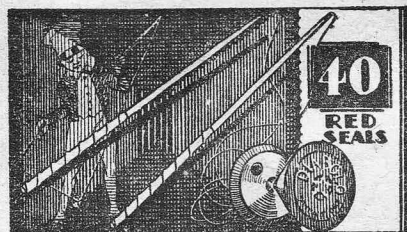
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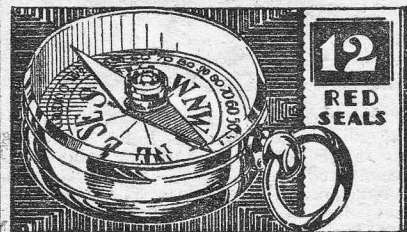
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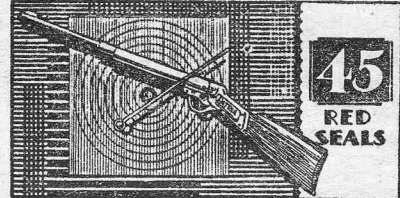
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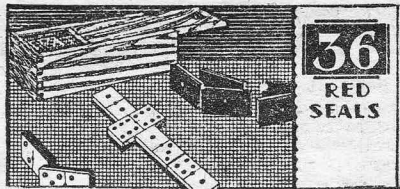
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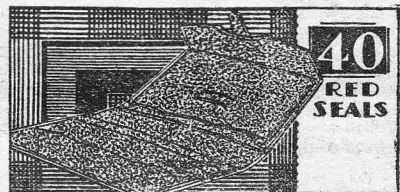
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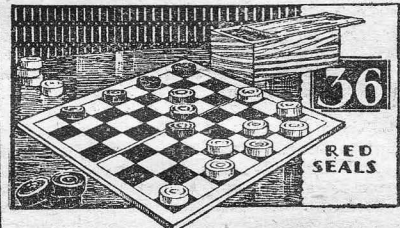
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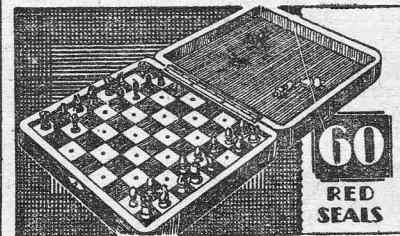
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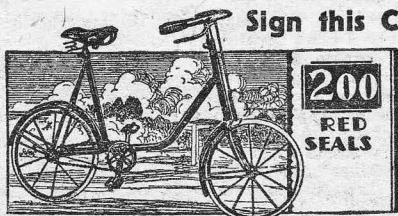
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THE SCHOOL IN THE CLOUDS!

(Continued from page 14.)

buzz along, and wake the count. You'd better come, too, Talbot, old hoss—you saw the chap, whoever he was."

Tom and Talbot hurried off, leaving the others discussing the startling happening and their queer discovery with low, excited voices.

"I suppose that chap Santana can't have anything to do with it?" breathed Blake suddenly. "I have a sort of feeling he might have!"

"I don't see how he could," said Manners, shaking his head. "How could he be in the castle at this time of night?"

"If you ask me, deah boys, I am wathah beginnin' to feel that you were imaginin' things," said Arthur Augustus, turning to Levison and Clive. "You admit you only saw a vewy dim sort of figuah. It is quite possible that it was some twick of the lightnin' that made it appear as if someone was walkin' about heah—and by a wum coincidence, we discovahed that there was a secwet way down to the dungeons at the same spot!"

"Oh rats," growled Levison. But he spoke doubtfully. Could it have been that he and Talbot and Clive had been deceived by the queer effects of light and shadow brought about by the lightning? It was certainly possible, he had to admit.

And that this was the solution was the unhesitating opinion of Count Roma, when their host came back with Tom and Talbot! Of course he knew of the secret panel and of the dungeons; but that some midnight prowler could have vanished into them, he would not believe. He laughed at the idea—and Talbot, Levison, and Clive were beginning to feel that he must be right, and that they had imagined it.

The fact that there had been no one in the dungeons when they had gone down to them, was a strong point against their first supposition, they had to agree.

Even so, they could not feel quite convinced! As they dropped to sleep, back in their room, some time later, they were wondering still.

CHAPTER 9.

The Red Eagle!

MORNING broke clear and golden over Castle Roma.

Tom Merry, leaping out of bed, crossed to the windows, and drew in deep breaths of the wonderfully fresh mountain air.

"Wonder how Count Santana slept last night, with that wounded giddy shoulder?" he said grimly, glancing round to where Manners and Lowther and Cyrus K. Hancock were tumbling out from between the sheets. "Well, he asked for it—and he got it!"

A mountain stream that passed through the castle grounds formed a deep bathing-pool not far from one of the marble-flagged terraces at the back of the frowning old building. In the morning sunlight, Castle Roma, with its towers and battlements and grey, ancient walls, looked less forbidding than it had done in the dusk, on their arrival.

After a dip in the crystal-clear waters of the pool, the juniors tramped indoors again for breakfast.

Count Roma seemed to be in high spirits—though whether this was chiefly for their benefit, the juniors could not help but wonder. Oddly unreal though the incidents of the previous night now seemed, they knew only too well that the count was deeply troubled that the ancient vendetta of the Romas and the Santanas seemed to have been revived, despite his efforts, with all its old, cruel bitterness.

The count's shoulder had quite recovered from the slight wound it had received from the pickpocket's stiletto in the Via Galeotta, that day in Rome. After breakfast, a dozen magnificent horses were brought round to the courtyard in front of the castle, and the count mounted his favourite black stallion without any trace of stiffness in his shoulder, Tom Merry noticed.

All his schoolboy guests could ride a horse; and a long excursion into the mountains had been planned, on horse-back.

Mounted servants followed the party with luncheon-baskets, and at midday the juniors and the count enjoyed a splendid meal on the mountainside, many miles from the castle. The mountain air had whipped up their appetites!

"We must return home before dark, my young friends," said the count, as they remounted after lunch. "Our friend the Red Eagle has not been heard of very much of late, in these parts at any rate; but I do not wish to put

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you into any danger at his hands! He might consider that an English schoolboy was worth a big ransom!"

After a while, at a word from the count, they all turned back towards the castle. They had a long ride before them, however, to reach it, and a good deal of the distance was through thick woods, honeycombed with narrow bridle paths.

It was a stone in his horse's hoof that caused Monty Lowther to drop behind. He jumped down from the saddle to extract it. Tom Merry, Manners, and Hancock drew rein to wait for him.

Lowther's horse, a big white animal, was restless, and it was no easy task removing the troublesome stone. When at last the job was accomplished, and Lowther had swung back into the saddle, the four of them were out of sight of the others who had evidently gone on without noticing that Tom Merry & Co. had dropped behind.



Out of the dark trees came running a bunch of olive-skinned

"Better, catch 'em up quick," exclaimed Tom, spurring his mount to a gallop along the tree-lined bridle path. "We don't want to get lost in these blessed woods!"

Whether the count and the rest of the party had turned off down some unexpected path through the forest, or whether they themselves missed the main way, they never knew! But when, ten minutes later, they drew rein without any sign or even sound of the others, and glanced at one another with rather startled faces, they knew definitely that they had lost them!

Tom grinned, rather ruefully. "This is awkward!" he exclaimed. "Better get back, and see if they come back to where we left them!"

"I guess so!" agreed Hancock. They rode back in the direction they had come. But the part of the forest where Lowther had taken the stone from his mount's hoof seemed to have vanished, too! At any rate, they did not find it.

"I say, this is rotten!" said Monty Lowther, after a while, as they were riding rather aimlessly along a shadowed path through overarching trees. "What about giving 'em a yell?"

He sent an echoing shout ringing through the trees. It was unanswered.

They shouted in unison, with the only result of making their horses restless. The four chums glanced at one another uneasily.

"We've lost 'em all right," said Tom quietly. "The only thing for it is to find our way back to the castle on our own!"

It was easier said than done, as they soon discovered. The paths in the forest twisted confusingly, and every one seemed alike. They could not even feel very sure of their direction, for though the sunlight gave them a rough guide to the points of the compass, they were by no means certain whether Castle Roma lay to the west or to the north. The sun went down at last, with them still in the forest—hopelessly fogged. And Manners' horse had gone lame, just "to put the lid on it," as he expressed it.

In a darkening clearing the four drew rein again.

"Doesn't look to me as if we're likely to get back to the



men, some carrying rifles and every one armed with a knife!

castle to-night, you chaps," said Tom Merry. "What are we going to do?"

"If it didn't get so darned chilly at night up here, we wouldn't take much harm sleeping out," said Monty Lowther. "But we'd be jolly well frozen!"

"I guess I'm getting plumb hungry, too, buddies," said Tom Merry. "Geo, this is an unlucky break—"

He turned his head suddenly. A faint sound had come to his ears from the trees—the sound of a furtive movement.

"What's that?" cried Manners sharply.

The next moment they knew!

Out of the dark trees a dozen swarthy figures had come running, closing in upon them—olive-skinned men, most of them, with glittering gold rings in their ears, and scarves round their heads. Some of them carried rifles, and every man had a knife in his belt. Strange, picturesque figures in their way, but the St. Jim's juniors had no time to consider whether they were picturesque or not!

Before they knew what was happening, they had been dragged from their horses by brutal hands.

Tom Merry, struggling with a giant ruffian with a black scarf tied round his head, was knocked flying by a mahogany fist. The next moment the man was kneeling

on his chest, pressing the point of a glittering knife to the English youngster's heart.

Manners, Lowther, and Hancock were also lying pinned to the earth, while some of the other scoundrels caught their scared horses. The clearing was filled with the jabber of Italians. The juniors could not understand one word; but one thing they realised only too well—that they had fallen into the hands of mountain brigands!

And a moment later they knew who these brigands were.

Out of the trees a tall figure had come striding—a man in a flowing black cloak, wearing high riding-boots, carrying a heavy whip. A long scarf was tied round his head; and his face was hidden by a crimson silken cloth tied across it beneath the eyes, that glittered black and triumphant, mockingly, as he stood above the four captured youngsters, glancing from one to another.

The Red Eagle!

Tom Merry remembered in a flash Count Roma's description of the famous, dreaded bandit whose name was a terror in the mountains around Castle Roma—the unknown, mysterious figure whose face was ever hidden behind its crimson silken mask!

They had fallen into the hands of the Red Eagle!

CHAPTER 10.

In the Brigands' Lair!

"I GUESS I'm sick of this!"

The transatlantic tones of Cyrus K. Hancock were deeply gloomy.

"It is pretty rotten," nodded Tom Merry.

"I always thought it would be rather a rag to be captured by brigands," said Monty Lowther, with a rueful grin. "But I know now it isn't!"

It was two days later.

For two long days the four St. Jim's juniors had been captives in the hands of the Red Eagle and his band of ruffians. On their capture, they had been taken, tied to their horses and blindfolded, to the Red Eagle's secret lair, somewhere among the wildest stretches of the great mountain range that was his domain. In the brigands' fastness, a narrow gorge shut in by precipitous cliffs on three sides, with deep caves, partly natural and partly artificial, running deep into the mountainside, they had found themselves helpless prisoners, although they were not kept bound after the first night. But the cliff walls of the gorge were unclimbable; and the entrance to it, a narrow cleft in the rocks, was guarded day and night by three armed men. They were as helpless to escape as though they had been clapped into a prison cell.

From one of the brigands who spoke English—a little black-eyed ruffian with oily hair and huge earrings—they had learnt that they were not being held for ransom, as they had at first assumed, but as hostages.

One of the Red Eagle's lieutenants, a scoundrel named Capuletti, had been captured by a band of soldiers a few days before, and was now in prison under sentence of death. The Red Eagle had sent a message to the authorities that if his lieutenant was shot—as he was sentenced to be—the three English boys and the American youngster in his hands would be put to death!

The authorities would understand well enough that the death of Tom Merry & Co. would be a serious matter. The British and American Governments would have something to say which would cause a lot of trouble to the Italian Government. But whether that fact would be sufficient to save the life of the scoundrel Capuletti, was rather doubtful.

And if Capuletti died, there was not the slightest doubt that the Red Eagle would carry out his threat. Tom, Lowther, Manners and Hancock would be put to death.

Despite the ghastly danger they were in, the four juniors were keeping a stiff upper lip. Not one of them had shown, or was likely to show, the white feather.

They were sitting now outside the cave that had been given them to sleep in, its only furniture four dirty blankets. They had been fairly well fed, and had so far suffered no brutality at the hands of their captors. But though the brigands had taken almost no notice of them, they knew that a strict watch was being kept upon their every movement.

Tom Merry picked up a stick and stirred the glowing embers of a small fire round which they were seated. Dusk was falling, and the mountain air was growing cold.

"Wonder how long it'll be before the Red Eagle hears from the police about—about Capuletti?" he said.

His tone was rather hoarse.

The other three did not answer. It was a grim question. When the answer came, it might mean death to them.

Death or freedom—hanging on a single thread!

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Tom glanced down the gorge to the narrow cleft that formed the entrance. Outlined against the sunset could be seen three motionless figures, rifles in hands; the sentries, whose presence made escape so hopeless.

"Waal, I wish the Italiano authorities would be slick and send their answer back to this guy, the Red Eagle," muttered Hancock. "I guess I'm plumb sick of this spot!"

He tossed some more sticks on the fire, with a restless movement that betrayed his inner feelings, though his drawing voice had been perfectly cool and steady.

"If they—if they murder us," said Manners quietly, "there'll be the dickens to pay when the British Government gets to know all about it."

"Sure—and the American Government," nodded Hancock. "I guess President Hoover would have a thing or two to say—yes, sir!"

"Unfortunately, that won't help us much, then," put in Lowther with grim irony.

The darkness was deepening rapidly. The light from their fire flickered on their drawn faces and on the wall of rock behind them. Some distance away, a group of brigands seated round another fire were singing what was evidently coarse Italian songs, to the sound of a guitar played by a black-bearded ruffian in a wide, black hat. A foraging party entered the gorge past the sentries and joined them.

"Wonder where the Red Eagle is, anyway?" muttered Manners. "He doesn't seem to show up much."

They had scarcely seen the bandit chief since the night of their capture. Like the mysterious figure he was, he seemed to appear and disappear in almost ghostly fashion.

"Rummy that no one knows who he is," said Tom Merry. "Count Roma declared that even his followers knew very little of him—didn't even know his real name!"

"Yeah, I guess he's the mystery-guy all right," nodded Hancock. "Say, I guess I'll turn in!"

He rose to his feet. The other three followed suit, and entered the cave with him. They had slept very little the two previous nights, and were dog-tired. Despite the hard ground that formed their bed, it was not long before Manners and Lowther and the American were sound asleep.

But Tom Merry still lay staring into the gloom, watching the dying embers of the fire by the mouth of the cave.

What would the reply be from the Italian authorities to the mysterious brigand chief? Yes—or no? The question would not leave his mind!

The embers in the mouth of the cave died out, till only a single crimson eye remained. Wrapped in his blanket, Tom Merry stirred restlessly; but sleep would not come.

Footsteps approaching the cave came to his eager ears after a while. The figures of two men, black against the starry sky, passed the cave-mouth, talking in low tones. Tom Merry drew a sudden hissing breath between his teeth.

He had recognised one of them as the Red Eagle!

As always, the man's face was covered with the silken cloth that only left his eyes visible. His companion was the little ruffian with earrings who had told them how their own fate depended upon the fate of the scoundrel named Capuletti.

The pair came to a halt a little distance away, out of sight. But in the deathly silence of the night, broken only by the distant songs of the throng round the big camp fire at the top end of the gorge, Tom could hear the voices of the Red Eagle and his satellite still—and to his astonishment he realised a moment later that they were speaking in English.

Whether the Red Eagle took it for granted that the juniors were all asleep, since he had heard the steady breathing of Manners, Lowther, and Hancock as he passed the cave-mouth, or whether he did not care whether he was overheard or not, Tom did not know. But nearly all that was passing between the brigand chief and his companion could be heard as Tom listened, half raised on one elbow, within the blackness of the cave.

That the two were talking in English so that they would not be understood by the rest of the brigands was plain enough.

And as Tom listened, his eyes grew wide with amazement and horror.

"The dynamite has been placed ready in the dungeons, Silvestro!" The voice of Red Eagle was soft and purring, exultant. "Guiseppe and I placed it there last night, by way of the secret underground tunnel that leads into the castle from without the castle walls. To-night I fire the fuse—with my own hand!"

A soft laugh floated through the gloom—a laugh that turned Tom Merry's blood cold.

"Buono!" came the chuckling voice of the Red Eagle's companion.

"To-night," went on the Red Eagle, with a sudden snarl, "Castle Roma will go sky-high!"

CHAPTER 11.

The Decision of Fate!

TOM MERRY'S face was deathly white in the gloom as he heard the Red Eagle and his satellite walk away, still talking in low tones.

Why the Red Eagle had planned to blow up Castle Roma with dynamite—to send it sky-high, and all those within it, was a ghastly mystery! But he had no time to wonder why. All he knew was that Count Roma and his seven pals from far-off St. Jim's would perish horribly if the plan was carried out.

And he was powerless to warn them!

A cold perspiration was standing out on Tom's brow. The dungeons! That was where the dynamite had been stored that was to destroy the castle. He remembered vividly those dank, stone passages and chambers beneath Castle Roma which he and the others had explored three nights ago, in search of the shadowy figure that Reginald Talbot, Levison, and Clive had declared they had seen vanish through the secret panel at the top of the stone stairway.

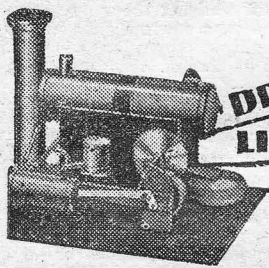
He understood now.

The three had not been mistaken. And the shadowy figure they had seen had been one of the Red Eagle's men—possibly, even, the Red Eagle himself, exploring the lie of the land within the castle. No wonder they had failed to find him in the dungeons—Tom knew that the midnight intruder had entered the castle by a secret underground tunnel that led into the dungeons from outside the castle walls. The unknown man had vanished that way, no doubt leaving the entrance to the tunnel hidden by some secret flagstone of which even Count Roma had known nothing.

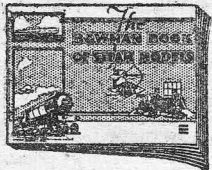
A stifled, choking cry—almost a sob—broke from Tom's lips.

That very night, the dynamite in the dungeons was to be fired! The castle would be destroyed; and his helpless friends—

He flung aside his blanket feverishly, to wake the others and tell them of what he knew. But he checked himself. What was the good? They could do nothing to save their friends, prisoners as they were in the brigand's fastness. Better let Manners and Lowther and Hancock sleep on in



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peace. No need ever to tell them! To-morrow, perhaps, they would have to die themselves—why should they ever know?

Tom's despairing thoughts were broken by the sound of stumbling footsteps outside the cave.

A reeling figure came into view, outlined against the stars—a huge, hook-nosed ruffian whom Tom knew by sight; one of the party of bandits who had captured them and brought them to the secret lair of the Red Eagle.

He was singing to himself in a thick, incoherent way. It was clear enough that he had been sampling wine much too freely. As he staggered on, the man tripped over a boulder and collapsed almost in the cave-mouth. He lay where he had fallen, snoring lustily.

Tom Merry drew a sudden hissing breath between his teeth.

A moment later he was stealing across the cave to where the snoring figure lay. He stooped over the man, eager fingers searching swiftly.

Farther along the gorge the crowd of ruffians round the great fire were still drinking and singing. None of them seemed to have noticed their companion's collapse.

It did not take Tom long to find what he sought—the scoundrel's heavy pistol. He drew it out of the silver-studded belt, and crept back to where his three chums still slept.

His heart was beating wildly as he examined his prize. The pistol was fully loaded, as he had prayed would be the case.

Dropping on one knee, Tom softly shook the others by the shoulder in turn. They awoke with their wits about them instantly.

"What's up?" breathed Monty Lowther.

"I've got a pistol!" Tom's voice was feverish with excitement. "Got it from that chap snoring out there! And I've learnt some terrible news—"

"Great Bohunkus! A gun?" ejaculated Hancock hoarsely.

"Oh, buddy—"

"Listen!" muttered Tom hoarsely. "For some reason the Red Eagle has planned to blow up Castle Roma to-night! The dungeons have been filled with dynamite! It's to be sent sky-high, and everybody in it! We've got to do something, and quick!"

The three stared at him with faces that had gone deathly white.

They had grown used to their own deadly danger. The news that their friends at the castle were in equal danger—worse danger—had left them almost dazed.

"Listen!" breathed Tom Merry. His voice was suddenly quite cool. "With this pistol one of us might escape. The chances are against it, but it might be done. Most of the brigands are drinking round the fire—it ought to be possible to get to the entrance of the gorge, where the sentries are, without being seen. Once there, the chap would have to try to bolt through, and shoot down the sentry that tried to collar him. He might get through! If he did, with luck he might get to the castle in time to warn Count Roma and—the chaps."

He glanced from face to face in the gloom. In the cave-mouth the snores of the inert ruffian were still steady and lusty. From the other end of the gorge came the songs of the men gathered round the great crackling fire.

"We've got to try!" breathed Monty Lowther.

"Right," said Tom in steady tones. "The question is, which of us goes? Whoever it is, he takes his life in his hands, even more so than by staying here—"

All three broke in on his words. He shook his head.

"Better draw lots. Quick, no time to waste!"

In the darkness they heard the soft tearing of paper as Tom Merry tore four strips from a sheet of his notebook, and closed them in it with their ends protruding. He held the notebook out towards them.

"Choose, Hancock," he muttered. "One's shorter than the others. Which ever gets the short one takes the pistol and tries his luck."

Without a word the American chose one of the strips and drew it out. Manners and Lowther followed suit, leaving the fourth for Tom Merry. Tom took it, and in the gloom of the cave the four juniors from far-off St. Jim's compared the fateful strips, to learn the decision of chance.

The short strip had been drawn by Monty Lowther.

CHAPTER 12.

Over the Precipice!

MONTY LOWTHER rose to his feet, taking the pistol that Tom Merry held out to him.

"Good luck, Monty, old chap!" Tom muttered hoarsely.

He gripped his chum's hand. So did Manners and Hancock.

"So long, buddy!" breathed the American.

"So long!" answered Monty Lowther.

He smiled at his three chums in the gloom, and shifted the pistol back to his right hand. Then, without another word, he turned and crept across to the mouth of the cave.

Stepping cautiously across the figure of the snoring ruffian who lay there, he ran crouching to the shadow of the cliff. The moon had risen, filling the gorge with silver light, with black shadows flung by the beetling rocks that towered around it.

Lowther's heart was beating quickly. He knew that he carried his life in his hands. But his face was set in cool, determined lines as he stole along in the shadow of the rocky wall towards the cleft where the three sentries guarded the entrance to the gorge.

Whether he would be able to find his way to Castle Roma, even if he succeeded in gaining freedom, was a question that he was deliberately not asking himself yet awhile.

As he stole nearer to the jagged cleft that spelt freedom if he could once pass through it, he could hear the pacing footsteps of the guards. A black figure, with rifle across its shoulder, passed across the skyline, and Lowther crouched motionless before creeping on, silent as a ghost.

Slithering from rock to rock without a sound, Lowther came at last to within a dozen yards of the entrance of the brigands' lair. He bent down behind a ragged boulder, his eyes searching the patchwork of moonlight and shadow ahead.

One of the sentries, he could see, was seated on a great stone, his rifle across his knees, a cigarette glowing between his lips. The watching youngster heard him yawn. A second was pacing to and fro, whistling some gay Italian tune. The third he could not see.

"Here goes!" breathed Lowther, his fist tightening on the heavy pistol in his hand.

There was no more cover to be had; it was a question of risking all on a sudden dash. Rising cautiously to his feet, Monty Lowther raced for the opening!

He heard a sudden startled shout in Italian, saw the seated guard spring to his feet, whipping up his rifle. Lowther swung the big pistol round and pressed the trigger as he raced on. There was an echoing report, and the man who had been about to fire at him reeled back with a cry, the rifle clattering to the rocks at his feet.

"Per Dio!"

Another of the sentries was racing to cut Monty off, shouting as he ran. But he missed his footing on the loose stones, and went sprawling. A third sprang out of the shadows full into Monty Lowther's path, rifle raised. A bullet sang past the youngster's head, and crashed against the rocks behind him. The next moment the man who had fired the shot was felled by a desperate blow with the butt of Lowther's pistol, full between the eyes. He lay groaning and writhing, and Lowther tore past him, down the steep path beyond, to freedom!

He could hear shouts from behind him as he ran. The two shots had roused the brigands' lair like a nest of hornets!

He glanced round swiftly, and saw running figures coming in pursuit. A shot whined past him, and another. Then he was round the corner of the cliff, tearing on down the mountainside at breakneck speed, safe from their bullets for the moment at least.

Monty Lowther was an athletic youngster. Even the loose, treacherous surface of that mountain path, with a great precipice yawning at his side if his foot should slip, could not check his speed. He tore on.

It seemed an eternity before he reached the woods that clothed the mountainside half a mile below. But he plunged in among the trees at last, with his pursuers far behind. And he knew that they would never catch him now!

He had won through! He was free.

A sense of wild jubilation seized him as he plunged on through the blackness of the olive-trees. But then his heart went suddenly cold.

He had still to find his way to Castle Roma, and he must get there before the Red Eagle, or he would be too late!

A groan escaped him as he realised how terribly likely it was that he would fail yet to save the lives of his chums and of the old count.

Panting on through the trees he came out at last into open country again. A narrow track led along the edge of another of the sheer precipices that were to be found everywhere amid the mountains in that wild region. A sudden exclamation rose to his lips.

A tall figure was striding along the path beside the yawning brink—a lithe figure, moving with the easy strides of a man bred to the mountains. A black cloak was drawn

around him, and his face was covered with a crimson silken cloth.

"The Red Eagle!"

For a moment Monty Lowther's heart seemed to miss a beat. Then a wave of fierce delight swept through him.

He was not too late.

In his desperate race down the mountain from the brigands' lair he had overtaken the sinister figure of the man who was on his way from that same place to Castle Roma, with his fiendish purpose!

He flung a swift look over his shoulder. There was no sign of pursuit. It was quite evident that the ruffians who had made a vain attempt to catch him had given up the attempt as hopeless.

Scarcely fifty yards separated him from the striding figure of the bandit chief. It seemed astonishing that he had heard nothing of the youngster. Monty Lowther, his face set, slowly raised the heavy pistol in his hand.

The idea of shooting the mysterious scoundrel in cold blood was horrible. But the lives of all those in Castle Roma were forfeit if ever the Red Eagle reached the castle that night.

He pressed the trigger. There was a spurt of flame, an echoing report, and the bullet whined on its way.

But it did not find its mark. At the last moment the thought that he might end by having a human life on his hands had unnerved him, and the bullet sang harmlessly past the cloaked figure on the brink of the precipice. There was a startled cry from the Red Eagle. He swung round, his eyes glittering balefully above the crimson cloth that masked his face. The next moment he was leaping up the path towards the white-faced youngster.

Desperately Lowther pressed the trigger again. But there was no result, and he realised with a sickening sense of helplessness that the old-fashioned weapon had jammed.

The sinister figure was on him the next instant. Steely arms closed round him. He found himself staring into the blazing, malevolent eyes of the Red Eagle.

He tried to fight free. But he was helpless in that powerful grasp—and the mysterious bandit was dragging him towards the edge of the precipice!

A strangled cry broke from Lowther's lips. The man meant in his rage to hurl him over the brink, he knew. He beat up desperately at the masked face, and his fingers fastened on the silken scarf that concealed it.

It was torn aside.

A gasping cry broke from Monty Lowther's lips as he found himself staring into a face he knew!

Count Santana!

The next moment he had been hurled backwards, had staggered helplessly over the rocky brink, was falling, falling with a scream into the abyss of darkness beyond.

CHAPTER 13.

The Death Machine!

COUNT SANTANA stood by the cliff edge, staring down into the blackness. There was no sound from below. An evil laugh broke from him.

"So much for that young fool!" he muttered in Italian. "Per Bacco—he will never tell anyone on this earth that the Red Eagle is Count Santana!"

He raised his eyes, staring across at the opposite hills. From the path that ran above the precipice Castle Roma was just visible to eyes that knew where to look. His eyes glittered.

"By dawn the Castle Roma will be no more!" he snarled. "The last of the Romas will have died—at the hands of the last of the Santanas. For centuries the Santanas have striven to stamp out that accursed breed. My hands shall accomplish it. The vendetta shall end to-night after all these years, with the death of Count Roma and the destruction of his castle—the accursed den that housed his breed for centuries!"

He raised a clenched hand and shook it towards the distant castle. Then, turning, he strode swiftly down the rocky path.

The secret tunnel that led into the dungeons of Castle Roma from outside the wall had its entrance hidden amid bushes on the mountainside below the castle. A flat stone concealed a narrow flight of steps leading down into the earth.

Travelling on foot as he was, the Red Eagle took two hours to reach the hidden entrance. He had come on foot deliberately; his spies had warned him that a fresh troop of carabineers were on the hunt for him, and to have

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gone to the castle on horseback would have made him a conspicuous figure in the moonlight.

With a last glance round Count Santana stepped swiftly into the bushes and dragged aside the secret stone. A minute later he was hurrying along a low, narrow tunnel, an electric torch lighting his way.

The crimson silken cloth was again tied across his fallow face.

He came at last to another flight of stone steps, crumbling with age, that led up to a great flagstone in the roof of the tunnel. He was beneath the castle now, and a heave on the flag with his shoulder raised it, enabling him to thrust it aside and clamber through into the darkness of the dungeons.

He stood flashing the torch round with an evil glitter in his black eyes.

He was in the old torture chamber, deep beneath the ancient pile that for centuries had stared across the valley towards Castle Santana for so many hundred years.

The wavering torchlight revealed great stacks of wooden boxes with rope handles—dynamite!

A gloating laugh broke from the sinister cloaked figure of the count. He glanced up at the arched stone roof above his head. Beyond the ancient stonework, high above, Count Roma was doubtless sleeping, little dreaming of the waiting death stacked in the dungeons beneath. And the English schoolboys, too—Count Santana shrugged, and smiled.

"Per Bacco! What do I care for them? If they seek the hospitality of Castle Roma they must accept it in full!"

Again he laughed evilly.

Standing on the stone floor near the dynamite boxes was another box, of metal. Santana crossed towards it and took from it its devilish contents—a clock-like instrument that could be set for any hour, and at that hour would detonate the dynamite. He had brought it there himself the previous night.

With quick fingers he set the infernal machine, timing it to do its dreadful work in another half-hour. It began to tick noisily in the deathly silence of the dungeons.

Raising the lid of one of the boxes of dynamite he placed the instrument upon the explosive, making the necessary connections. He was breathing fast, and his hands trembled.

"Buono!" he muttered, stepping back and picking up the torch from where he had laid it on another of the boxes, so that its vivid ray lit up the ticking machine.

For a moment he stared round with another mutter of satisfaction, then turned swiftly to the opening of the secret tunnel, where the opened flagstone revealed the dark steps that were to lead him to safety long before the explosion occurred that was to send Castle Roma sky high in a sheet of flame.

But he did not reach the steps.

A faint movement in the gloom beyond brought a stifled exclamation to his lips. He swept the ray of torchlight to the low doorway that gave access to the rest of the dungeons—and a choking cry burst from him.

Framed in the stone doorway, watching him, was the tall figure of Count Roma, a levelled pistol in his hand.

Santana stood as if turned to stone, his eyes blazing across the shadow chamber above the crimson silken cloth that masked his face. His breath could be heard, a sibilant hiss. He seemed struck dumb, paralysed.

Count Roma stepped forward. His handsome old face, with its eagle features and snow-white hair, was as grim as Fate. Never for a moment did the levelled pistol waver from covering the other's heart.

He bowed courteously.

"Good-evening, signor!" he said quietly in Italian—"or perhaps I should address you as your Excellency—for I have reason to believe that the famous Red Eagle is my old friend Count Santana."

An incoherent cry broke from his enemy. Santana seemed to wake as if from a dream. He made a swift movement as if to leap for the open flagstone. But the imperious voice of Count Roma rang out in grim command:

"Halt! Move one yard from where you stand, and you are a dead man!"

Santana froze in his tracks, his eyes blazing with baffled fury. The torch fell from his fingers, as he stood revealed in the light of three other torches that had suddenly sprung from the surrounding gloom. His eyes swept round, making out half a dozen or so shadowy figures that had come out of hiding.

Blake & Co., Talbot, Levison, and Clive!

And then a face appeared from the shadows that caused the face of Count Santana to go deathly pale.

The face of the youngster he had flung over the precipice, miles from the castle!

"Per Dio—"

Monty Lowther was standing at the side of Count Roma, watching the cloaked figure of the Red Eagle with a grin that held no atom of mirth—a smile that was as fierce and grim as that on the face of the last of the Romas!

CHAPTER 14.

The End of the Vendetta!

TO Count Santana it seemed black magic that Monty Lowther was there in the dungeons with the others. He was never to know that, far from being dashed to death hundreds of feet below the brink of the precipice, Lowther had been caught in one of the twisted trees that grew from the face of the cliff, had climbed to safety up the face of the rocks, with bleeding hands, and followed the count—whom he now knew to be Red Eagle—all the way to Castle Roma!

torch, the other juniors bringing up the rear, the strange procession made its way to the marble-flagged hall of the great castle, lit now by the glare of electric light. The tall figure of Count Roma flung out a pointing hand to where two swords lay on a black table, slim, glittering ribbons of steel.

"Your Excellency," he said courteously, "I am glad to notice that your shoulder is well again. For to-night we continue our duel—this time to the death!"

Count Santana started. A gleam of hope sprang into his eyes. But that he was dazed with astonishment was clear.

"Some men, perhaps," went on Count Roma contemptuously, "would shoot you like a dog, as you deserve. But I do not choose to kill you in cold blood, Count Santana. Take your choice of weapons!"

Santana turned without a word, and snatched up one of the swords. He tore the silk from his face, and flung aside his

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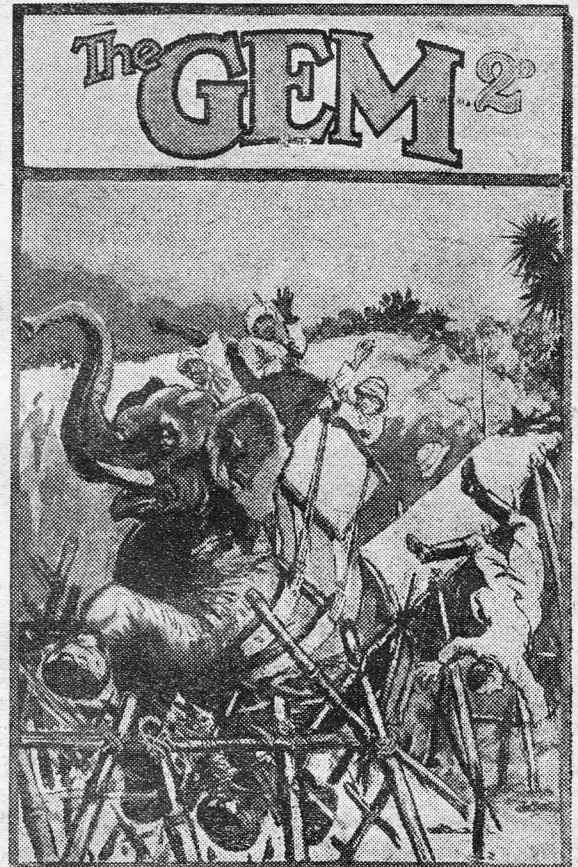
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It was Lowther who had roused the occupants of the castle, after slipping on ahead, and whose information had brought Count Roma and the rest of the juniors down to the dungeons, there to await the coming of Count Santana.

The juniors were closing in on the baffled figure, lit by the glare of their torches. At a word from Count Roma Talbot ran quick hands over Santana, relieving him of a knife and a heavy pistol.

"And now, your Excellency," said Count Roma, in quiet tones, "you will honour me by adjourning upstairs!"

His pistol never left Santana's heart, as with one hand he reached down and disconnected the infernal machine. He flung it to the floor, smashing it with his foot, and the sinister ticking that had filled the dungeons ceased abruptly.

Without a word, Count Santana, still with his face hidden by the crimson silk mask of the Red Eagle, turned and crossed to the stairs that led up into the castle. A cold perspiration bathed his every limb.

With Count Roma close behind him with a levelled pistol, and Reginald Talbot silently leading the way with a lighted

cloak. Count Roma laid his pistol on the table, and picked up the other sword.

There was an uncanny quiet in the great hall as the two men faced one another, the juniors watching in utter silence. Levison and Talbot had placed themselves between the combatants and the table where the pistol lay. They did not trust Santana an inch.

The clash of steel rang out beneath the painted ceiling, as the two men engaged—the last two descendants of the ancient families that had carried their blood-feud down the centuries even till to-day.

Santana was like a man possessed.

His eyes were blazing balefully, his lips twitched, as he attacked ferociously, driving his elderly antagonist back against the wall in a few breathless seconds. The dancing blades flickered like summer lightning.

"Oh, my hat!" muttered Monty Lowther, in horrified dismay, as he saw Santana's sword-point tear through

Count Roma's sleeve, saw a stain of crimson flow out upon his white shirt.

There was an exultant cry from Count Santana. He lunged for his enemy's heart.

Monty Lowther closed his eyes. He opened them fearfully, dreading to see Count Roma lying lifeless on the flagstones, for the clash of steel had suddenly ceased.

He heard a queer sound from Jack Blake, and the thud of a body on the cold marble. He turned his eyes, with chilled heart, towards the spot, and saw that Count Santana, alias the Red Eagle, was lying sprawled face-downward at the feet of the last of the Romas. Santana choked horribly, and lay still.

The vendetta of centuries was finished. Count Santana was dead.

It was a week later the S 1000 passed over Rome on its way eastward. Some hours later it was flying above the towers of Castle Roma, where, on the battlements, a tall, white-haired figure could be seen, arm upraised in salute to the great airship as it passed high above him, and on over the mountains—those mountains that were rid for ever of the terror of the Red Eagle!

From Monty Lowther's information, the carbineers in search of the brigands' mountain fastness had been able to locate it at last. The gorge had been surrounded by night, and in the ensuing fight, those of the Red Eagle's followers who had not died had been captured; they were now awaiting trial for their evil deeds.

Tom Merry, Manners, and Hancock had been rescued

unharméd, and Monty Lowther was the hero of the hour when they told the full story of his break for freedom, that had brought about not only the saving of the lives of all within Castle Roma that night, but the end of the sinister count who had been searched for in vain so long by soldiers and police, in his guise of the dreaded Red Eagle.

That Count Santana's nephew had been slain by one of the count's own brigand band was made clear from information gained from one of the captured bandits, so that even if anyone other than Santana had believed Count Roma to have been his murderer, his name was cleared of any suspicion on that score. Though Count Roma had been forced into carrying on the ancient vendetta, it was thus proved conclusively that he had been blameless in the matter.

From the juniors' promenade deck on board the S 1000 Tom Merry & Co. watched Castle Roma vanish amid the mountain ranges with very thoughtful eyes.

It disappeared at last, and they turned from the windows towards the map of the world that hung on the metal wall behind them.

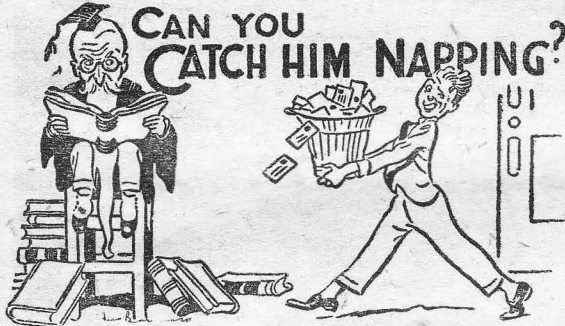
The S 1000 was on its travels again. In a few days Europe would be left behind.

Ahead of them, vast, mysterious Asia!

THE END.

(Well, chums, a rattling good yarn, eh? There's an even better one next week when the St. Jim's fellows reach India, the land of strange happenings. Don't miss "THE SNAKEMEN OF ZUNDAKI!")

SHOOT YOUR QUESTIONS—AND MAKE A HIT!



Now then, you fellows, you've simply got to find a question the Oracle can't answer. He's been asking me to call him Solomon!—Ed.

SINCE that accident with the tea-things last week, chums, the Editor has not been too friendly.

In fact, he's been positively insulting at times, and told me to run out and buy some more plates, so I just told Adolphus to hand over the "Holiday Annual" he was reading.

"There you are, sir," said I, running into the sanctum with a gleesome smile, "there are eight beautiful plates in this jolly old Annual, not to mention a lot of spiffing yarns about Greyfriars and St. Jim's."

The old Ed. told me not to be cheeky.

"There are lots of queries to answer this morning, Whiskers," said he, "so you can sit down and speak up. First of all, Charlie Crow, who lives at Yarmouth, writes to ask if you can describe a bullfight?"

"I'll do my best, sir," I replied, "though it's a bit awkward without a bull. Still, to begin. The bulls used in Spanish bullfighting are specially reared for the job, and are selected for their fighting spirit. The best bulls are worth about £50, and it is reckoned that about 1,500 bulls are killed every year in Spain. The bullfighters are divided into matadores—sometimes known as espadas—banderilleros and picadores. In addition to these there are a number of assistants, drivers, and other helpers."

"That's all right," said the Editor, "but what about the bullfight? That's what we want to hear about."

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,187.

wear satin jackets and breeches, which are ornamented with gold and silver. The picadores, which are really pikemen, on horseback, usually dress in yellow, and have their legs protected by steel armour, covered in leather. All these johnnies march round the arena, amidst loud cheers. Then the bull is released into the arena. After a good deal of skirmishing the picadores stick their spikes into the bull's neck, while the banderilleros keep the bull away by waving their red cloaks. Finally, the matador kills the bull with a knife, and in order to do this he has to jump sometimes on to the bull's back and perform all sorts of agile tricks to save his own life. When the bull is killed the matador rides round the ring, amidst prolonged applause. And that's all I know about that, sir."

"Quite enough, too," said the Ed., picking up another letter. "Fred Fisher, of Frinton, wants to know what a kanaka is?"

"That, sir, is a Polynesian word, and means 'man.' The name kanaka is used by Europeans to describe all South Sea Islanders, whether black or brown in colour."

"I see. Now explain, for the benefit of a girl reader—Mary Birch, of Ealing, from what fruit citric acid is obtained."

"The answer to that, sir," I said, "is a lemon."

The old Ed. looked up with his gimlet eye.

"Yes, sir; I'm coming to that. The bullfight begins with a grand entry into the arena of all the bullfighters, followed by the matadores, banderilleros, picadores, and the team of mules, covered with richly decorated cloths, which are used to drag away the bulls and horses that are killed in the fight. Everybody in this procession is brilliantly dressed, and they make a fine show, believe me. The matadores

"I don't want any cheek, my lad," he growled. "Do you mean that citric acid comes from lemons?"

"Yes, sir."

"How is candied lemon peel obtained, Whiskers?"

"That is made in England, sir, from a large lemon grown in Sicily, called the Spadaforese lemon. This jolly old lemon is allowed to get quite ripe before it is picked, after which it is cut in half, pickled in brine, and sent to England in casks. When it comes over here it is soaked in water before being candied."

"That's very interesting. Now, can you tell L. S. Stone, a Stoke Newington reader, when the first newspaper was introduced into this country?"

"I can, sir. A man named Archer published a periodical in the year 1625, called the 'Mercurius Britannicus.' In 1622 the same man produced a weekly paper, called the 'Weekly News.' And that, sir, I think I may safely say, was the first newspaper."

"Did you write for that?" asked the Ed.

"No, sir; I did not. You know perfectly well that I am not nearly so old as that. I'm not much more than ninety-eight Fahrenheit."

"So the first newspaper was published in 1622?"

"Yes, sir; and it was followed by a number of others. But the first important journalist was Daniel Defoe, the man who wrote 'Robinson Crusoe.' He started a weekly publication called 'The Review,' in 1704. Defoe, by the way, was the first man to publish a serial story, but I don't know whether they were as good as the serials in the jolly old Gem."

"It's hardly likely, is it?" said the Ed. "Now for the next conundrum. What is a wapinshaw?"

"In the old days the word was used in Scotland for a review of armed troops. It means weapon-show. Nowadays a wapinshaw is a meeting for rifle-shooting, or sports of any kind. The word, I may mention, is pronounced 'wawp-in-shaw'."

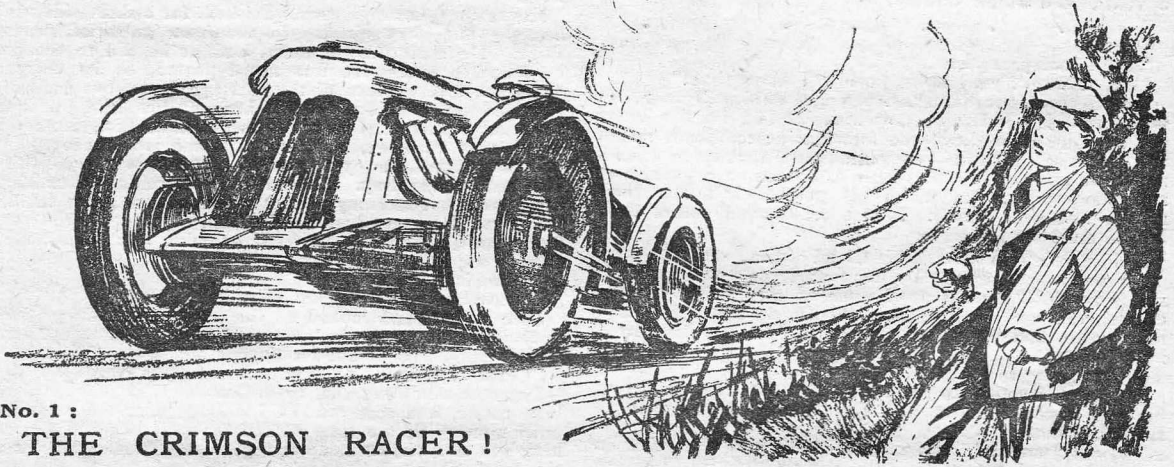
"Well," growled the Ed., "there doesn't seem much chance of bowling you out, so you can run away while you're safe!"

A GRIPPING, COMPLETE STORY!

KINGS O' SPEED!

BY

DOUGLAS MORTON.



No. 1:

THE CRIMSON RACER!

CHAPTER 1.

"Scared, Sonny?"

CRASH!

Dick Stanford threw himself bodily into the ditch at the terrific explosion. A staccato roar, a rush of tearing wind, a flash of what looked like living fire was all he heard, felt, and saw!

"Great Scott! What was it?"

A cloud of dust from the narrow country lane enfolded him as the roar died away. When the air cleared he crawled from his refuge to see a gleaming monster backing towards him; a sight which he could not take his eyes off.

"Thundering stars! What a car!" he murmured in admiration.

And a car it was; but such an ordinary word could not adequately describe it. The body was so low on the ground

that it was like a crouched lion; it was painted a bright crimson, and its streamlines were absolutely the last word in curves, every inch designed to cheat the wind of its pressure. And the bonnet! From the ridiculous little windscreen, splayed back to its utmost limit, to the grinning red mascot it seemed, to Dick's wondering eyes, yards, not feet! What an engine there must be—

"Sorry! Backfire!"

Dick came to earth with a crash as he realised that he was being addressed.

"Sorry!"

Again he heard that soft Southern intonation, and Dick now noticed a humped-up figure of a big man at the driving-wheel who was regarding him with clear grey eyes.

"Shouldn't have been speeding," the driver went on. "My fault entirely! Temptation! First time out on the road with this auto."

The speaker took a cigar from his case, lit it, and Dick noticed that he continually turned it round and round in his mouth as he spoke. He took to this huge American immediately, for he radiated energy and efficiency in every direction. What a lucky chap he was to own such a bus! Dick would have given anything to have driven it.

"Oh, that's all right, sir! I don't mind. I like speeding myself," Dick made reply.

"Live here?"

The American evidently did not believe in wasting breath on long sentences; but, however short his speech, Dick felt that those eyes were boring him like gimlets, weighing him up.

"Yes," he replied. "I am on my way to my uncle's place—the White Cottage."

Dick was just back from school for the holidays. He had left his luggage at the station, and was at that moment trekking the four miles home.

"Say! Mr. Vernon your uncle?" The American seemed quite pleased with the information. "That's great! Know him. Take you home if you like. Get right in! This is the 'Crimson Racer'!" he added, with unconscious pride.

Dick could hardly believe his ears. Was he being asked

to get into that wonderful car—actually to take a ride in it? Whilst he mentally star-gazed, his companion jerked out:

"Gee! Step on it! Life's too short to hesitate!" Then, quietly: "Scared, sonny?"

"Scared? My hat!"

A smile appeared for an instant on the American's face. Good, he thought, that's roused him! He liked

to judge folk, and that little flick on the raw had been purposeful. Looked a good kid, this boy.

"Scared? Why, I'd like to drive her!"

Dick augmented his answer by vaulting the side of the car and dropping into the little, set-back seat, shaped to fit the body. He was breathless with excitement, for he was a fanatic where cars were concerned, and he looked at his companion with shining eyes.

"Good!" smiled the laconic man. "Grip your hat!"

Dick saw the goggles snap down and the left foot move ever so slightly. There was hardly any perceptible motion, yet the hedges were slipping by at an amazing speed. The end of the road seemed already poised on the nose of the bonnet, and the wind sang a song of glorious speed around Dick's burning ears. He crouched low for what little protection the windscreen gave, and let himself revel in it all.

Whooor!

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THE "WRECKER" IS OUT!

He wants Arkville's new invention,
but Dick Stanford's there to see he
doesn't snaffle it!

Like gas escaping, the sound of the tyres tearing at the road-surface came to his ears as the car slowed down. A flash of the corner, and once more they were in the straight. The tyres seemed like screeching demons as they wrenched at the road with a noise that Dick had never heard before on any car. But the mile to his uncle's front gate was gone before he knew it, and once more the great monster was stilled at its master's touch.

"Like it?"

Dick could not answer. Speech was impossible, for he could think of no words of thanks.

"Can see you do. Call around any time to see me. Don't worry about making a date. Arkville's my name—Cyrus J. Arkville. Taken a little shack around here. Benton Manor. Got to get a move on now. 'Bye!"

Before he could realise it the car was gone, and Dick was walking up the little path to his uncle's house, his head in a whirl, to meet his destiny.

"I'm so sorry, my boy!"

"Oh, it wasn't your fault, uncle! I know that!"

Dick leant forward impulsively, and Ashley Vernon, his uncle, smiled affectionately at him. It had been a bitter pill for Dick to swallow—the fact that he could not return to Helston owing to the very plain reason that there was no money to pay future school bills. Dick was an orphan, and now the company in which his parents had left their money had gone smash. It was confounded rotten luck, but he must set his teeth.

Suddenly he remembered his friend of the morning.

"A marvellous man," his uncle said, as he heard Arkville's name. "He has read some of my modest literary efforts, and was kind enough to call on me. He is a millionaire, and owns big car factories in America, so I hear."

"I am going to see him!"

Suiting the action to the word, Dick was soon trundling his old motor-bike out of its shed and on his way to Benton Manor.

The old "mo-bike" was modestly eating up the miles on the main road when suddenly the words, "Look where you're going!" were snarled in his ear, bringing him out of his reverie with a jerk. Dick tore at his handlebars, and

only just saved himself from a fearful crash against the high kerb which ran along the great white artery. He was on the correct side of the road! Who was this blinding at him?

He turned his head, to see a car which was racing along deliberately beside him edging him into the kerb, and to behold an evil-looking face with a livid scar running down the left side of the mouth. Its owner sat at the wheel of a huge Darracq saloon, and he cursed Dick repeatedly. The boy recognised him as the proprietor of a big garage in the near-by town of Sanderstead—a chap he had never liked and one who was notorious for wanting all the road. What a rotter he was, to come barging across like that for no reason whatever! Dick was raging, but before he could say anything the Darracq had accelerated and was soon a speck in the distance.

"Thank goodness that cad's gone, at any rate!" exclaimed Dick.

His temper, however, soon vanished, for a short side road brought him very quickly to the open gates of Benton Park. He shot through them, and as he did so thought he heard a shout. It was not repeated, so he charged along the level surface of the carriage drive, but suddenly slammed on both brakes and brought his bike up in a screeching protest. For right in front of him, from out of the very roadway, had risen a strong iron fence.

Dick rubbed his eyes. Gosh! What ever was this? He must be dreaming. He had not been inside Benton Park for years, but nothing like this had been there in the old days. His pace had skidded him right up to the very fence itself, but before he could examine it a voice hailed him so suddenly that he jumped.

"Come back to the lodge!"

It wasn't a request—it was an order!

Dick turned and looked at the building by the gates—and, incidentally, he noticed that the portals were now closed—but he could not see anyone about.

"Come on!" shouted the mysterious voice again.

There was nothing else to do but obey. He twisted his bike round, and soon was at the lodge door. A strongly-built man, with the tang of the sea still hanging around him, was now visible and was regarding him silently. Then the man spoke:

"Now, my lad, who are you to be dashing around like that? Coming aboard like an admiral!"

Though the words were severe enough, there was a twinkle in the eye that tempered their harshness.

"I'm so sorry," said Dick. "I'm Dick Stanford, and I want to see Mr. Arkville."

"So do a lot of people, and some of 'em queer craft at that. Stand by whilst I phone."

The lodge-keeper took his broad shoulders indoors. Dick could hear his voice in a murmur, and evidently the conversation was satisfactory, for he soon returned.

"Get up steam and make for port."

Dick took this to be that he could go up to the manor, but as he turned in that direction he could not help remarking:

"I say! That fence!"

"Ask no questions and you'll get no lies!" was the laughing reply he got. "Keep your course—straight on!"

By Jove! thought Dick. Here was mystery, if you like! But the man gave him a smile and a wave of the hand, so Dick restrained his inquisitiveness and "got up steam." The fence had disappeared into the ground from whence it had risen, and, wondering greatly in his mind, Dick came to the great oak door of the manor.

The door was opened to him by a butler who stared hard at Dick. Dick returned the compliment, and for no apparent reason took an immediate dislike to the man. Still, he had little time to ponder on butlers, for he was soon ushered into Mr. Arkville's presence, and that taciturn gentleman gave him good welcome.

"Want a job, eh?" said the millionaire, when Dick had given the purport of his visit.

"I do, sir."

Mr. Arkville looked at him steadily for some moments, and then came to one of his usual quick decisions.

"Come right along with me."

Cyrus Arkville led the way through the long corridors of his house, and as they emerged into the old courtyard a strange sight met Dick's eyes.

CHAPTER 2.

"My Enemy, The Wrecker!"

THE old courtyard was ringed with enormous garages and workshops, and overalld mechanics swarmed everywhere! In the middle, where in olden times knights jostled for the honour of their names, stood a large turntable. Up to each garage and workshop ran a runway of dressed concrete, and the old flint and brick

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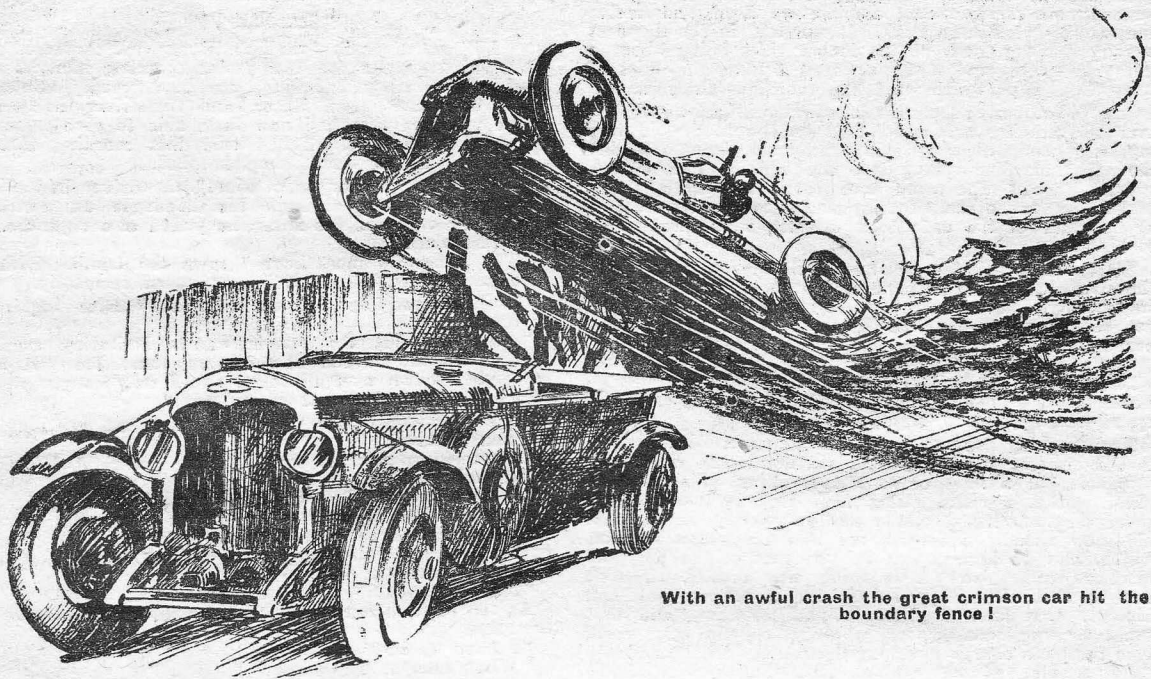
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With an awful crash the great crimson car hit the boundary fence!

walls had been heightened, thus forming a complete circle around the courtyard. Under the old porticulis ran a roadway which crossed the moat at the old drawbridge. All was orderly haste and bustle, and a terrific contrast to the "good old days!"

They moved on into the office, and when they had sat down Mr. Arkville came at once to the point.

"Can hand you out a job, of course. In the works—anything. But that won't bring home much bacon, I guess. You'll be my secretary—sort of roving commission till I get you fixed up good and proper."

Dick began to stammer his thanks.

"Nix on that!" cut in the American. "If you don't pan out as I calculate you'll be fired. Pronto!"

The inevitable cigar twisted and turned in the speaker's mouth.

"Don't get thinking this sec. job's a cinch," he continued. "It ain't. The bit of quill-pushing you'll do will be a blind. You've got to help me in big things. Listen!"

During the next half-hour Dick sat entranced as Arkville unfolded the tale of his life—how he had made his fortune by sheer hard work, and now, as a multi-millionaire, he was devoting his time, for the pure love of the thing, to automobile inventions of his own. Money was not the object, only the achievement. The job at present on hand was in connection with the Crimson Racer. It was fitted with a secret gadget—a thin attachment to the outer cover of the tyre, ensuring extra road grip. Speed! Speed! That was the slogan, for the Grand Prix, the greatest motor race in Europe, was very near now.

Dick felt slightly disappointed. It all seemed very ordinary. Perhaps his thoughts showed on his face, for his companion smiled and then said:

"That's not the half of it. I've given you my word that this is no soft billet."

Dick's thoughts flew back to the mysterious fence inside the lodge gates. Ah! Perhaps they were coming to it now!

"There's one man in this world," continued Arkville, "who's clean crazy jealous of me. Who the guy is I don't know. But he's out to kill anything I do—or grab it for himself and sell it. And he doesn't let the grass grow under his feet when he's around. No, sir! See that?"

Arkville pushed back his hair from his forehead. Across his scalp ran a vivid scar!

"That's one of his birthday presents," he went on grimly. "In everything I do there's money; I don't want it, but he does. And that big boy won't let anything stand in his light to pinch my inventions!"

Cyrus Arkville paused and lit a fresh cigar.

"Now! Get right hold of this, sonny," he went on seriously. "You may be bombed, sandbagged, doped, trodden on! You may expect to see the sky fall, the

earth open, and the sea rise, with you in the middle of the earthquake. And that may just be a kind of sample before you've had time to park your breakfast in your innards. Any day and every day. So now you know. And if you feel like going home while the going's good I, for one, shan't blame you. But if you don't feel that way—"

Dick impulsively leant forward, put out his hand, and Arkville solemnly gripped it.

"You've got sand, sonny. Now you're one of us. I'll give the word to Tregarthen on the gates. He won't press the button and put up the fence against you. Or talk to you through his loud-speaker."

Mr. Arkville smiled as he saw the surprise on Dick's face. But the boy soon recovered and asked a question with great eagerness.

"Mr. Arkville, who is the mysterious man, your enemy?" "Sonny," was the solemn reply, "I'd give the world to know. Whatever his name is, he keeps it under his hat good and tight. He sent me a few 'billy-does' in his time, and signs himself 'The Wrecker'!"

"The Wrecker! By golly, we'll wreck him!" replied Dick.

"Good for you, boy! Now come along with me."

The millionaire led the way to the library, where he handed him a cheque. Dick gasped as he read the figure. Fifty pounds!

"Your first quarter's dough!" he heard his companion say. "You'll earn it all right, if the Wrecker's about!"

Earn it? Why, he'd do anything for this man, who had given him such a topping start.

He heard his employer speaking into his house phone, and soon a taciturn man, stumpy in figure, came into the room.

"Mold," said the boss, "I want you to take Mr. Dick Stanford out in the Bentley. Let him have his head!"

A Bentley! One of those great sporting cars that had smashed their way to victory in the last Grand Prix.

"Am I to drive?" Dick gasped, excitement tingling his whole body.

"Sure!" said the cigar-twister calmly.

Mold was holding open the door, so Dick passed out with him to his first great drive.

In Garage No. 10 stood the long, grey Bentley, breaker of countless racing records, all ready for the trip. Mold handed Dick a crash-helmet, and, with enormous pride, the boy donned it. He was trembling with eagerness, but a glance at the stolid Mold and the mechanics as they pushed the Bentley on to the turntable soon steadied him. Dick sprang in, Mold following. A touch to the starting-button and the vast engine roared into life.

Dick sighed with satisfaction as the Bentley slid over the old drawbridge and then nearly "boshed" everything up at the sight which met his eyes. For lying behind the

CHAPTER 3.

"Scar-Face!"

great manor, and stretching as far as he could see, was an enormous racing track; a miniature Brooklands inside the confines of Benton Park. It was laid in the shape of a rough oblong, each of the longer sides being about a mile in length, and it disappeared behind the lines of the ancient oaks, which stood like guardians along it.

Quickly recovering from his astonishment, Dick swung left over the guiding arrows studded on the road, slid into top, and gently depressed the accelerator pedal. He felt the great machine spring into life beneath him with a swoop. Speed! The wind tore round his crash-helmet, and he wanted to shout for joy at the power of it all and at the roar of the unfettered exhaust, which was music to his ears.

"Great snakes!" he exclaimed. He was tearing along the straight, with the needle of the speedometer registering seventy. Never in his life had he travelled so fast, and yet seventy was really no speed at all. Suddenly he heard a shout in his car.

"Let her rip, sir!"

Down went his foot, and the car leapt away like a horse with the bit between his teeth. Up and up crept the speed—seventy, eighty, eighty-five—

Then a thing happened which was to test Dick's nerves to the utmost; for suddenly, right across the track only a quarter of a mile or so ahead, appeared a burst of black smoke, a cloud rising from the earth entirely to cover the metalled speedway and completely blotting out his view ahead. This was not like Tregarthen's fence, which, now he knew about it, was part of the jolly old defence work. No! This thing was deadly, sinister! And on Dick alone depended the life of the mechanic and himself. One false step, one slight hesitation, and that great roaring monster, at whose wheel he sat, would take complete charge and hurl them both to destruction.

By a flick of an eyelash, Dick anticipated Mold's shout.

"Straight on, sir!"

There was nothing else for it. He trod on the gas, and it was all over in a flash. The car smashed through that ominous black cloud at ninety miles an hour. Darkness enveloped Dick for a split second whilst he hung grimly on to the steering-wheel. Then—through—safe!

With a grind of brakes, Dick brought the heaving car to a standstill. He thrust his goggles back from his eyes. My hat! Here was excitement, if you like. He turned to speak to Mold, but that stocky man was already out of the car, with a leap like that of a released bulldog. He was running back along the track, and Dick, like a flash, did likewise, and, as he caught him up, gasped out:

"What was it?"

"Smoke bomb! Had 'em before. The Wrecker's out!" came the reply in jerks.

The Wrecker! By Jove, he didn't waste much time!

As they ran along, Dick, at the back of his mind, was vaguely conscious of a familiar roar. Long before they could reach the heavy black cloud, which still obscured the track, Mold had also realised, only too well, what that roar meant. A startled exclamation escaped his lips:

"The Racer! The Crimson Racer!"

Without a moment's hesitation, they hurled themselves off the track, as from out of the smoke-cloud came a crash of roaring machinery. It leapt at them, and they saw the driver crouched firmly over the wheel. Mold gasped, for to the man in the Crimson Racer the sight of the Bentley practically under his wheels must have been appalling. Dick involuntarily yelled: "Look out!" before he realised how idiotic it was to expect anyone to hear at that terrific speed.

To their horrified gaze, they saw the driver wrench over his wheel, the great crimson car give a terrific lurch, skid with shrieking tyres askew on the track, and, with an awful crash, hit the boundary fence. They saw it somersault and for a moment hang in the air, its wheels whizzing round ludicrously; then it disappeared into the undergrowth with an ear-splitting roar.

Dick stood petrified for a second, and then, with one glance at Mold's face, he tore along the track, his fleet feet soon outdistancing his companion's. But another was at the scene of the smash even before him, for he saw a figure leap from behind a bush—a figure which had waited for just such a chance—rush to the overturned car and stop one of the still racing wheels in its mad career. A flash of a knife, a rip of the outer cover, and the figure was gone in the dense undergrowth.

"My hat!" Dick's thoughts raced through his head. "The Wrecker! And he's got the secret gadget!"

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DICK sat alone in Arkville's library and concentrated his thoughts on the problem facing him. Two days had passed since the blackguardly attempt on the Crimson Racer, and the driver, lucky to escape with his life, had now been able to give them a little information. Dick had only that morning interviewed him in the Sanderstead hospital.

"Only caught a glimpse of him!" the driver had said, grinning cheerfully through his bandages as, strictly against the orders of his nurse, he puffed at a cigarette.

"Which one?"

"The man who must have thrown the bomb. Didn't have time to see the other!" he laughed cheerfully.

"Nothing you could trace him by?" Dick inquired anxiously.

"N-n-no!" But the answer had a hesitating sound. "Wait a moment, sir. It's coming back. He had his hat pulled down over his eyes, and I only caught sight of him out of the corner of my eye!"

"It's a wonder to me you had time to see anything!" grinned Dick.

"I remember now. A scar! A scar down the left side of his mouth!"

Dick went over the conversation again and again in his mind as he sat in the library. A man with a scar! Dick's days had been pretty full lately, but at the back of his brain was the memory of a scar. Oh, if only he could remember!

"Ah!"

As the exclamation left him, Cyrus J. Arkville entered the room.

"I have it, sir!" Dick cried.

"What, sonny? The earth?"

"No. The man with the scar!"

Arkville looked keenly at his companion. It was not like Dick to make silly statements. There must be something at the back of this. The great inventor was feeling very keenly the loss of his secret gadget, and he set his lips as he swung a chair round and sat down.

"Let's have the yarn," he said quietly.

Dick quickly retailed the gist of his interview with the driver of the Crimson Racer, Arkville listening intently all the time.

"Did you see the second one?" the inventor inquired.

"No," answered Dick.

"You'd need big glasses to see that smarty. He's the Wrecker all right. The boy with the brains behind it all. But this other guy—the man with the scar?"

"I know him, sir!" Dick was all agog to give his information. "He's a garage proprietor at Sanderstead!"

"Say! That's great! Grab your hat, and we'll go around and size up his lay-out!"

Soon they were tearing along the road in the first car available on the turntable, and, heading past Tregarthen at the gates, where Dick received a friendly smile as they shot through, made their way towards Sanderstead.

"It'll be a great blow if that gadget's lost," said Arkville, as they raced along. "The foreigners will dig deep into their pants to pay for it. And the Grand Prix only four weeks ahead. Want our boys to win it. And they will with my invention. But if the foreigners have got it—"

He broke off his remarks, and Dick stared through his racing goggles at the road ahead and set his teeth. They would not have it if he could help it! He'd get that gadget back before anyone could use it, if he died in the attempt!

He turned expectantly to his companion as the car slowed down in the town.

"Near here?" queried Arkville.

"Yes," replied Dick.

"Good enough. Walk right in and rout around!"

Walk in! What ever was he to say, thought Dick, when he got to the garage, which was only just round the corner? He looked into Arkville's clear grey eyes, which were regarding him steadily, and he knew he was to make good on his own.

"It's your job, sonny. They're sure to know me."

Without a word, Dick swung himself over the side of the car, and, with a firm step, entered the main door of the show-room, which lay in front of Scar-face's garage.

"Yes?"

A very supercilious salesman was approaching him, and up to that moment Dick had not the least idea of what he wanted to say. But he had a brain-wave, and replied:

"I say, can you lend me an adjustable spanner? I've broken down just round the corner."

The salesman's eyebrows went higher still. "They will doubtless lend you a spanner in the garage," he said, and waved his hand grandly in the direction of the back of the show-room.

Dick took this to be an invitation to proceed, so, grinning broadly to himself, he wound his way through the gleaming models, all ready for sale, his eyes and ears well open. As he neared the door which obviously led to the garage, he heard voices raised in argument. For the moment he could not trace their direction; but, rounding a glistening, coach-built Rolls-Royce, he noticed a small room labelled "Office." Quickly he glanced around. No one was about. Lucky!

It was but the work of a second to crouch on the fat foot-board of the super-saloon and press his car against the matchboarding of the office.

"You have had my offer!" he heard a guttural voice snap, evidently in anger.

"The Grand Prix is only four weeks away," came the soft reply.

"Bah! Get a better price if you can!"

"I shall! I leave to-night at eleven o'clock to meet—"

But the first man evidently did not wish to listen, for the sound of a chair being pushed violently back sent Dick crouching down once more. He heard the door of the office open, and, breathless with excitement, he raised his head cautiously over the shining panels of the car which was his hiding-post, and peered through its windows.

One of the men now leaving the office was Scar-face!

"Gee-whiz!" exclaimed Dick quietly. "Eleven o'clock to-night! You won't journey alone, my friend!"

CHAPTER 4.

The Fight in the Night!

"YOU know what to do, sonny?"

"Yes, sir," the boy answered.

Dick and Arkville sat quietly discussing Scar-face and the loss of the gadget as the evening drew in. The hands of the clock were pointing to ten when Mr. Arkville walked to the window and looked out.

"It's hitting up for a black night," he said.

All to the good, thought Dick, as, with his companion, he left the library and made for the courtyard. Standing ready on the turntable was a new two-seater Chrysler, low, long, snappy and speedy, a bus capable of beating pretty well anything on the road. Dick flicked down his goggles and climbed aboard, eager for the fray.

The clock at the station showed ten-forty-five as he passed it, and soon he was in the little side street by the notorious garage. He opened the bonnet of his car and tinkered at the engine, keeping a wary eye open all the time. He was soon rewarded for his vigilance for, with the striking of the hour, the big Darracq saloon, with which he was already acquainted, slid into the street.

Dick jumped into his seat and at a discreet distance followed it. He kept its tail-light well in his eye and noted they were making for the narrow country lanes near the river. All the better, thought Dick, to keep away from the main roads. Scar-face was a hot driver, but he easily had the measure of him.

Waiting until they were in a straight strip, without any side roads, Dick accelerated and roared past the Darracq, giving it his dust. A mile or so farther on he stopped.

Dark, mysterious, and deserted the road stood at that hour. Dick, thanking his lucky stars that he knew every inch of the district, waited eagerly for his enemy to appear. In a minute or so the headlights of the Darracq lit up his car.

"Hi!" he heard a voice shout. "Get out of my way!"

"Can't!" Dick yelled back. "Brakes jammed!"

The figure of a man approached, grumbling and cursing. "What's up?" the man snarled. "Brakes? Come on, get your darned car off this narrow road!"

Dick held his breath, for his heart was thumping with excitement. This was Scar-face! Let him come just a little nearer to him, just a little closer, for Dick's right fist hung ready by his side.

"You're a silent young pup, my lad! What—"

But Scar-face never completed his sentence, for a hefty punch from Dick's timely fist laid him helpless on the ground.

Quickly Dick thrust him into the ditch, and the man lay there, breathing heavily. Leaping to the Darracq, Dick flung open the door. On the seat was an attache-case. Would the gadget be in it? It was! Snatching it up, he made for the Chrysler and sprang in.

But Scar-face wasn't finished. With an oath he heaved himself out of the ditch and made a leap. He just missed Dick as he slammed in the first gear, but, with another oath, leaped to his own car and followed in close pursuit.

Over the river bridge in the village of Merlow Dick crashed at high speed,

Ping!

He heard the whine of a ricochet! Great Jupiter! That fellow was a sticker. Firing at his tyres! He'd have to shake him off somehow. He tore round a corner, and then suddenly remembered the small lane near by that led to a backwater of the Thames. Over went his wheel, and his tyres bit screechingly at the loose stones.

The lane dropped sheer to the river and then abruptly ceased. It was upon this intimate knowledge of the river side that Dick banked all his hopes. There was only an old wooden fence between the end of the lane and the water, and as he neared it Dick swung sharply right and brought up his car with a jerk. Out snapped his lights, and he turned quickly in his seat.

The rocking Darracq, its mad and incautious driver giving a sudden shout, whizzed past him with screaming brakes, right into the trap prepared for it. Dick snapped round in reverse, switched on his headlights, and in its glare saw the big saloon go through the fence as if it were matchboarding, take the bank of the small backwater in a terrific leap, and land on all four wheels in the shallow stream, to remain there a helpless hulk of metal.

A volley of curses greeted his ears, and he caught the words:

"The Wrecker and me will have you yet!"

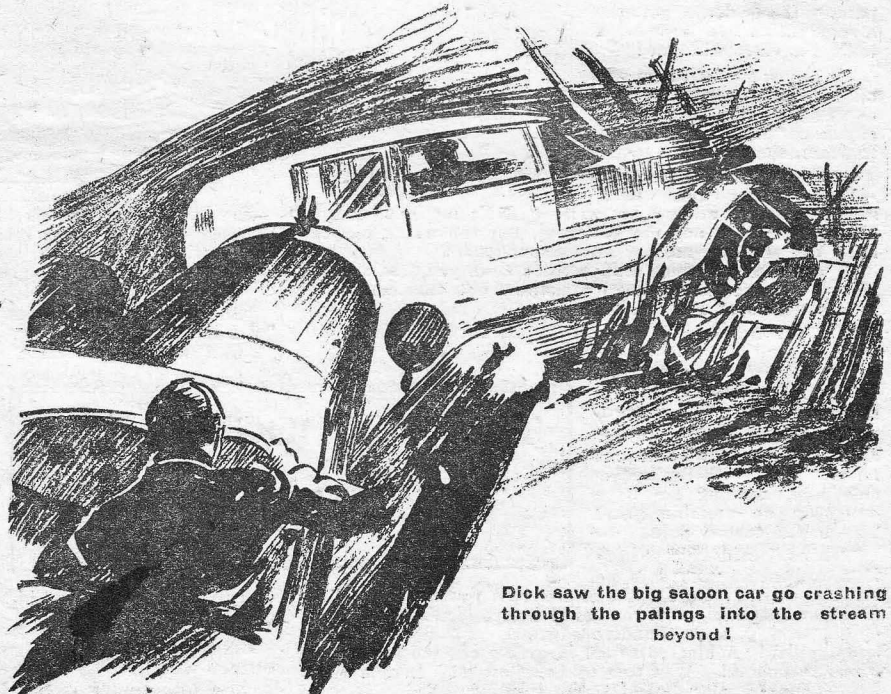
So this man was not the Wrecker!

But what odds, thought Dick, with great joy. The gadget was safe, and the Grand Prix England's—as it eventually proved—and he had won!

"As the boss would say: 'That goes well with me!'" he mused as he roared his way triumphantly home.

THE END.

(Dick Stanford's a great guy, isn't he, boys? Next week he's up against a tougher proposition still. Mind you read "The Silent Rocket.")



Dick saw the big saloon car go crashing through the palings into the stream beyond!

OUR SMASHING SERIAL OF THE ROYAL NAVY!

The FIGHTING MIDDY!

Smiler Solves a Knotty Problem!

"W E'LL turn him out for you! We'll pitch the swab overboard, if we're broke for it!" said Mayne.

"I don't want you fellows to get court-martialled on my account, though," said Jinks. "Let's go and reason with the beast!"

They all made for the sleeping flat, and there, sitting on Jinks' chest, was the tailor-bailiff, a folded blue paper in his hand, and his bloated face turned triumphantly towards Jinks.

"Are you going to get off my chest, or ain't you?" cried Jinks.

"I'm not going till I'm paid the last 'alfpenny o' twenty-five pounds," said the tailor hoarsely, "as well as my expenses in comin' out! Wot's more, if you touches a single harticle in this chest, you're breaking the law, an' I'll have you arrested!"

"Do you mean to say you're going to swindle Jinks out of all that money for a suit of second-hand clothes?" said Acland hotly.

"Don't you use that language to me, or I'll 'ave yer run in!" said the bailiff insolently. "I'm 'ere arter my lawful hearmin's. 'Ere I am, an' 'ere I stays till I'm paid. If I don't get the money inside five minutes, I takes the chest with me!"

"Will you? We'll turn you off it pretty quickly if you don't go!" said Mayne excitedly. "Send for a file of Marines, somebody!"

"Send for the 'ole regiment—they daren't touch me!"

said the tailor, waving his writ. "'Ere's my hauthority! Not the captin, nor the hadmiral, nor the whole blessed Fleet can stir me—no, nor Parliament itself!"

"I dare say all these things can't shift you," said Ned Hardy quietly; "but I know something else that can do it in two shakes of a duck's tail."

"I'd like ter see it!" sneered the bailiff, flourishing his writ.

"You shall," said Ned, "and mighty quick, too!" He disappeared without a word.

They wondered what he was about. In a few moments he was back, with Smiler beside him, showing his huge fangs in an amiable grin! The bailiff turned pale!

"Smiler," said Ned, "here is a gentleman who says he can't be shifted; but I'd like to see what you can do—"

Smiler caught sight of the bailiff before Ned's speech was ended, and gave a thunderous growl. Strangers in the sleeping-flat! A bloated rascal in greasy clothes, sitting on Jinks' sea-chest! Was this to be allowed? Like a shot from a gun, Smiler dashed at the intruder.

By David Goodwin



preferring the sea to Smiler, the bailiff flung himself overboard.

The bailiff gave one terrified howl and fled, abandoning the sea-chest, and racing blindly for the door, Smiler after him in full cry. The alleyway was blocked, and the bailiff tore round the room at amazing speed, keeping just ahead of the dog, amid a roar of laughter.

"Show him the writ, you giddy fool!" exclaimed Ned. "Read it out to him!"

"Call 'im orf!" screeched the bailiff. "If he catches me, you'll be 'ung! Yow!"

He rushed frantically through the farther alleyway, fear driving him at such a pace that he outdistanced even Smiler, who, intent on business, followed grimly at his best speed, the middies in full cry bringing up the rear. As the bailiff fled blindly out on to the boat deck, he cast a

despairing glance behind him, and saw that Smiler was very close indeed.

Right in front was a gap in the rails by the second cutter's davits. The bailiff, preferring the sea to Smiler, gave a howl and launched himself into the air. The bull-

The BULLDOG BREED!

Bow-wow Smiler victorious in battle with Bailiff!

dog, intent only on his prey, shot out after him, and amid a roar of laughter from all beholders, the bailiff and Smiler sailed forth and soused with a double plunge into the water far below.

Never did any man go to his fall more eagerly than the bailiff. He hurled himself overboard like a rabbit dashing into cover, and as man and dog dived gracefully into the sparkling Solent, a great gust of laughter swept from end to end of the battleship's after-deck.

"Silence!" shouted the officer of the day, looking over the bridge deck-rail. "What fool's game are you playing there? Who's that overboard?"

"It's a bailiff, sir," said half a dozen voices.

The officer of the day disappeared again like a jack-in-the-box. He had heard quite enough. If bailiffs came aboard the Victorious and got into trouble there, it was their own look-out.

"Great Scott! He'll be drowned!" exclaimed Ned, in a sudden scare, running to the side.

"Not he! He can swim like a porpoise!" said Jinks, catching his chum and holding him back. "None of your jump-to-rescue business here, old son! Stay where you are. He's all right. Look at him!"

The bailiff came shooting to the surface, blowing like a whale, and, looking round, he saw Smiler, not half a dozen yards away, paddling wildly, and sneezing the water out of his flat nose. With a spluttering shriek, the bailiff turned away, and struck out as if he meant to break the Channel record. Smiler gave a wheezy grunt, and set out after the fugitive as fast as his legs could paddle him.

"Take him away! Stop him! I shall be et up!" howled the bailiff, striking out frantically.

He was a powerful swimmer—or, at any rate, fear made him so. The audience on the ship's deck nearly collapsed with laughter. For the moment discipline went to the winds. Bluejackets, Marines, warrant-officers, ship's police all joined in the chorus:

"Six to four on the tailor!" cried Keppel.

"I'm backing Smiler!" chuckled Jinks.

"Help! Won't some of yer help?" gasped the bailiff frantically.

When Smiler started on any undertaking, he followed it up to the bitter end. It was unworthy of a bulldog to do anything else, he considered. Smiler had chased the intruder on shipboard, and saw no reason why he should not chase him in the water.

For a heavy dog, he was a fine swimmer. Once fairly on the way, he began to gain on the bailiff. His big, business-like head clove along through the water, leaving an arrow-shaped wake that stretched away behind, his small but determined eyes fixed on the fugitive.

The bailiff cast a glance back at him, and, with a grunt of fright, increased his pace, and began a side-stroke that sent the water flying in showers. It looked as if he meant to swim to Portsmouth.

There were two of the Victorious' boats out—a cutter with her crew lying at the boom, and a fully manned whaleboat that had just arrived at the gangway. The latter came out towards the fugitive, her crew almost too weak with laughter to row.

A third boat, however, that did not belong to the ship, but was rowed by two excited watermen who had brought the bailiff out, and who were evidently friends of his, made for the swimmer with all possible speed, and he, in his turn, was trying to reach it.

"Keep your 'ead up, old pippin!" shouted the stroke waterman. "We'll 'ave yer all right!"

"E'll 'ave me, if you don't look sharp. I'm done!" wailed the bailiff.

"I say, there'll be slaughter if they don't get that chap out quick!" said Mayne apprehensively. "The dog—"

"Oh, they'll do it all right!" grinned Jinks. "Just near enough to be pleasant. I wouldn't have missed a front seat at this for a captaincy! Rah! Smiler's got him!"

Smiler made a spurt, and gained on his man so much that the bailiff, in a panic, drew up his legs and turned clean round in the water. He rolled over like a porpoise, and Smiler, making a blind grab, seized a large mouthful of cloth.

There was a frantic struggle, the water was lashed into spray, and man and dog turned round like a catherine-wheel in the foam. Then the bailiff broke away, leaving the seat of his trousers with Smiler as a trophy of war, and

the next moment he was pulled bodily into the boat by the two watermen. He collapsed, streaming and gasping, and sat down heavily on the floor gratings.

Smiler, balked of his prey, made a gallant effort to overtake the boat; but it sped away, and left him with nothing but a square foot of cloth to rejoice over. He saw something blue floating on the foam, and made a grab at it. It was the writ. Smiler did not seem to like the taste of it, for he let it go again, and, being sodden with water, it slowly sank and disappeared. The whaleboat reached Smiler at the same moment, and the bowman lifted him aboard.

On the Victorious everybody within view was weeping and limp with laughter. Seamen leaned across rails and stanchions like wet rags, and fought for breath.

"Jinks, you're a blessed public benefactor!" gasped Keppel, wiping his eyes. "I wish you'd get served with a writ every day. Cheered us up no end!"

"It was Ned Hardy did the trick. He thought of bringing Smiler," said Jinks. "Saved us a heap of trouble—what!"

The bailiff raised himself in the boat, and, hastily wrapping the end of a sail round his injured trousers, howled fervidly at the ship.

"You'll get it for this, all the lot o' you! Set o' bloom'n' pirates! I'll 'ave you for it, you see!"

"Go on, old six-an-eightpence!" retorted a leading-seaman jocosely. "Turn round and take a reef in your spanker!"

"Behold the far-famed Gilly Gout," said Mayne, "whose shirt hangs out—five yards in and five yards—"

"I'll prosecute the lot o' you!" yelled the tailor, purple in the face. "Wait till I get back to the police court! I'll summons every man-jack! An' the beggar that set the dorg on me—"

"What did you run away for?" said Ned blandly. "He only wanted to lick your hand. He eats bailiffs—"

"Take me to that 'ere gangway!" hissed the tailor to his boatmen. "I'll 'ave the captain down—I'll 'ave the admiral—I'll—"

"What! Ain't you 'ad enough of it yet, mate?" said the stroke-waterman. "Look, there's your pal waitin' for you!"

The bailiff glanced at the gangway where Smiler had just been landed, and his voice failed as he saw the dripping dog squatting comfortably on the lower platform watching the waterman's boat with longing eyes. The gusts of laughter were still sweeping the deck when the first lieutenant strode down from above.

"Silence, here! Are you all mad?" he cried angrily. "Ten days' 10A to the next man who laughs! You, yonder, there!" he hailed the bailiff. "What are you making this disturbance about? Be off with you, my man, or I'll send the cutter after you!"

"Ere, let's get out of it!" exclaimed the watermen, bending to their oars and making for the Hampshire shore with all speed. "We don't want to be razzled!"

"You wait till I get ter the courts! Only wait!" roared the tailor. And he was carried away, raving and gesticulating at the Victorious, and calling down vengeance on her and her ship's company, shaking his clenched fists above his head till the wash of a passing destroyer made the boat lurch, and he pitched forward into the arms of his stroke-oarsman.

Jinks rushed into the gun-room, accompanied by Ned, and, flinging himself at full length on a seat, buried his face in the cushion and laughed till the supports shook.

"Ned," he panted at last, sitting up, "you've put me under a giddy debt of everlasting gratitude. Absolutely saved my bacon, old chap. To say nothing of serving up the best jape of the whole cruise!"

"Me? What d'you mean? I didn't do a thing!" protested Ned.

"Well, but—"

"Don't talk skittles! I don't want anybody to get that

idea into their head, old chap. I don't know what you're talking about. Nobody did anything—unless it was Smiler. I didn't chase the fellow overboard!"

"No, of course not. Don't you worry about that. My hat! Didn't he look ripping, sailing over the side like a giddy aeroplane!"

Jinks fell into fresh fits of mirth. Ned looked rather solemn.

"It's all very well. But won't there be a thundering row about it?" he said

HOW THE STORY STARTED.

MIDSHIPMAN NED HARDY, son of a line of sea captains, is appointed to the Victorious, the same ship from which his brother Ralph has been cashiered in connection with a robbery. Misfortune soon befalls the new snotty, for he is made the scapegoat of a Russian plot to wreck the British Navy. Thanks to a warning note from Ralph, Ned succeeds in establishing his innocence and bringing his enemy to book. Granted shore leave, Ned and his pal Jinks are wending their way through a maze of narrow streets when they are suddenly attacked by four roughs. Jinks is knocked into a puddle and his clothes are ruined. The toughs are eventually beaten off, and Jinks is forced to get a second-hand uniform from a wily tailor who charges him twenty pounds. Jinks hands over two pounds and signs an IOU for the rest. Later, he receives a county court summons, which he ignores, with the result that the tailor sneaks aboard and threatens to seize his sea-chest.

(Now read on.)

apprehensively. "Of course, I couldn't see the ruffian sitting there on your box without doin' something about it. There'll be the dickens' own shindy. The commander'll be sending down for me in a minute, I suppose. I say, Jinks, do—do you think they'll cashier me?"

"Sack you! Great Harry, what bosh!" said Jinks, sitting up. "Why, my dear chap, everybody will back you up. You don't suppose any fellow on the ship will take a beastly bailiff's part against one of ourselves. The man only got aboard here by a trick, and I'd jolly well like to know how—"

"But suppose the captain gets to hear of it, there'll be an awful—"

"Of course the captain will hear of it," said Jinks, "and he'll wink the other eye. He'll hear of it, and yet not hear of it. Do you tumble? Catch the Owner putting his oar into an affair like that! The bailiff was very neatly got rid of. Do you suppose Raglan wants to have him on the Victorious?"

"You mean—"

"Why, of course. The Owner probably had 'em after him himself when he was a snottie. He knows what sharks those longshore swindlers are. You won't have any trouble. Hallo, here's old Hart!"

Sub-Lieutenant Hart came into the gun-room with two other subs. and several middies behind him. Grimshaw was away on shore leave, and Hart being consequently senior sub-lieutenant in his absence, caught sight of Ned and came over towards him. Ned looked apprehensive of trouble, but there was a suppressed grin on his superior officer's face.

"Well, Hardy, your pet cleared out the enemy pretty effectively," said Mr. Hart.

"The gun-room pet, sir," said Ned warily.

"Oh, ah, of course! Well, we all share it, then—the responsibility and the glory," said Lieutenant Hart. "I must say, Hardy, you've kept things moving pretty briskly since you joined us." He turned to Jinks. "Was it you that fellow with the writ was after?"

"Yes, sir," said Jinks. "He'd got aboard somehow on the quiet, and I found him sitting on my sea-chest. He was going to seize it."

"What was it for—champagne suppers at the Royal Hotel? Or have you been buying a motor-car and forgotten to pay for it?"

"No, sir; nothing like that. Twenty-five—and costs—for a suit of clothes I had."

"Twenty-five what?" shouted Hart. The subs. and midshipmen crowded round and listened with interest. Jinks blushed to the roots of his hair. "Why, was it made of gold thread, with ruby buttons?"

"Only a second-hand monkey-jacket and trousers—worth about two pounds," said Jinks, stammering as the others began to grin. "You see, it was—I— Oh, hang it, Ned! You tell 'em. I'm no hand at a yarn."

"It was like this, sir," explained Ned. "Jinks and I were on shore leave some time ago, and coming back we got into a fight with four roughs who set on us in an alley off the quays. There was a scrimmage, and Jinks got upset into a mud-puddle and his uniform absolutely done for."

"We were due aboard, and as he couldn't come back like that, and hadn't another uniform handy at the time, we went to a tailor's shop close by, kept by a chap called Kay, and he'd got a second-hand uniform that was just the thing—"

"And when I'd got it on," burst in Jinks, finding his voice with the memory of his wrongs, "he said it was twenty pounds, and as there wasn't time to change again, and I'd nothing else to wear, he'd fairly got me."

"I gave him two quid cash, and he made me sign a bill for the rest. And then he got a summons out almost directly, and I didn't know what it was. So the end of it was, there I found him on my sea-chest half an hour ago, saying he was going to seize it, and—"

FREE GIFTS!

"Union Jack" (The Sexton Blake Mystery Magazine), is presenting to all its readers a really attractive set of free gifts—a series of pictures in FULL COLOUR of World Famous Aircraft, and an artistic album specially designed for mounting them. Fourteen pictures in all, the best and biggest gift of the kind ever presented with a boys' paper. Ask your newsagent for a copy of "Union Jack" on sale Thursday, November 13th, price 2d., containing the FIRST TWO full-colour aeroplane pictures, and the PRESENTATION ALBUM.

"Great Caesar!" broke in Hart. "You don't mean to say you got into the clutches of that cheap skate! You young mokes! Why, it was all a put-up job!"

"What!" exclaimed Ned.

"Put-up job!" gasped Jinks.

"Not the first time, either," said another sub.

"Those toughs who set on you were in Kay's pay," said Lieutenant Hart. "They were there to muck up your clothes for you, so there was nothing for it but to get fresh ones at his shop close by. Then when he's got the clothes on to his customer, he swindles all the money out of him that he thinks he can get."

"I've heard one of those hooligans is his son. There was a snottie from the Belligerent got caught that way three months ago, and Kay stuck him for fifteen pounds, and got it, too. The price seems to have gone up in your case," said Hart, smiling grimly.

Jinks and Ned looked thunderstruck. The assembled middies burst into roars of laughter.

"By Jove, though, that blackguard of a tailor wants a spell of Southampton Gaol!" exclaimed Vaughan.

"He does; but I'm afraid there's no chance of his getting it," said Hart. "It's almost impossible to prove the thing against him, that's the trouble. We know he plays his game, but you can't bring it home to him."

"My word! I seem to have dropped into a choice sort of trap!" said the astonished Jinks.

"And you think there won't be any row about—about what we did, sir?" asked Ned.

"Row! the only row will be for the corporal of the gangway, and I shall see he gets well hauled over the coals for letting an outsider get past him aboard the ship. That's a serious matter," said Lieutenant Hart. "Except for that the job's over and done with, and I vote the gun-room mess presents Smiler with a silver collar."

"Hear, hear!" said a dozen voices.

"Engraved with a suitable inscription," said Vaughan, grinning. "The Bailiff-Destroyer, or the Trousers-tearing Terror of the Seas."

"What about the tailor-man?" said Jinks. "He went off breathing fire and slaughter. Will he be prosecuting us for attacking him in the course of his duty—or whatever it is?"

"Well, he might take out police court summonses against you and Hardy for that business, and I dare say he will. That's be a serious matter. But he's got to serve the summonses on you before he can get you before a magistrate. He might even get you arrested, for all I know," said Hart, "if you went ashore; but as long as you stop on the Victorious, and keep away from the gangway, so that nobody from Portsmouth can serve a summons on to you, you're all right!"

"And we sail first thing in the morning!" said Keppel, chuckling.

"Catch me going ashore!" said Ned fervently; and Jinks echoed him.

"Well, you're both safe, then," returned Hart. "I'll stand Marsala round in honour of the occasion, and then you kids must stop this playing round and keep quiet. The gun-room discipline is going to pot!"

"Not much wonder, with Hardy advertising himself in it every day!" growled Wexton; but somebody kicked him severely, and he lapsed into silence. The middies were in no mood to hear anything against Ned and Jinks.

The small glasses of mild brown wine were handed round, and the health of the pair was drunk with honours.

The Black Steam Yacht!

"WHAT I want to know," said Ned to his chum, two days later, "is, when are they going to bring our spy to his trial—Dimitri, the fellow who took the place of Private Beckett, the Marine, and nearly got me into that ghastly mess?"

"It takes some time to get all the evidence together for a big case like that, I reckon," replied Jinks gravely. "But I heard Buckley saying yesterday—I don't know if it's true—that he's to be fetched from the prison to-night."

"Good!" exclaimed Ned, brightening up. "It's time they got a move on. But I should say it's too late to-night—it's nearly seven bells, and dark as pitch. They couldn't—"

"Mr. Hardy to the first lieutenant at once, please!" said a messenger from the upper deck, appearing suddenly.

Ned, without a word, dashed out at top speed, and saluted Mr. Moxton, under the guns of the fore-turret.

"Mr. Hardy," said Number One, "you will man the first pinnacle at eight bells, and go to the Admiralty office at

Gospport. You will take a file of Marines with you, and bring off a prisoner who will be brought down to the wharf with an escort."

"Yes, sir!" said Ned, and his heart gave a leap, for he guessed what the order meant.

"You will hold no communication with anyone ashore except the officer commanding the escort, nor with any passing vessel, while engaged in this duty; and, of course, you will see that your men do not do so, either."

"Very good, sir!"

"Go and get ready. Take your boat-cloak with you."

Ned darted away to make the necessary arrangements, and when he came on deck again he was seized upon behind a ventilator by Jinks, who was serving with the watch, and had heard-what was said.

"I say, it's that spy you're going after," said Jinks. "Must be! They're bringing him aboard for trial, then."

"Yes; that's what I thought."

"Lucky beggar! Wish I was coming with you!"

"Oh, there isn't much in it! Just to fetch him aboard!"

"Things'll begin to move now. Keep your eye lifted, old chap. Remember what Mr. E. told you," whispered Jinks. Ned hurried off.

A corporal and two privates of Marines entered the pinnace, where she lay rocking and hissing at the gangway, and at the stroke of eight bells Ned called: "Pinnace manned, sir!" and was given the order to go.

The little vessel slipped away through the night, Ned sitting silently in her stern. Brinkman, the young A.B., was one of her crew, but there was no talking, in accordance with orders.

When they were half-way to the harbour, a small steam vessel came past them rather close, a curious-looking craft, with a long, raking schooner bow, and smartly painted sides. The officer on her low bridge seemed to look very hard at the pinnace as he steered past it.

"What craft's that, I wonder?" muttered Ned, who knew most of the vessels that cruised in the Solent. "Looks a rum 'un!"

"Foreign steam yacht, by the look of her, sir," said Brinkman.

The vessel was quickly out of sight, and not long afterwards the pinnace entered Portsmouth Harbour, and ran up to the wharf to which Ned had been ordered. A small group was standing on the dark quay, and one of its number hailed.

"What pinnace is that?"

"From the Victorious. Orders to transfer prisoner aboard!" replied Ned.

"We've got him here," said the speaker; and the next moment Ned recognised the spy who had so nearly brought him to grief three weeks before!

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