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The GEM

2^D
EVERY WEDNESDAY.



LASHED TO A STONE, DESTINED TO BE HUMAN SACRIFICES!

The SNAKE MEN OF ZUNDAKI!



A LONG COMPLETE
YARN OF ST. JIM'S.

BY

MARTIN
CLIFFORD.



CHAPTER 1.

In the Heart of India!

"INDIAH—"

"Shut up, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, Blake! I was about to remark that Indiah—"

"Well, don't! Ring off!"

"I will not wing off!" roared Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's. "I wepeat, Indiah—"

"Oh, sit on Gussy's head, somebody!" groaned Jack Blake, the leader of the Fourth.

Nearly a score of juniors were busy with their evening's prep on board the S 1000, Sir Napier Wynter's giant airship, in which forty St. Jim's fellows were on a world tour.

The huge dirigible was flying at a comfortable eighty miles an hour high above the plains of India. They had left THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,188.

Bombay that morning, where they had spent several days after arriving there by way of Cairo from now distant Europe.

They were now on their way to the native State of Zundaki.

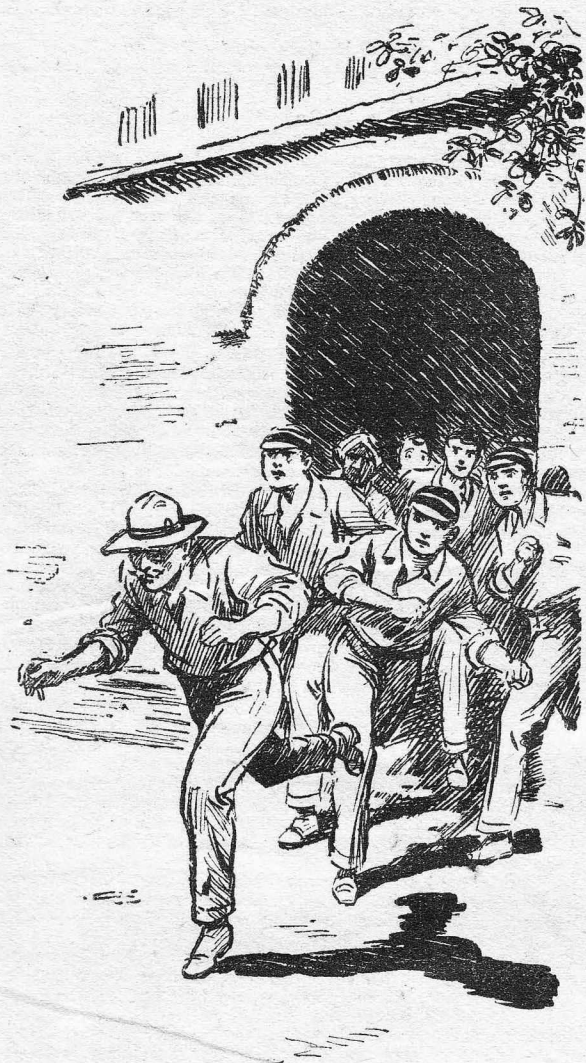
The Maharajah of Zundaki was an old friend of Mr. Railton, the Housemaster of the School House at St. Jim's, who was one of the two masters accompanying Sir Napier Wynter's party. Mr. Railton and the Maharajah had played cricket together in England, the Maharajah having been a famous cricketer in his day—he had, in fact, knocked up a century for England in more than one Test match against Australia!

It was by the sporting Maharajah's special invitation that the S 1000 was now on its way to Zundaki, where the princely hospitality of the Maharajah's palace was prepared for the guests.

"I wepeat that Indiah—"

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THIS IS THE EXPERIENCE OF TWO BRITISH SCHOOLBOYS!



Chased by a mad elephant! Tiger-hunting in the jungle! A fight with deadly snakes! Amazing adventures of Tom Merry & Co. of St. Jim's!

"As I was sayin', Indiah—"

"He's off again!" groaned Ernest Levison.

"—is a vewy queeah and stwango countwy—"

"Open the window and we'll throw him overboard!" suggested Ralph Reckness Cardew, the slacker of the Fourth.

"—where amazin' and weird happenin's occur!" continued Arthur Augustus, fairly shrieking to drown the interruptions. "And I wemembah particulahly weadin' in the papahs before leavin' England that this vewy place we are visitin', Zundaki, was wecently the scene of some vewy queeah happenin's indeed!"

Blake, Herries, Reginald Talbot, Monty Lowther, and Sidney Clive, the South African junior, rose to their feet, with meaning glances at one another. Arthur Augustus eyed them uncasily as they advanced towards where he was standing.

"Finished?" inquired Blake politely.

"Bai Jove, no! I—"

"Then you're going to be bumped till you have!" said Talbot grimly. "Collar him, you chaps!"

"Oh, gweat Scott— Wow!"

Arthur Augustus gave a yell as he was collared and whirled into the air.

"Yawoooooop!"

The swell of St. Jim's elegant trousers smote the aluminium floor of the lounge with a resounding concussion.

"Oh ewumbs! You uttah wottahs! Oh! Whoooooops—"

"Finished?" gasped Herries.

"No, you frightful wottahs! Leggo! Oh, yowp! I shall administah feahful thwashin's to all of you— Yawooogh!"

Bump, bump, bump!

"Finished now?" panted Monty Lowther. "Or do you still want to jaw?"

"No!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Oh, you wottahs! Pax!"

Arthur Augustus collapsed in a sprawling, dishevelled heap as he was released. He scrambled up, crimson with wrath, and surveyed his rumpled garments with dismay.

"You howwible wuffians! You have wuined my clobbah!"

It was very warm, even so high among the clouds; and Arthur Augustus was wearing a very natty pair of white bags. They were scarcely natty now, however! Snorting fiercely, the swell of St. Jim's glared round at the grinning juniors as though he intended to carry out his threat of "administahwin' feahful thwashin's all wound." But he thought better of it, apparently, and, with a final snort, turned and marched out of the lounge in an icy silence, leaving the rest of the juniors to continue their prep in peace.

"What was the ass saying about queer happenings at Zundaki?" remarked Tom Merry thoughtfully, as Arthur Augustus vanished on to the promenade deck outside.

"Now I come to think of it, I seem to remember reading something in the papers about the State of Zundaki, not so long ago."

He knit his brows in an effort to remember. A sudden exclamation escaped him.

"My hat! I know who it was! The Snakemen of Zundaki!"

"The whatters?" ejaculated Manners in astonishment.

"The Snakemen of Zundaki," repeated Tom. There was an excited note in his voice. "Didn't any of you chaps read about it? There was a gang of native scoundrels, a sort of secret society, who were called the Snakemen! They gave a lot of trouble. It was partly a religious organisation and partly political. They had some horrible sort of religion of their own, and went in for human sacrifices."

"My giddy aunt!" ejaculated Digby.

"Human s-s-sacrifices?" squeaked Baggy Trimble, his fat figure quivering with startled excitement as he stared across at Tom Merry. "Oh, lor'! I—I say, I don't like the sound of it, you chaps! Oo-er! I—I say, what about telling Sir Napier Wynter, and asking him not to take us to Zundaki after all?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Really, you chaps, nothing to cackle at! I—I jolly well don't like the idea of being a human sacrifice for anybody!"

"Of course, when you come to think of it," drawled

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There were groans in the spacious lounge, with its light cane chairs—everything on board the S 1000 was constructed with a view to lightness—and its great mica windows overlooking the level Indian countryside sweeping past below. The juniors wanted to get their prep finished so that they could be free when the airship arrived at its destination. They did not wish to listen to the swell of St. Jim's airing his views on India—mysterious and absorbing though they had already found that vast country to be!

"Dry up, Gussy, there's a good chap!" groaned Tom Merry, the captain of the Shell.

"Hire a hall, Algernon," suggested Cyrus K. Handcock, the American junior, plaintively.

"Bai Jove! My name is not Algahnon! I—"

"Chuck jawing, or I'll squash you!" roared Frederick Burkett, the hefty bully of the Shell, glaring across at Arthur Augustus from the table at which he was working, with his two cronies, Croke and Mellish. "Dry up!"

"Look heah—"

"Really, D'Arcy, my dear fellow," murmured Herbert Skimpole, the bulging-brained freak of the Shell, surveying the indignant swell of St. Jim's gravely through his glimmering spectacles. "I must confess that I, for one, would be exceedingly obliged if you would kindly refrain from any loquaciousness until I have completed my preparation! Concentration is indubitably somewhat difficult when conversation—"

"Yo gods! He's swallowed another dictionary!" gasped Monty Lowther of the Shell. "How do you eat 'em, Skimmy? Fried, boiled, or plain?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his famous monocle into his aristocratic eye and took a deep breath. He was quite determined, in spite of interruptions, to say his say!

Cardew gravely, "a nice fat chap like Baggy is just the sort of chap to make a rippin' sacrifice, too."

"Ow!" Baggy jumped. "Oh, really, Cardew, I don't think it's very nice of you to make jokes about it," gasped Baggy. "I—I think I'll ask Sir Napier to go back to Bombay—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't worry, porpoise," chuckled Tom Merry. "As I was just going to say, the Snakemen were smashed up. The society doesn't exist now, I'm almost sure."

"Oh, good!" said Baggy with a sigh of relief. He coughed. "Hem! I hope you chaps don't think I was funky, or anything. I wasn't, of course. I was thinking of the general safety of everyone on board—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Catch you thinking about anything but your own fat hide!" grinned Talbot.

"Oh, really, Talbot—"

"But why were these chaps called the Snakemen, Tommy?" queried Ernest Levison with keen interest.

"The snake was their sacred emblem," explained Tom Merry. "At their secret meetings and ceremonies, too, they always wore the heads of giant snakes over their own."

"Phew! They sound as if they were a pretty thrilling crowd for anybody to have run up against!" Levison ejaculated.

"Rather!" grinned Tom.

Ralph Reckness Cardew yawned.

"Gad, yes! They certainly must have been an excitin' lot of chappies to meet! The Snakemen of Zundaki, eh? Well, I hope it's true that they've been broken up, as Thomas says. I'm lookin' forward to a nice easy time at the giddy Maharajah's palace; I don't want any excitin' times with a gang of Snakemen!"

"Ha, ha, ha! No!"

The juniors returned to the business of prep, and for the time being the rustle of papers and the scraping of pens was the only sound to be heard in the lounge, except for the drone of the great airship's engines, as the S 1000 swept on under the purple Indian sky towards the tiger-infested realm of the Maharajah of Zundaki.

CHAPTER 2.

The Maharajah's Palace!

"MY giddy aunt!"

"Bai Jove, deah boys—"

"Great Bohunkus! Whadyer know about that?"

Many and varied were the exclamations from the juniors seated in the foremost motor-cars of the glittering fleet of Rolls-Royce that the Maharajah of Zundaki had sent to the station to bring his guests to the great palm-encircled palace in the heart of the native state over which he ruled.

The S 1000 had been left at Jomanshore, the nearest available aerodrome capable of dealing with an airship of such dimensions, and the party had come on by train, changing at the border of the sporting Maharajah's realm into a special train on that dusky potentate's private narrow-gauge railway. At the little station not far from the palace the glittering fleet of open Rolls' had been awaiting them, with a squad of turbaned servants.

Ten minutes' run along a palm-fringed road had brought them into view of the Maharajah's palace—the cause of the wondering exclamations from the juniors!

The palace of the Maharajah of Zundaki seemed to be almost entirely of marble, white as snow in the hot sunlight. Domes and minarets and sweeping terraces seemed piled together to make a palace out of a fairy-tale! The way to it led across a wide bridge of glittering white marble, with a palm-fringed stream flowing beneath. A picked body of the Maharajah's army was drawn up on either side of the avenue leading to the palace—tall, turbaned Indians, who presented arms with military precision as the line of motor-cars swept noiselessly towards the great terrace where the figure of the Maharajah himself could be seen standing to welcome them.

"Phew!" breathed Monty Lowther. "I say, it's like a giddy movie! Or the big scene of an Aladdin pantomime!"

"I say," squeaked Baggy Trimble, who had squeezed into the same car with Tom Merry & Co. and Talbot, "this is just great! I'll bet the grub's good here! This place'll suit me down to the ground, you know—"

"Well, you try to behave yourself, porpoise!" warned Manners. "We don't want to have you disgracing the party in front of the Maharajah!"

"Oh, really, Manners!" Baggy Trimble sniffed. "I

THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,188.

rather fancy staying at a palace is more in my line than some of you common bounders! I'm used to moving in high circles—"

"Well, you moved in high circles this morning, when we rolled you along the deck on the airship," chuckled Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Lowther—"

"Dry up! Here we are!"

The car had come to a standstill, and a tall, dusky Hindu in a scarlet turban sprang down from the seat beside the equally dusky driver, and swung the door open. The juniors climbed out, gazing round at the magnificent outer courtyard breathlessly. The marble walls with their rich Eastern carving reflected the sun in dazzling splendour. Ornamental fountains splashed softly, and motionless figures in rich Indian uniforms seemed posted everywhere.

Already the Maharajah was shaking hands warmly with his old friend from England, Mr. Railton.

The Maharajah of Zundaki was a jovial-looking, portly gentleman of middle age, with a dusky, clean-shaven countenance. Except for his magnificent turban, where a jewelled aigrette nodded, held by a huge emerald brooch, he was clad in European clothes of a cut that had brought an admiring gleam into the eyes of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the glass of fashion at St. Jim's.

"I have verree much pleasures in welcoming my old and honoured friend to Zundaki!" beamed the Maharajah, in his queer, clipped English. "Yess, indeed!" He squeezed Mr. Railton's hand warmly. "I never forget the excellent cricket games we play together, eh?"

"Neither shall I!" laughed Mr. Railton. "Jolly good of you to have us all over here—"

"Oah, no—not in thee least!" chuckled the Maharajah jovially. "It iss verree great pleasure to me, I assure you. I have heard much of thee excellent St. Jim's, and I am verree glad to make acquaintance with thee boys!"

Mr. Railton introduced Sir Napier Wynter and Mr. Latham, the whiskered little master of the Fourth fairly preening himself as he shook hands with the genial prince, who afterwards insisted on being introduced to everyone personally, from Kildare down to Reggie Manners of the Third, whose eyes were fairly bursting from his head with excitement at the sight of so much magnificence. Baggy Trimble smirked greasily as he shook hands with the Maharajah.

"Jolly glad to meet you, your Highness!" said Baggy, with a fatuous grin. "This palace of yours looks the goods to me! I'm going to enjoy staying here. I— Oh! Yoooop!"

Baggy broke off with a sudden yell. A foot had come down sharply on his fat little toes, and he leapt into the air in anguish. Tom Merry, whose foot had broken in on Baggy's words before the Falstaff of the Fourth had had time to make an absolute fool of himself, grasped Baggy firmly by the arm and drew him away, making room for the next fellow to be greeted by the Maharajah.

From the lofty archway behind a new arrival had appeared on the scene. It was an Indian youth of nineteen or so, dressed in European clothes but for his jewelled turban. His thin, dark face did not look particularly pleased to welcome the St. Jim's party, though he broke into a flashing smile as the Maharajah turned to him.

"This is my nephew, sare!" beamed the Maharajah. "Prince Akram Vind! He, too, takes much pleasures in giving glad welcome—yess, indeed!"

That the Maharajah was a little optimistic in thinking that Tom Merry & Co., at any rate, could not help but believe, as the young heir to the throne of Zundaki—as they learnt that he was—bowed stiffly to Mr. Railton and the rest.

"I don't like the look of that chap!" muttered Talbot in Tom Merry's ear. "Dunno why, but I'm blessed if I do!"

Tom shrugged.

"You will now be conducted to your rooms, sare!" said the Maharajah, his dusky countenance beaming and friendly. "You will be verree glad seeing that I have made arrangement for Europe style rooms for you all! I trust you will discover everee comfortableness."

That the St. Jim's party were going to "discover everee comfortableness" at the palace was certain enough, as they soon realised! A whole wing of the palace, near the rooms occupied by the Maharajah himself, who liked to live to some extent in European style, had been made ready for them. The nineteen Fourth and Shell fellows had six lavishly furnished apartments allotted to them, overlooking the wide terraces and gardens at the back of the palace, with a distant horizon of snow-clad mountains rising against the deep blue of the sky, and the dark green of the Indian jungle stretching almost to the edge of the palace grounds.

"The Maharajah seems a ripping old boy, doesn't he?" grinned Jack Blake, who was sharing one of the rooms with Arthur Augustus, Herries, and Dig. "Talk about doing things in style—"

"We ought to have a ripping time here!" nodded Dig cheerily. "I heard the Maharajah saying something to Railton about a tiger-shoot being fixed already!"

"Bai Jove! That'll be wippin'!"

The four chums of the Fourth stared out with shining eyes towards the dense jungle—a jungle which hid, had they only known it, other strange and cruel things than tigers in its mysterious depths—human tigers, of whose existence they were not to be left long in ignorance!

But for the time being they had forgotten that they had ever even heard of that terrible sect, the Snakemen of Zundaki.

CHAPTER 3.
The Elephant!

"THIS is the life! He, he, he!"

Baggy Trimble gave a snigger of satisfaction as he murmured the words.

Baggy was seated on one of the marble terraces at the back of the great palace of the cricketing Maharajah. His fat figure was reclining podgily in a deck chair with an awning over it to keep the horrid Indian sun from his ample countenance. Even as it was and despite the fact that he was wearing his lightest clothing, Baggy was perspiring profusely with the heat.

On either side of him were a number of little tables, on which stood huge silver bowls of fruit, and plates of Eastern delicacies. Behind him, two impassive-faced Indian retainers, with huge turbans round their dusky heads and wide scarlet sashes round their waists, stood with folded arms, silent and motionless, waiting on Baggy's needs.

Baggy had often dreamed of such magnificence! And now it had actually come to pass. He was fairly hugging himself with satisfaction. To live amid such luxurious surroundings, waited on hand and foot by dusky servants, appealed to Baggy more than anything else he could possibly imagine. It was his idea of the ideal existence!

The Maharajah's guests had been at the palace two days. Ever since their arrival they had been enjoying the most lavish hospitality they had ever encountered.

"Suits me down to the ground, this does!" ruminated Baggy, selecting a big peach from one of the silver bowls at his side, and beginning to devour it greedily. "Why those asses there want to sweat about in the sun playing blessed cricket, beats me!"

The view from the terrace included the green stretch of the Maharajah's private cricket ground, bordered with palms, with the gleaming river winding through more palm-trees in the background, spanned by white marble bridges. A cricket match was in progress between a team captained by Mr. Railton and the Maharajah's own dusky eleven. Kildare, Darrell, Monteith, Knox, and North of the Sixth were playing in Mr. Railton's team, and so were Lefevre, Smith major, and Lee of the Fifth. Tom Merry and George Figgins made up the eleven, and the rest of the juniors and the one or two seniors who were not taking part, were watching from the edge of the grass with keen interest. Baggy Trimble alone did not care two pips

about the cricket match that the Maharajah of Zundaki had arranged for the entertainment of his guests from England!

Baggy finished his peach.

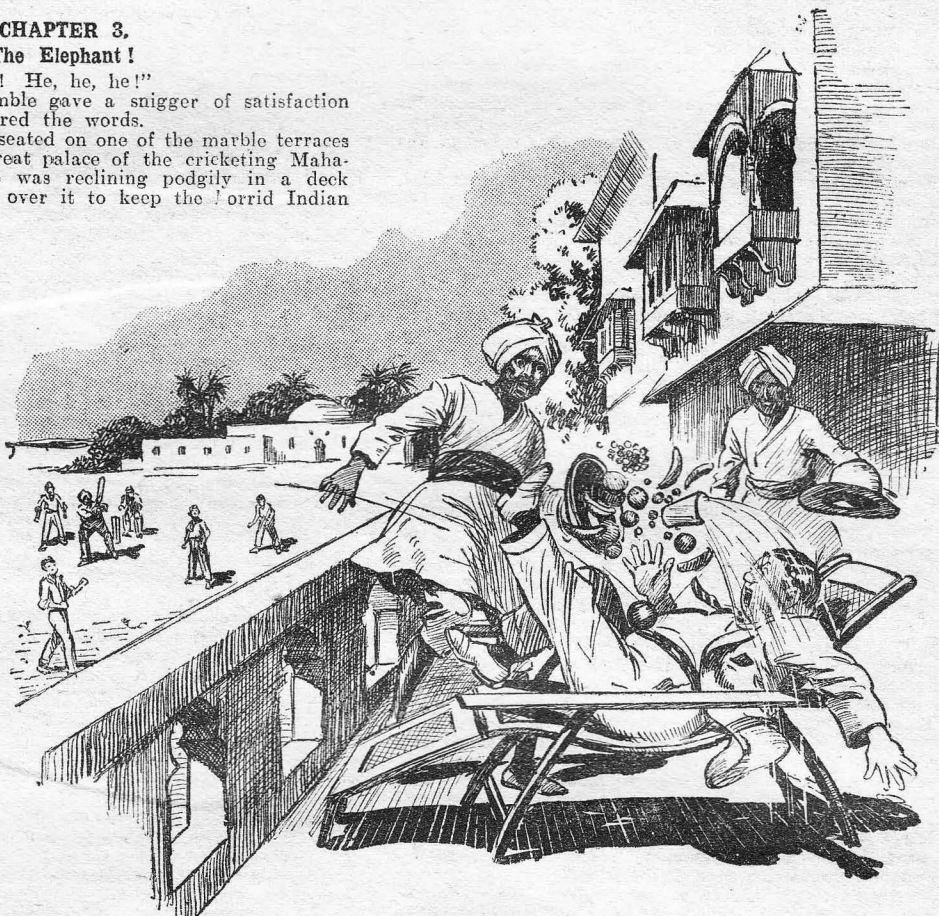
"Those are prime!" he muttered. "I'll have another!"

He turned in his chair to pick another peach from the dish. Then he changed his mind, with a covert grin. After all, what was the good of having two turbaned native servants waiting on him if he didn't make them work?

Baggy squinted round at one of the natives—a huge, broad-shouldered Sikh with a bushy black beard parted in the middle and brushed stiffly into two fierce tufts.

"Hi, you!"

"Sahib?" murmured the dusky retainer, stepping swiftly



The cricket ball came to rest clean in the middle of Baggy's podgy waistcoat!

forward and bowing low. "If the sahib will speak his will—"

"That's the idea," nodded Baggy approvingly. "When I sing out, you jump to it—see? Pass the fruit!"

"As the sahib decrees."

The bearded native raised the big silver bowl of fruit and, with another low bow, proffered it to Baggy. With a lordly air Baggy selected a peach.

"Stay there!" he commanded. "I'll want another in a minute!"

"As the sahib decrees."

Baggy turned a rather glazed eye towards the cricketers as he guzzled his peach.

St. Jim's were in the field, and the Maharajah was batting at the moment.

That genial potentate, despite his portliness, made a businesslike figure in his white flannels, and had already knocked up eighty runs for his side. The St. Jim's eleven had batted first, and compiled a total of a hundred and sixty. If the Maharajah kept on much longer it looked as though there would be a close finish, for he had some good cricketers in his suite—Indians who had been to Oxford

or Cambridge; and with only three wickets fallen, the "home team's" score, thanks to the Maharajah's eighty, had already well passed the hundred mark.

Click!

The Maharajah of Zundaki had cut a fast ball of Eric Kildare's through the slips, Lefevre just failing to get to it for a catch, and the dusky potentate, beaming joyfully, was running hard between the wickets, crossing and recrossing with his partner, his nephew, Akram Vind.

Long-legged Figgins was in pursuit of the ball, and succeeded in just saving the boundary. A smart throw-in, however, was just too late to enable Smith major, keeping wicket, to stump the Maharajah's nephew as the latter raced to his crease.

Akram Vind faced the bowling.

Kildare caught the ball, and took his short run, sending a stinging googlie hurtling up the pitch.

Crash!

The young prince's wicket had been beautifully spread-eagled, the balls flying far past Smith major.

Akram Vind's lean countenance took on an angry look, and his eyes glittered savagely. With an impatient gesture he turned away from the wicket, muttering beneath his breath.

Tom Merry, fielding mid-off, glanced at Darrell of the Sixth with a dry grin.

"That chap Akram Vind doesn't seem a very sporty bird, does he?" he muttered; and Darrell shrugged.

Another of the Maharajah's suite came out to the wicket, and the game carried on. The dusky ruler of Zundaki continued merrily piling up the runs. Though the watching group of St. Jim's fellows cheered him lustily at every brilliant stroke, their faces were growing a little long. For the rival team's total now amounted to a hundred and thirty for four wickets.

"Only thirty-one wanted for a win," grunted Wally D'Arcy of the Third. "Blow!"

"Rotten!" agreed Frankie Levison.

"Why didn't they play my major, I'd like to know?" sniffed Wally, glancing to where Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, elegant in white trousers and Panama, was lounging in a deckchair between Blake and Reginald Talbot. "Old Gussy would have shown 'em a thing or two!"

"Oh, rats!" retorted Frankie. "Now, if they'd played my major—"

"Look here, young Levison—"

But an argument as to the respective merits of the two fags' majors was interrupted by a magnificent boundary hit on the part of the Maharajah, which the fags cheered lustily with the others.

On the terrace Baggy Trimble was still gorging on the delicacies provided for him. His face was growing more and more greasy, his eyes more and more glassy, his breath heavier and heavier.

"Hi, you!"

The second of the two native servants approached and bowed humbly.

"Gimme a glass of lemonade!" commanded Baggy. "And look sharp!"

"As the sahib decrees!"

"Don't stand there jawing about it!" snapped Baggy, in his usual polite way. "When I—hem!—decreed anything it's up to you to jump to it, Sambo!"

The native strode off, to return in less than a minute with a long glass of lemonade, in which chunks of ice clinked musically.

"Good egg!" grinned Baggy.

He grabbed the glass and raised it to his lips, sucking at the two long straws.

Crack!

From the cricket field below the terrace came the sound of a lustily-hit cricket ball. The Maharajah had opened his shoulders to a delivery of Lefevre's, and the ball sailed high over the fielders' heads, straight towards the terrace where Baggy Trimble was seated.

Crash!

"Yarooooooop!"

There was a wild yell from Baggy.

The cricket ball had landed. It had come to rest clean in the centre of Baggy's podgy waistcoat. The glass of lemonade shot from his hand, its contents streaming all over him, and in his excitement Baggy bit clean through one of the straws and swallowed half of it. His legs kicked out wildly, and one of them caught the bearded native on the knee, and the man gave a gasp and let fall the big bowl of fruit that he had been holding for Baggy to help himself from. The fruit fell upon Baggy, and since most of it was beautifully ripe the force of impact caused a good deal of it to burst juicily!

"Oh! Groooh! Mum-mmmmmmm!"

With a strangled gulp Baggy swallowed the length of THE GEM LIBRARY.—No. 1,188.

straw, and in taking a gasping breath nearly swallowed a flying banana as well as it dropped clean into his mouth.

Clasping his fat waistcoat the Falstaff of the Fourth feebly fought for breath.

"Yoooooh! Gug-gug-gug! Mum-mmmmm! Oo-er—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a yell of laughter from the cricket field.

"Well caught, Baggy!"

"Jolly well held, old fat top!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, m-my hat!" groaned Baggy. "Oh, lor'! Grooosh! Help! I'm injured!"

He sat up feebly in the deck-chair, blinking dazedly round.

He somehow expected to find the two native servants looking terribly upset over what had happened. But as his gaze fell upon them Baggy jumped in astonishment.

On the dusky faces of the two white-clad retainers were huge grins!

Baggy had fondly imagined that by his lofty airs he had tremendously impressed the two Indians. He realised now that, despite their respectful manner towards him, they had been anything but impressed, and they were thoroughly delighted over his discomfiture!

Baggy's fat face went suddenly scarlet. He scrambled out of the chair and rolled hastily into the palace, followed by the soft chuckles of the two dusky retainers, in search of a bath-room where he could clean himself from the sticky lemonade and fruit stains.

"The—the blessed black rotters!" gasped Baggy. "If you ask me, they were jolly pleased at that happening! Yah! Rotten niggers!"

Monty Lowther had hurried on to the terrace to retrieve the ball for the fielders, and soon the game was in full swing once more.

Shortly after, a tremendous cheer greeted the fact that the Maharajah of Zundaki had scored his century. He beamed round at his applauding admirers jovially.

Things were certainly looking very bad for the St. Jim's eleven!

And then, as the Maharajah turned to the crease again, there was a sudden wild shout from among the palm-trees that waved softly in the sunlight at the edge of the cricket field.

It was followed by a thunderous trumpeting, and the next moment a great grey shape had burst into view from out of the trees.

A huge elephant, a broken chain attached to one of its mighty rear legs, was charging across the grass—with its bloodshot eyes gleaming murderously—straight towards the startled cricketers!

CHAPTER 4.

A Strange Suspicion!

"GOOD heavens—"

From Tom Merry there broke a breathless shout of dismay.

The St. Jim's cricketers and the Maharajah and his partner at the wicket seemed rooted to the spot as the great beast thundered towards them across the grass, trumpeting madly.

"B-bai Jove!"

Most of the spectators had leapt to their feet. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, gazing across the field towards the charging elephant, his eyeglass jammed in his eye, glanced anxiously round for his minor.

Already Wally & Co. were making an instinctive bolt for safety, however.

"Run for your lives!"

Mr. Railton sent the ringing shout across the cricket field. The white-flannelled figures seemed to wake to life. There was a rush towards the palace buildings, the Maharajah among the rest, still carrying his cricket bat.

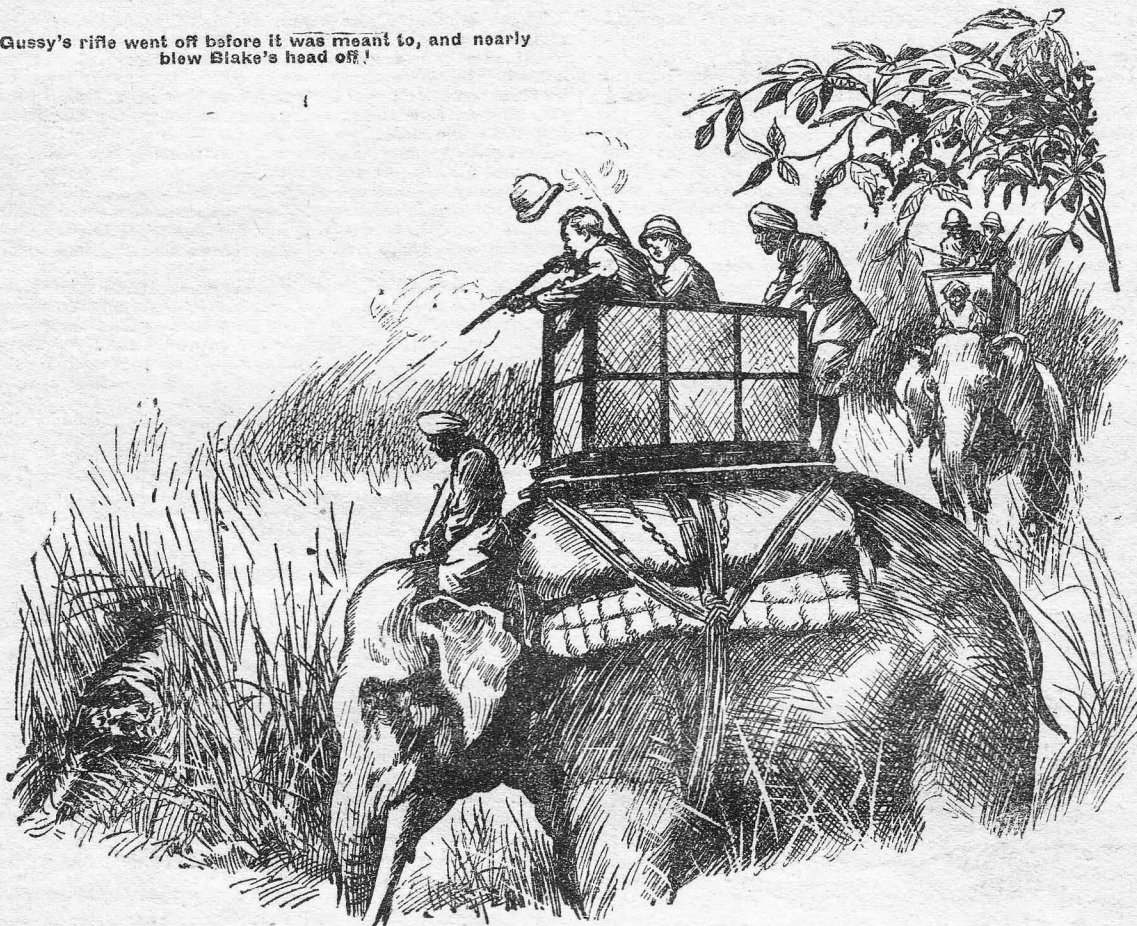
Half a dozen scared natives had appeared from the trees, and were watching helplessly as the maddened beast thundered up to the now deserted wickets. A few lashing sweeps of the great trunk, and the stumps had been flung in all directions. Then, with a shrill, angry trumpeting, it charged on in pursuit of the flying figures of the Maharajah and his guests, to say nothing of his dusky suite, whose faces seemed almost pale with terror!

Tom Merry flung a swift glance over his shoulder.

The elephant was coming after them at an astonishing speed, its trampling feet causing the very ground to shake.

Tom knew that elephants are always subject to fits of madness, and it was clear that this murderous-looking beast was one of the Maharajah's state elephants that had suddenly "gone berserker" and wrenched itself free by the

Gussy's rifle went off before it was meant to, and nearly blew Blake's head off!



simple process of snapping the chain that had been holding it.

If it caught anyone in that lashing trunk it would be death for its victim—a horrible death!

The cricketers and the rest were racing for the safety of a low archway that led through a high white wall into part of the palace gardens. Once through that the elephant could not follow them farther, and it looked as if they would have just about enough time to get there—and only just!

One of the first through the archway was Gerald Knox, white-faced and scared, in great contrast with the coolness of Kildare and Darrell and most of the others. Akram Vind, the Maharajah's nephew, was also well to the fore in the dash for safety, almost thrusting Burkett and Mellish aside in his desperate anxiety to gain shelter.

One of the last was Fatty Wynn, of the New House. David Llewellyn Wynn was not exactly a sprinting champion at any time. And the Maharajah himself, with his portly figure, had needed all his efforts to cover the ground successfully.

As the dusky potentate panted towards the archway he missed his footing, and fell. There were cries of consternation from those already safely through the arch.

Its trunk writhed in beneath the arch in a baffled way. But his fall, and the maddened elephant, at sight of the helpless figure lying on the grass before him, trumpeted as if in fierce triumph, and thundered on even faster than before, its trunk whipping the air like a giant flail.

"My heavens!" cried Sir Napier Wynter hoarsely. "The Maharajah! It'll get him! Quick—"

Tom Merry turned his head swiftly at the shout, and his heart went cold at sight of the Maharajah of Zundaki scrambling rather dazedly to his feet, with the elephant charging down upon him, its bloodshot eyes aflame, its long tusks gleaming in the sunlight.

"It'll get him!"

"Oh, gweat Scott—"

For a moment Tom Merry's eyes fell on the face of Akram Vind.

A queer thrill ran through him.

For on the face of the Maharajah's nephew there was a

look of anything but horror and dismay. Instead, the dark eyes seemed to hold a strange, almost gloating light, as though Akram Vind would almost have been glad to see the oncoming beast trample his uncle to death beneath its mighty feet.

His eyes met Tom's, and swiftly the Indian's look changed. But that he had seen it there Tom knew!

As it was, Akram Vind was standing nearest to the archway; there would still be just time for him to have darted out and dragged his uncle to safety. Tom Merry half expected him to do it yet. But to his amazement the young prince turned and began swiftly to push his way to the back of the crowd gathered inside the protecting arch.

That was enough for Tom!

He thrust aside the five frightened fags who were gathered round him, to rush out to the Maharajah's aid. But there was no need. Already he saw that Sir Napier Wynter, Eric Kildare, and Mr. Railton had darted out. They seized the Maharajah as he scrambled up, and dragged him to safety. A moment or two later the huge beast that would have pounded the ruler of Zundaki to death beneath its feet thundered up, trumpeting shrilly, and almost crashed against the archway.

Its trunk writhed in beneath the arch in a baffled way. But it could not get through, and the discovery seemed to enrage it all the more. It began battering its head against the stonework, its great feet trampling and stamping on the other side of the archway.

From somewhere on the other side of the wall a heavy shot rang out, evidently from an elephant-gun.

The trumpeting monster gave an almost human shriek. It staggered, falling on its knees; then, without another sound, it rolled slowly over and crashed on to its side. The bullet had found a fatal spot—and in the ensuing, deathly silence the St. Jim's juniors found themselves looking at one another with white faces and queer, strained looks.

"Gee! I guess that was a pretty close call, buddies!" muttered Cyrus K. Handcock.

The Maharajah of Zundaki glanced round at his guests, with a sudden return to his jovial smile.

"That iss thatt!" he said in his queer English. "I have

to thank my British friends for their verree excellent rescue!"

Tom Merry glanced quickly at Akram Vind.

Was he mistaken—or was there sullen disappointment somewhere at the back of the eyes of that shifty-eyed young prince?

Had the elephant killed the Maharajah—as it would have done but for the prompt action of his guests—Akram Vind would have been Maharajah of Zundaki. Even so, Tom Merry could scarcely credit that the Maharajah's own nephew could actually have wanted that potentate to die a horrible death in order to place him upon the throne in his uncle's stead!

"I wonder!" he muttered. "But that chap Vind is a shifty sort of bird. He needs watching!"

CHA 5

The Snake-Knife!

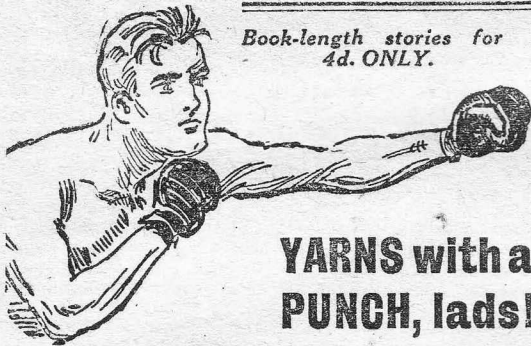
THE Maharajah of Zundaki seemed to have nerves of steel, for he insisted upon finishing the match as if nothing had occurred.

But his luck was not so good as his nerves, for in the second over after the resumption of the game he was clean-bowled by Kildare, and retired from the wicket, beaming cheerily, cheered to the echo!

After that a rot set in, and wickets fell like ninepins. But, thanks to the Maharajah's brilliant century, his team had collected only three runs less than that of the St. Jim's eleven by the time the last batsman was caught by Figgins, near the boundary.

It had been a hair's-breadth finish! And the New House juniors, yelled themselves hoarse over the fact that it had been Figgy who had made the winning catch, and so saved the game in the nick of time.

On the edge of the field the Maharajah lit a long cigar and beamed round at his big crowd of guests.



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"That iss thatt!" he remarked. "From thiss exciting game I have taken much excitements and enjoyableness! What you call a narrow shave, sars! Ha, ha! Yess, indeed. Only thee three runs in itt! And now I have the surprise treat for you. If you all like thee idea, I shall take you all into thee treasure-chambers of the palace and show you some fine stuff!"

"Splendid, your Highness!" exclaimed Sir Napier Wynter. "We'll all enjoy that!"

The treasure-chambers of the Maharajah of Zundaki were deep beneath the palace, and to reach them it seemed to the juniors that about twenty heavy doors, each fitted with an intricate lock and guarded by turbaned soldiers, had to be passed through.

But at last the Maharajah and his guests found themselves in a series of small chambers, lit by the most modern electric lamps. Evidently the treasures contained there had already been arranged for inspection, and from the shelves surrounding them the St. Jim's fellows were greeted by an almost blinding glare of jewels, reflecting the electric light with a thousand points of dancing colour.

"There is some quite fine stuff, eh?" grinned the Maharajah carelessly.

The St. Jim's fellows might not have been experts on jewels; but they could tell well enough that the Maharajah certainly had some "fine stuff" in the treasure-chambers of his palace! Never in their lives had they seen such heaped-up wealth as lay around them now.

Gold and precious stones, jewelled arms and armour of ancient times, magnificent harness for horses and elephants, set with precious gems, weird Eastern ornaments, each worth a king's ransom. They caught their breath in wonder as they passed from room to room.

"By Jove, that's a rum-looking thing!"

The exclamation had come from Kildare. He was pointing to an article lying on a shelf by itself—a huge knife, four feet long. Half the length of it consisted of its curved, evil blade; the other half of a golden handle, shaped like a snake and studded with glimmering jewels. The whole thing was obviously of almost fabulous worth.

"Thatt knife has verree rum story," said the Maharajah slowly. "Oh, verree rum! Thatt knife, sars, has taken many human lives!"

"Good gad!" gasped Kildare.

"Perhaps you have never heard, sars, of thee Snakemen of Zundaki?"

"The Snakemen of Zundaki?" cried Tom Merry quickly. "Yes, rather! There was something about them in the English papers! I was telling the chaps!"

"Well," said the Maharajah, with a glance at Tom, "you see there thee verree knife with which the Snakemen slew their human sacrifices! When thee societee was broken thee sacred knife came into my possession. Oah yess—it is verree fine piece! But itt iss verree horrible, too!"

"Well, its career of evil is ended now, your Highness!" put in Mr. Lathom, eyeing the snake-knife with great distaste. "Dear me! What a horrible history it must possess! But I understand that this disgraceful sect known as the—er—Snakemen, has been disbanded?"

"Oah, yess, verree forcible!" smiled the Maharajah. But a shadow came into his dark, gleaming eyes. "Thee onlee trouble iss, perhaps, thee Snakemen start again. There iss that undoubted danger, Mister Lathom."

"What exactly were the Snakemen?" asked Darrell of the Sixth, in quiet tones.

"They were verree bad eggs," replied the Maharajah gravely. "They were a secret societee, you know, with a High Priest and other priests, and many ordinaree members. They murdered and thieved all over Zundaki. And in their secret ceremonies, in their temple in thee jungle, they had human sacrifices, as I have already explained. We found their temple after verree long while, and burnt itt right to thee ground, and many of thee priests were put to death, which was jollee good job. But I have deep regrets thatt the High Priest himself, a verree bad egg named Zahir-u-Khan, escaped."

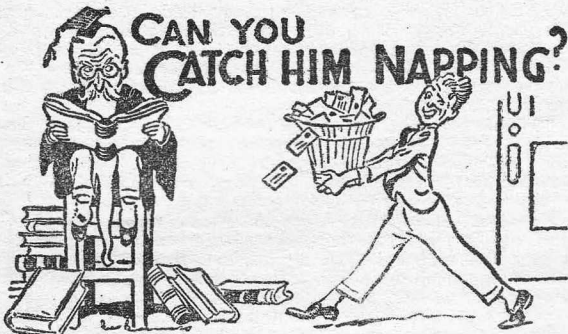
"Have you any reason for thinking that the Snakemen will start again?" persisted Mr. Railton.

"Well, yess," admitted the Maharajah reluctantly. "There are rumours that men of thee Brotherhood of thee Snake have been seen in the jungle at recent times. Some villagers have disappeared, and thee fear is growing thatt thee Snakemen have spirited them away."

"My hat!" ejaculated Blake. "I say, that sounds pretty exciting."

"Yess, there will be much excitements if it iss true," agreed the Maharajah. A dry smile appeared on his broad, dusky face, and his eyes flickered with a sudden, new light. "There iss one thing, I can tell you— if thee Brotherhood of thee Snake hass formed again,

(Continued at foot of next page.)



"Wader know about that?" as Cyrus K. Hancock would say. Maybe the answer's "Nothing!" If so, just write and ask the whiskery one, and he'll answer without fail.

WHEN I barged into the sanctum this morning the Editor was deeply engrossed in reading a book, so much so, chums, that he never heard me come in. I crept up behind him and had a look over his shoulder. Well, I'll tell you what he was reading, it was "The Popular Book of Boys' Stories." I don't blame him, chums, it's a jolly good book and well worth reading. It only costs 2s. 6d.

Just at that moment, while I was also enjoying a story over the old Ed.'s shoulder, one of my whiskers tickled the back of his neck. Immediately he turned over the leaves of the book hastily, as if he were just looking through it! Then he put it down and turned and glared at me, picked up a letter from his desk, and said: "That's funny!"

"What's funny?" said I. No sooner had I asked the question than the old Ed. burst into a loud guffaw. "Your face," he retorted. "I suppose it is a face?" he added. "It's not something you've just been out and bought to amuse your nephews with at Christmas, by any chance?"

I naturally looked indignant at that insult.

"I've no need to buy anything to amuse my nephews with. I just tell 'em how funny you looked when the office-boy's dog was trying to find out what Editors tasted like, and they roar with mirth, believe me!"

"Sit down!" The Ed. was looking absolutely fierce, so I sat down, all of a dither, and waited. "I've just been reading a letter from a girl reader, my lad, and that's what I thought was funny. Just listen while I read it to you. 'Dear Editor,—I have read your wonderful paper, the GEM, for years, and it gets better and better. I often wonder what you look like? I think you must be very clever and handsome, and a bit of a dog.' What d'you think of that, my lad?" "She means a bite for a dog, sir," I suggested. "Shut up!" retorted the Ed., continuing to read.

"Your whiskery friend, the Oracle, is an absolute genius, but it's a pity he's so bald, I think, so please tell him that if he wets his cranium and sprinkles it with mustard-and-cress seed, and then puts his head in a hot oven, he'll be much better for it." The old Ed. did another chortle. "There you are, my lad, a few hours in a gas-oven would improve you no end." "No

doubt it would, sir," said I, "but no end of me is going in the gas-oven, believe me. Please let me get on with my work, sir, I'm all of a tremble to get going."

"Very well, my lad, just tell Sandy McGregor how cork is manufactured?"

"Yes, sir. In the first place, you can tell friend Sandy that cork is not manufactured, it grows. Cork is the outer layer of the bark of a certain tree known as the evergreen-oak. This tree, which grows to the height of about thirty feet, is found in the South of Europe and in Spain and Portugal. The cork is stripped from the trees, first of all, when the tree is about fifteen years old, and again, at frequent intervals, throughout the tree's life."

"How long does the tree live?"

"For one hundred and fifty years at least, sir."

"Corks!" exclaimed the Ed. "And how is it removed?"

"The cork is removed from the cork oak-tree, O mighty one, by cutting it carefully top and bottom, and then in sections up and down, vertically, that is to say. Great care, of course, is taken not to injure the tree in any way. To remove a cork from a bottle, however, a corkscrew is usually employed.

"Quite so! Now, Whiskers, Herbert Daniels has been to sea, and has observed peculiar lights on the water at night, which he was told was called phosphorescence. He wants to know what causes this?"

"Phosphorescence on the sea is very interesting to watch," I explained. The Editor growled. "That's more than I can say about you, my lad. Never mind, get on with it."

"This curious light is caused by little animals, which float about on the surface of the water. They are called cystoflagellata."

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Ed. "You'll be losing your teeth if you go on like that. Can you explain to Roger Matthews what a rebus is?"

"I expect young Roger has seen plenty of rebuses, sir," said I. "A rebus is a riddle in which a sentence is represented in pictures."

"A reader who lives in Hove, down by the sea, wants to know if there is sand at the bottom of the ocean?"

"The answer to that, sir, is 'yes.' But please explain to our Hove reader that the sand found at the bottom of the sea is green in colour, not yellow. The green colour is caused by the presence in the sand of a mineral called glauconite. Green sands are used for softening water."

"And the next query is from Fred Fraser, of Cardiff. He wants to know what a platypus is?"

"The platypus is a very queer animal indeed, sir. It is known as the duck-billed platypus, and is found in the rivers of Australia. It has no teeth, no sir, not even false ones, and it does its chewing by means of a kind of beak-shaped muzzle. The front feet of this strange creature are fitted with webs, like the claws of a duck, and those the jolly old platypus can fold back when he crawls on to the land. It is about twenty inches in length, and is covered in brown fur."

"That's splendid," said the Ed., looking fiercely at some more queries. I could see he was wild at not being able to catch me out. "A reader in Peterborough wants to know how he can waterproof a new tent? Can you tell him, Whiskers?"

"Well, sir," said I, "making any material waterproof is by no means an easy matter. An application of rubber, varnish, boiled linseed oil, paraffin wax, or other things, will produce the desired result. But I wouldn't advise our Peterborough friend to try it on his own, as the process needs great skill. When waterproof materials are being made, the properties that make them waterproof are introduced by special machinery. So you see, sir, the only thing to do if you're in a tent and the water is coming through is to catch the drips in a saucepan."

"Here's an interesting conundrum, my lad! Fred Hands, who lives at Chelmsford, says his friend's father had a horse, and the horse was poisoned by eating the leaves of a yew-tree. Is that possible?"

"Quite possible, sir! And you can tell Fred that the man who owned the tree is liable for the death of the horse."

"Is that so? You mean, Whiskers, the 'yew' killed the horse?"

"You've got the idea, Ed.," said I. "Yew'll kill horses, if they eat it, believe me!"

"And would yew finish off the office-boy's dog?" inquired the Editor.

"No, sir, I won't. I'll leave that to you. Good-bye!"

"THE SNAKEMEN OF ZUNDAKI!"

(Continued from previous page.)

sars, these Snakemen will be verree keen to gett back their sacred knife." His eyes fell on the long, weird knife on the shelf. "They will want thatt back, and you can make bets they will try verree hard and cunninglee to regain same."

"Well, I should think it's pretty safe down here, your Highness," grinned Kildare.

"Yess, so one would think," agreed the Maharajah. "But this verree bad egg, Zahir-u-Khan, he iss cunning rascal. Oah, yess!"

There was a sound behind the group. Tom Merry glanced quickly round, and saw that Akram Vind had entered the chamber, a flashing smile on his dark face.

"My uncle has been telling you of the Brotherhood of the Snake?" murmured Akram Vind softly. His English, unlike his uncle's, was perfect. "Do not believe him, my friends, if he tells you that there is any chance of the Brotherhood coming into existence again. That will never happen."

"I hope you are quite right," laughed the Maharajah.

For the second time that day Tom Merry had a queer feeling that Akram Vind was masking his true feelings. Something in the eyes of the young Indian had flashed a warning message to Tom Merry's every instinct that Akram Vind was a person to fear. And in this case his instinct told him that the Maharajah's nephew knew something of the Brotherhood of the Snake—something that the Maharajah himself did not know.

"You're imagining things, you ass!" he told himself impatiently. "What on earth would he know about the Snakemen?"

And Tom Merry resolutely banished the queer thought from his mind as the Maharajah's guests followed their dusky host from the treasure-chambers, and up through interminable guarded passages back to the light of day.

CHAPTER 6.

The Treachery of Akram Vind!

"ZUZUZ-ZZZZ!"

In the room he was sharing with Reginald Talbot and Baggy Trimble, Herbert Skimpole, the freak of the Shell, was snoring with a lustiness really quite astonishing, considering his weedy frame.

Talbot was fast asleep as well. But Baggy was not. He lay listening to Skimpole's snores, and stirred restlessly.

Baggy was peckish.

How Baggy came to be peckish was really rather a mystery, in view of the vast quantities of food he had put away in the course of the day. He had scarcely ceased guzzling from morn till night ever since the arrival of the St. Jim's party at the palace of the Maharajah of Zundaki. But all the same, Baggy was feeling decidedly peckish just then.

That it was well past midnight, he knew, for he had long ago heard the little clock on the mantelpiece chime twelve. No doubt the whole palace, more or less, was asleep.

In the darkness Baggy licked his lips hungrily as he thought of the great dishes of fruit and Eastern delicacies that were always to be found set out in the great dining-hall downstairs.

"I could do with a snack," he muttered. "A chap of my delicate constitution needs constant nourishment. I believe a doctor would jolly well order me to buzz downstairs now and help myself to a snack. Sure of it!"

Baggy's face had brightened at that thought. He sat up, peering across towards the beds occupied by Talbot and the freak of the Shell.

"Either of you two awake?" breathed Baggy.

There was no answer. With a nod of satisfaction Baggy Trimble slipped from his bed and donned slippers and dressing-gown, and rolled rather guiltily towards the door.

He knew quite well that it was not "the thing" to sneak downstairs in the middle of the night for a secret tuck-in, while a guest in a house, even though in this case the house was a palace. But Baggy never troubled very much about good manners, and certainly never when they would have debared him from a good feed.

Though he was fairly well acquainted with the geography of the palace by now, this was the first occasion on which he had tried to negotiate its bewildering maze of corridors and halls in the darkness. It was not at all easy to find his way to the great dining-hall, and, finally, it was more by luck than judgment that the Falstaff of the Fourth found himself there.

Outside, the stars were shining brilliantly, casting a faint light into the long hall, with its Eastern mosaics ornamented walls and floor, and its richly carved pillars. One of the walls consisted simply of a series of arches opening directly on to one of the marble terraces of the palace, without windows of any kind. The hot night air

came drifting in between the pillars, and far away from the jungle Baggy could hear the mysterious cries of night birds and prowling beasts.

Noiseless in his slippers, Baggy stole across the marble floor to where the big dishes of delicacies stood, his mouth watering.

"Thank goodness I'm not a greedy chap, like that ass Fatty Wynn!" muttered Baggy virtuously, as he crammed some delicious spiced cakes into his mouth. "It's simply that I need the nourishment. Eating for the sake of eating, I jolly well despise!"

He turned with gleaming eyes to one of the bowls of fruit, and in the dim light found a huge peach. He guzzled it greedily, and was reaching out to take another when a sudden faint sound on the terrace outside the line of pillared arches caused his heart to leap.

"Ow!" gasped Baggy. "W-w-what was that?"

He peered across towards the nearest arch, and his heart turned cold.

A shadowy shape had appeared there, moving soundlessly against the starry sky—a weird, uncanny shape; a man, in all but the head, which appeared to be that of a huge snake, with yawning jaws.

Baggy's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, or he might have sent an earsplitting scream ringing down the pillared hall. For he knew in an instant what the figure was.

One of the dreaded Snakemen, whose evil brotherhood, though once stamped out, was feared by the Maharajah to have formed again.

The weird figure had come to a standstill, black against the silvery night sky.

Baggy stood with his eyes riveted upon it, trembling in every limb.

Then, to his utter astonishment, he heard a soft voice speaking—a voice he recognised. The next moment a second figure had appeared, halting by the other—the turbaned figure of the Maharajah's nephew, Akram Vind!

"Speak in English, Zahir-u-Khan!" came the muttered tones of the Maharajah's nephew. "Then we shall not be understood if some fool of a palace guard comes upon us softly, and listens to our talk!"

"Zahir-u-Khan!" gasped Baggy to himself. "The High Priest of the Snakemen! Oh, m-m-my hat!"

Baggy would have given a great deal to have been miles away from that particular spot. At any moment he dreaded that his presence near the secret meeting-place of Akram Vind and the High Priest of the Snakemen would be discovered. But since he was there, he dared not move a muscle. He crouched behind the pillar that sheltered him, and every word that passed between the two men came to his ears with perfect clearness, low though their voices were.

"Have you decided, your Highness?" came in servile tones from the High Priest.

"Yes," answered Akram Vind coolly. "I have decided. I agree to our bargain, Zahir-u-Khan. Place me upon the throne of Zundaki, by bringing about the death of the Maharajah, and so soon as I am ruler I will return to you the sacred snake-knife that you so much desire to be returned to your brotherhood!"

A soft, horrible laugh came out of the darkness from the snake-headed figure.

"It is well. It is a bargain to the benefit of both. You will not have long to wait!"

Potts, The Office Boy.....



"Good!" muttered Akram Vind. "How long?"
 "To-morrow!" whispered the High Priest, with another evil chuckle.
 From the prince there broke a startled ejaculation in his own tongue.

"So soon?" he breathed.
 "Yes. To-morrow, you have told me, the Maharajah goes hunting in the jungle with white sahibs! They return by way of Mirzapore, so that they must cross a certain bridge—you know the bridge. Take care, your Highness, that you are not one of those that ride on to the bridge first—oh, take care of that!"

Baggy Trimble, his little eyes almost popping out of his head, heard Akram Vind draw a deep, long breath.
 "I—I understand, Zahir-u-Khan! It is good! And now farewell. Take care that none sees you near the palace!"

With a last, horrible laugh, the snake-headed figure turned and glided away down the steps into the dark gardens. For a moment the Maharajah's treacherous nephew stood watching the weird figure vanish. Then Akram Vind turned, too, and hurried off noiselessly along the terrace.

Baggy Trimble, crouching behind his pillar, felt a cold perspiration trickling down his brow, despite the hot air of the Indian night. His face was as white as paper in the gloom.

He had overheard a deliberate, cold-blooded plan for the murder of the Maharajah of Zundaki, a fiendish compact made between the chief of the mysterious Snakemen and the Maharajah's own nephew! The Snakemen were to accomplish the death of the ruler of Zundaki so that Akram Vind should succeed to the throne, and then Akram Vind was to return the sacred knife to the evil brotherhood! Baggy's spine crept as he turned over in his mind all that he had overheard.

"M-my hat! They—they're going to kill the Maharajah! Oh lor! What ever shall I do?" moaned Baggy.

He woke to life at last. After all, as he began to realise, the fact that he had overheard the plot had spelt its ruin! All he had to do was to warn the Maharajah—and at once, without a moment's delay!

"I'll tell Tom Merry!" Baggy gasped wildly. "That's what I'll do. Then we'll tell the Maharajah!"

Stumblingly he crossed the shadowy hall to the farther entrance, with many a quaking glance over his fat shoulder. His knees were shaking under him.

But if Baggy hoped to find his way back to the juniors' quarters fairly easily, he was very much mistaken.

It had been difficult enough to find his way to the hall from his room; it was ten times more difficult to find his way back. The dark corridors and staircases and halls were as confusing as a maze. After a few minutes Baggy was utterly lost, in a part of the palace strange to him, and a wild panic seized him.

He began racing in terror along the dim passages in desperate search for his own familiar corridor. He tore up a wide staircase of glimmering marble, along twisting passages that seemed to lead nowhere but always back on his tracks. In his excited state, with his dreadful discovery burning in his brain, it seemed to Baggy that some malignant fate was dogging his footsteps, deliberately keeping him from finding anyone to whom he could unburden his frightening secret.

Almost sobbing, Baggy Trimble stumbled out at the end of one of the bewildering corridors on to a little starlit balcony overlooking the great centre courtyard, with the

domes and minarets and shadowy archways of the vast palace gleaming softly on all sides beneath the purple sky. He rushed to the low balustrade of carved stone, in the hope of seeing some of the Indian guards on sentry duty. Anyone would do to tell the Maharajah his life was in deadly danger!

But Baggy missed his footing on the smooth marble. He reeled with a cry, and crashed against the low balustrade. It was not high enough to save him, and the next moment Baggy Trimble had pitched over into the courtyard with an echoing scream.

On the stones beneath the balcony Baggy lay where he had fallen, white-faced and still.

It was there that he was found by an Indian soldier as dawn was breaking over the palace roofs.

He was still unconscious. There were no bones broken, by a miracle, the Indian doctor announced some time later to the startled members of the St. Jim's party, who could only assume that Baggy had been walking in his sleep. But the fat junior was suffering from concussion—it might be some hours before he regained his senses.

Meanwhile, the terrible secret lay locked in Baggy Trimble's sleeping brain.

CHAPTER 7.
 The Tiger Shoot!

DESPITE everyone's anxiety over Baggy Trimble, there was no reason why his accident should interfere with the big-game shoot that had been arranged for the following day.

Soon after nine o'clock the shooting-party were setting off from the palace on pad-elephants for the stretch of jungle which the Maharajah had fixed upon for the shoot.

With the exception of the five fags, Crooke and Mellish and Herbert Skimpole—the latter three having found excuses for avoiding the shoot, the idea of it having made them decidedly nervous—the whole of St. Jim's party was to take part in it, together with the Maharajah and his nephew and several members of his suite.

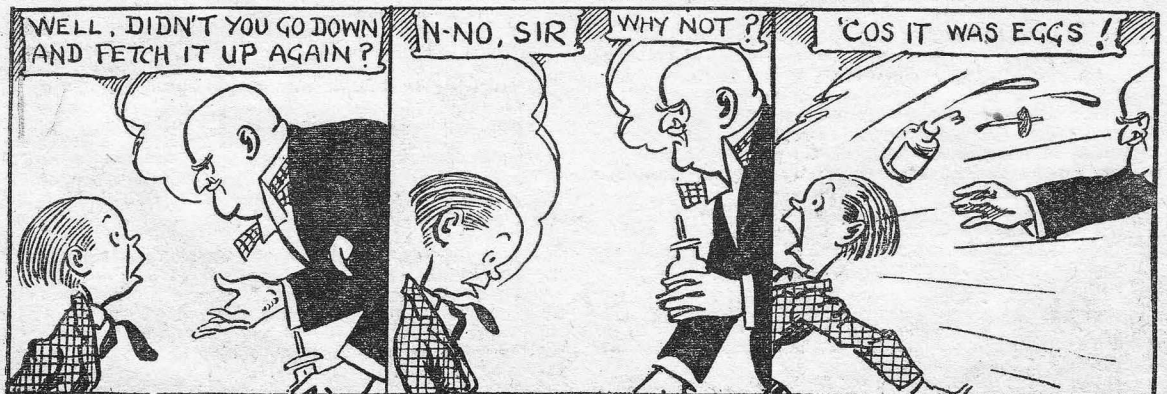
The "shikarees" had come in with reports of plenty of game, and it was with eager excitement that Tom Merry & Co. and Blake & Co. transferred with the others at the rendezvous in the jungle to their howdah-elephants, each with its dusky mahout seated on the animal's great head. The Maharajah owned more than a hundred elephants altogether, and most of them seemed to be taking part in the big shoot, either as howdah-elephants, pad-elephants, or beaters. The Maharajah, Sir Napier Wynter, and Mr. Railton were on the leading elephant—Mr. Lathom was not with the party—the St. Jim's fellows were divided into pairs on the rest of the grey beasts.

"I twust you will be vewy careful, Blake, deah boy," murmured Arthur Augustus gravely, as their elephant padded through the scrub, past thick clumps of bamboo, one of the long line spread out to left and right of them. "If a tighah comes diwectly at us, deah boy, I fancy it would be wisah if you left him to me. They are vewy dangewous animals if wounded—"

"Why, you blessed dummy!" snorted Blake indignantly. "I can shoot as well as you can—better!"

"Bai Jove! Weally, I cannot agwee—"
 Arthur Augustus broke off. From somewhere along the

Squashed!



line of elephants had come the report of a gun. A leopard had broken from one of the "topes" of bamboo, out of sight of Blake and his noble chum, and a skilful shot from Kildare's rifle had dropped it in its tracks as it had leapt for his elephant's head.

"I wondah what that was, deah boy?" murmured Arthur Augustus.

"A shot, ass!"

"Bai Jove! I am perfectly awah it was a shot, you dummay! I was wondahin'—"

"Look out!" gasped Blake suddenly.

At the same moment there was an ejaculation from their mahout—"Bagh!"—which Blake knew to mean "Tiger!" But he had already seen the great streak of orange-and-black that had come leaping into the sunlight from the edge of the jungle immediately opposite them. From Arthur Augustus there broke a startled gasp.

"Bai-bai Jove!"

The tiger was coming straight for their elephant. Luckily, like all the animals which the Maharajah had provided for his guests, their elephant was a proved "tiger-staunch" beast. It stood stock still as the striped shape came leaping towards it across the burnt-up jungle grass.

Arthur Augustus jammed his monocle hastily into his aristocratic eye and grabbed his Express.

Bang!

The rifle went off with a shattering report close by Blake's head. In his excitement, Arthur Augustus had fired before intending to do so, and Blake had had the narrowest shave of his life. But at the same moment Blake's own rifle had spoken.

The tiger, only twenty feet away, snarling and roaring, dropped dead. Blake's bullet had penetrated its shoulder and gone through to its heart. Blake turned a white, glaring face to his noble chum.

"You blessed lunatic!" he gasped. "You jolly nearly slaughtered me!"

"Wats! I—"

"You aren't safe with a gun!" roared Blake. "You burbling jabberwock—"

"Bai Jove! I wefuse to be weferred to as a burblin' jabbahwock! Simplay because you are jealous that I bagged that tighah—"

"What?" shrieked Blake.

Arthur Augustus wagged a reproving finger at the leader of the Fourth.

"I am surprised at you, deah boy, losin' your tempah because you missed the tighah and I shot the cweatuah! I—"

"Y-you shot it?" gasped Blake feebly. "Oh, my aunt! Why, you—you blessed ass, you fired into the air! Nearly blew off my top-knot! If I hadn't bagged the brute quick it would have been attacking the old elephant in another jiffy!"

"Weally, Blake," murmured Arthur Augustus sadly, shaking his noble head, "is this worthay of you, deah boy? You must realise it was I who shot the tighah, whereas you, fivin' wildly—"

Blake fairly goggled at his noble chum. But words failed him. Arthur Augustus straightened his sun-helmet calmly.

It was quite evident that nothing under the sun would convince the swell of St. Jim's that it was not his tiger.

The blazing Indian sun was dropping behind the distant mountains when the shooting-party set off at last back to the palace on the pad-elephants. These elephants, in place of a howdah, had large mattresses strapped to their backs, over which ran a network of stout cords. Each had four or five of the party mounted on them, clinging to the cord network.

Altogether, they had had a fine day's bag. No less than seven tigers had been bagged, three leopards, and a huge rhinoceros, which had fallen to Mr. Railton's heavy 4-bore elephant-gun, as well as a good deal of small game.

"But weally, deah boys, I considah that my tighah is the finest of the lot, don't you know," remarked Arthur Augustus, clinging to the back of the pad-elephant he was sharing with Blake, Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kit Wildrake. "I considah that my tighah—"

"It wasn't your tiger, dummy!" growled Blake.

"Bai Jove, Blake! Are you still persistin' in the wiculous pwetence that it was your tighah?" sniffed the swell of St. Jim's icily. "I am astonished at your unspornin'—"

"Br-r-r!"

"I considah that sound uttably senseless, Blake!"

Figgins, Fatty Wynn, and Kit Wildrake chuckled. They could guess that Blake's account of the bagging of that first tiger had been the true one.

But the little argument between Blake and his aristocratic chum was interrupted in startling fashion.

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The long line of elephants had been marching along a broad path between high-growing patches of jungle and bamboo. Their path had led them to a narrow, swampy river, spanned by a rickety-looking bamboo bridge, which, despite its flimsy appearance, was actually more than capable of taking its load, normally at any rate.

But a few moments after the leading elephant, on which were mounted the Maharajah, Sir Napier Wynter, and Mr. Railton, had begun to cross the bridge, there was an ominous sound that brought a startled shout from those on the second elephant, twenty yards behind.

"My heavens!" Kildare, on the second elephant, with three other Sixth-Formers, gave a cry of horror. "The bridge is collapsin'!"

Even as he cried out, with a splintering of bamboos the trestle-bridge caved in beneath the weight of the frightened elephant. The great animal staggered, trumpeting shrilly. The next moment its heavy bulk had gone hurtling down with the wreckage of the bridge, flinging the Maharajah and the two Englishmen from its back, down into the crocodile-infested waters beneath.

CHAPTER 8. Suspicious!

MR. RAILTON rose to the surface of the water, gasping, and instinctively struck out for the nearer bank.

Near him, Sir Napier Wynter and the Maharajah were also swimming for the bank, the elephant floundering after them. For a few moments the St. Jim's master did not realise that they were in any danger.

Then suddenly his eyes fell on some scaly shapes stretched on the mud-banks ahead, and his heart turned cold.

The place was alive with crocodiles!

The evil-looking brutes had already seen them, and were slithering into the water to attack them. There was a gasping shout from Sir Napier Wynter.

"The other bank!" he cried hoarsely, turning swiftly and striking out for the bank across the river.

There seemed to be no crocodiles on the farther side. But it seemed a vain hope to imagine that they would be able to swim to safety before the crocodiles had overtaken them.

At any moment, Railton expected to feel savage jaws closing upon his legs. He was a fine swimmer; but there was still a long way to go before the three reached safety.

Then, to his horror, a long snout lifted from the muddy water directly in his path—a crocodile, coming straight at him. It looked as though the game was up so far as he was concerned—when from the bank of the river the report of a gun rang out, and the evil snout vanished with a wild plunge, leaving the water stained with flecks of crimson.

Kildare, Darrell, Philip Lefevre, and half a dozen other seniors were strung out along the bank, their faces white and set, heavy rifles to their shoulders, firing down at the swarming brutes infesting the sluggishly-flowing river.

There was hope after all!

If the seniors with their rifles could keep the crocodiles at bay for only a short while, the three swimming figures battling for life in the muddy waters would have a chance yet.

To the crowd of juniors watching white-faced from the end of the broken bridge, it seemed an interminable time that elapsed while Mr. Railton, Sir Napier, and the Maharajah swam on towards the bank. Every now and again a fierce snout would appear near them, to be picked off unerringly by the seniors' rifles. And at last, after what seemed an eternity to all concerned, the three swimmers gained the farther side.

Mr. Railton was the last to leave the water, and a huge shape heaved itself out of the water with snapping jaws within a foot of him as he hauled himself to safety. But the crocodile sank back with a dull splash—it had lost its prey!

The Maharajah, dripping wet, his turban gone, glanced at Sir Napier Wynter and Mr. Railton with a grave face.

"That's rum-funny business, sars," he announced quietly. "Why did thatt bridge collapse, one thinks? Why wass itt nott safe and sound, eh? Oah, indeed, thatt iss big question!"

"Good heavens, your Highness!" ejaculated Sir Napier. "You surely don't suspect that it was deliberately weakened by some villains?"

"That iss what I wonder," answered the Maharajah grimly. "Oah yess! It looks like dirtree work of some bad eggs, sars. An attempt upon my life, I think. Oah, itt iss verree rum-funny business!"

The Maharajah's suspicion was soon found to be thoroughly justified.

An examination of the broken supports of the bridge showed conclusively that they had been half-sawn through, evidently in readiness for the arrival upon it of the Maharajah, whom the unknown miscreants would know to have been mounted on the foremost of the pad-elephants returning from the tiger-shoot.

As the Maharajah had said, it was a "rum-funny" business. But there was no clue to the identity of the scoundrels whose work had so nearly resulted in the death of the ruler of Zundaki.

"Whoever they were, they failed, anyway," said Sir Napier Wynter grimly, as the rather subdued party arrived back at the palace in the purple Indian dusk. "But it's a miracle, by gad, that those crocodiles didn't get us, all three, in spite of the excellent shots on the bank!"

The first anxiety of the juniors on their return to the palace was Baggy Trimble.

They found that he was still lying unconscious.

"Poor chap!" muttered Mr. Railton, who had gone to Baggy's room with Blake & Co., and Tom Merry & Co. at once. "He's had a bad blow, in that fall. Extraordinary how he came to be where he was found! There is no doubt that he fell from that balcony. It is all very queer."

The native who was in charge of Baggy, under the doctor, told them that there had not been the slightest sign of returning consciousness.

"Poor old Baggy!" grunted Blake, as they left the room. "It's rotten luck!"

Tom Merry touched Mr. Railton on the arm.

"Can I have a word with you, sir? Alone?"

"Yes, certainly," Mr. Railton surveyed Tom curiously, puzzled by the look on the face of the captain of the Shell. "Come to my room."

In Mr. Railton's room, Tom Merry closed the door behind him and turned a pair of troubled eyes to the House-master.

"You may think I'm crazy, sir, when I tell you what I've been wondering," he said abruptly.

"What ever is the matter?" ejaculated Mr. Railton.

"About the bridge, and its collapse this evening! We know it was a deliberate attempt on the Maharajah's life. I—I've got a suspicion that someone here in the palace knows something about it!" breathed Tom.

Mr. Railton stared at him with startled eyes.

"Good heavens, Merry—"

"You may think I'm crazy, sir, but the chap I suspect is the Maharajah's own nephew, Akram Vind!"

"The Maharajah's nephew?" echoed Mr. Railton incredulously.

"Yes," nodded Tom grimly. "I saw his face yesterday when his uncle was nearly trampled to death by that mad elephant—he looked just as though he hoped to see the Maharajah killed! You see, being successor to the throne—"

"This is a very grave suggestion to make, Merry," broke in Mr. Railton sharply. "Do you fully realise the seriousness of it?"

"I think so, sir," nodded Tom doggedly. "And then, to-day, I particularly remember noticing that Akram Vind made an excuse for not going on the same pad-elephant as his uncle when we were setting off back here. He looked queer, I remember, at the time—and he looked a jolly sight queerer when you and Sir Napier and the Maharajah got out by the skin of your teeth, instead of being killed by the crocodiles! I saw his face then, and I'll swear it was a bitter disappointment to him to see his uncle escape with his life!"

Mr. Railton eyed Tom Merry's dogged face keenly. A faint smile appeared at the corners of the master's lips.

"Nonsense, Merry! Really, your suspicions are too wild for words! You have imagined it all, I can assure you. There cannot be any doubt of that."

"Very well, sir. I am glad you think so. I hope I am wrong. I thought I ought to tell you, that's all."

Mr. Railton dropped a hand upon his shoulder, smiling. "Quite right. But put such an idea out of your head, that's my advice."

But there was a troubled frown on Tom's face as he left the room. Mr. Railton had laughed at his suspicions, but in his own heart he could not help but feel that they were justified.

"I can't tell the Maharajah!" he muttered helplessly. "What the dickens ought I to do? I wish I knew!"

CHAPTER 9.

Captives of the Snakemen!

BAGGY TRIMBLE groaned.

It was a faint groan—little more than a sigh. But it was enough to cause Jack Blake, sitting by the fat junior's bed, to turn swiftly and eagerly.

It was later that evening, and some of the Fourth-Formers (Continued on next page.)

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had been taking it in turns to sit by Baggy, while the native who had had that task throughout the day took a well-deserved rest from his trying vigil. It had been Blake's own suggestion that they should volunteer for the task, and the others had agreed readily; they all felt very sympathetic towards Baggy, puzzled though everyone still was to know how his accident had occurred.

"Baggy!" breathed Blake. "Baggy, old chap—"

Again Baggy groaned faintly. The next moment his eyes had flickered open—were staring at Blake dazedly.

"Where—where—" muttered Baggy. A frightened look came into his eyes. "The Maharajah! Akram Vind—the Snakemen—they mean to murder—"

His voice trailed off weakly. Blake's face had gone suddenly startled. He had risen to his feet, intending to summon the doctor; but now he stayed where he was, leaning over Baggy Trimble wonderingly. Knowing what he did of the broken bridge that evening, Baggy's words had startled him.

"Don't get excited, old chap!" he breathed. "Keep still. You've had a rotten knock on the napper, you know. But—but what—"

"They mean to murder the Maharajah!" cried Baggy wildly.

He struggled to sit up, but sank back on the pillow with a little groan. His hand fastened on to Blake's wrist.

"Baggy, what do you mean?"

"I heard them!" muttered Baggy, his eyes wide as he stared up into Blake's startled face. "I—I went downstairs to have a snack, and I heard that black rotter, Akram Vind, plotting with the High Priest of the Snakemen! The idea is for the Snakemen to do in the Maharajah, so that Akram Vind inherits the throne; then Akram Vind will give 'em back the snake-knife! They want it badly—"

Again Baggy's voice trailed off. His eyes closed.

"Ow!" he muttered. "My head!"

Blake stood staring down at the fat junior with a face that had gone as white as paper.

"Good lor!" he breathed.

He understood now.

"I got lost when I was going to tell somebody!" went on Baggy hoarsely, his eyes opening again. "I fell from a blessed balcony, didn't I? I wanted to warn the Maharajah, you know! There was something about a bridge—"

"That's right!" nodded Blake grimly. "They tried it on, but it didn't work. Don't worry, Baggy; it's not too late for you to tell your story to the Maharajah himself, if you like. He's safe enough still, and before Akram Vind and the others can make another attempt on his life, he'll know all about it."

A look of wonderful relief had come into Baggy's eyes. He lay back on the pillow with a little grunt of satisfaction.

"Thank goodness for that!" he muttered.

"Look here, I'll go and bring the Maharajah here right away, old chap!" said Blake. His tone was very grim. "It'll be best for you to tell him about this plot against his life yourself, you know. And he ought to be told at once, too. I'll go and bring him here!"

Blake stepped back from the bed and turned to the door. He froze in his stride.

Unheard, the door had opened. A thin, dark face was surveying Blake with glittering eyes. Akram Vind was standing within the doorway, and the look on the young prince's evil countenance showed only too well that he had overheard.

"I think not!" he said softly. "You will not bring the Maharajah here, my young friend! You will tell him nothing!"

A malignant smile appeared on his dusky face. His hand came out of the pocket of his jacket, and Jack Blake found himself staring into the muzzle of a levelled automatic.

There was a faint cry from the bed. Baggy Trimble had raised himself excitedly on one elbow, to sink back the next instant with closed eyes, unconscious. In his present sick condition, the thrill and horror of knowing that Akram Vind had overheard all that he had told to Blake had been too much for him. He had fainted!

"You—you hound!" cried Blake thickly.

"Silence!" hissed Akram Vind, his lips curling back viciously from his teeth. "Make no sound, I warn you, my friend—if, that is, you wish to live!" He laughed mockingly. "You are not in England now, remember! I could shoot you down where you stand if I chose, and though there might be a little trouble explaining the 'accident,' that would be all!"

He glanced swiftly over his shoulder and hissed. In answer to the signal, four dusky natives stepped swiftly into the room, the last of the four closing the door behind him. Their glittering eyes were fastened on their young master, awaiting his command.

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"Bind this boy and gag him!" muttered Akram Vind.

It was done in a few moments. Blake found himself standing with his arms tightly lashed behind him, and a cloth fastened over his mouth that prevented him making any but the faintest sound.

"Bring that fat fool! Gag him, too!" ordered the Maharajah's nephew. "Quick, you dogs! At any moment someone may come!"

His words, spoken in his own tongue, were incomprehensible to Blake; but that he and Baggy were to be carried away secretly, before they could warn the Maharajah of the plot against his life, was obvious enough.

Blake struggled vainly against his bonds. Akram Vind turned on him with a snarl, striking him across the face with the flat of his hand, while two of his servants hastily gagged the senseless Baggy and tied his wrists.



Akram Vind staggered back in panic, but it was too

"Come!" hissed Akram Vind in Hindustani. "I will lead the way! Bring them swiftly!"

He crossed the room with noiseless strides. It was constructed on a European plan, with french windows opening on to a broad balcony that ran along the whole wing. While two of the natives carried Baggy, whose eyes had opened again, wide with terror at finding himself being borne away a prisoner, Blake was seized by another of the dark-skinned men and hustled out on to the balcony on the heels of the young Indian prince.

A very western-looking metal fire-escape ran down to the ground from the far end of the balcony, and down it Blake was hurried, helpless and silent, with Baggy borne behind. On the terrace below, Akram Vind peered round furtively; but the coast was clear.

A minute later Blake was being forced stumblingly along a narrow path through the palm-trees of the palace grounds.

There was no one about, and soon they were passing through an arched doorway down by the river.

A boat was moored under the dark bank.

Baggy Trimble was bundled into it, and Blake forced to follow. Akram Vind and his four rascally servants boarded it, and, with softly splashing oars, the boat cut downstream through the black shadows of the overhanging trees.

Where they were being taken Blake could not imagine. His heart was sick within him. His capture and Baggy's meant that there was no one to warn the Maharajah of his terrible danger, and that thought completely overshadowed the knowledge of the deadly danger that he himself was in.

A quarter of a mile down the dark river the nose of the boat was turned towards the farther bank.

It grounded softly, and instantly out of the shadows there appeared half a dozen figures that brought a muffled



too late. One of the gliding shapes had struck!

moan of terror from the gagged figure of Baggy Trimble.

Each of the silent figures on the bank seemed to have the head of a snake. Members of the dreaded Brotherhood!

Blake was dragged ashore, and Baggy lifted out after him. The Falstaff of the Fourth was helpless with terror, and to have made him try to walk would clearly have been useless. Accordingly, he was seized by two of the Snakemen, and after a few muttered words with Akram Vind the mysterious figures started off into the dense jungle carrying their prisoner. Blake was forced to follow, a gleaming knife held to his spine to urge him on.

The four servants had vanished. But Akram Vind was still with them as the sinister procession hurried along the swampy trail, deeper and deeper into the heart of the jungle.

It seemed an eternity to Jack Blake before they came at last to a starlit clearing.

A shadowy building rose to the height of the trees in the centre of it, with a great dome of marble. In a flash Blake realised what this place was—the secret temple of the Brotherhood of the Snake!

The Maharajah had told them that the Snakemen's temple had been found and burnt to the ground. But it was evident that with the reforming of the society another temple had been raised.

Baggy Trimble was carried swiftly in through the dark, arched doorway, and Blake was forced to follow up the steps and into the pitch blackness beyond. A great curtain was thrust aside by one of the snake-headed figures, and Blake found himself in the dim-lit interior of the hidden temple of the evil Brotherhood.

What appeared to be an altar appeared at the farther end, before a giant idol of stone—a seated figure with the body of a man and the head of a snake. Its eyes glowed green through the gloom, seeming to flicker with a light all their own. The air was heavy with pungent, drifting smoke from braziers of incense.

But Blake had no time to look around him. He was dragged swiftly across the floor of the temple, through some pillars, and into a small chamber behind the altar, beyond a brass door. His captors flung him in, and Baggy was laid roughly on the floor near him.

Akram Vind stood in the doorway with a gloating light in his black, glittering eyes.

"So you would tell the Maharajah of his danger?" he mocked softly. "I think not. You will never leave this place alive. You are both to be used for sacrifice on the sacred altar of the Snake god, my young friends, in the ceremony of rejoicing at the death of the Maharajah!"

Blake stood panting, his eyes fixed on those of Akram Vind, blazing with helpless, despairing fury. But if the Maharajah's nephew hoped to see fear there, he was disappointed. Blake was not likely to show the white feather!

From Baggy Trimble, lying bound and gagged against the wall, there broke a moan of terror, however. Akram Vind laughed harshly.

"Despite you, my young friends," he went on silkily, "I shall soon inherit the throne of Zundaki! I do not mind telling you, since you will not have the slightest chance of revealing it, the little plan that we have made for the death of the Maharajah! To-morrow night a number of deadly snakes will be loosed in his room as he sleeps—snakes whose bite is instant death. To-morrow night! And then, when the snakes have done their work, here in this temple will be great rejoicing among the Snakemen! Oh, you will see their ceremony of thankfulness to their Snake-god—you will play a most important part in that ceremony, in fact!"

Again he laughed, his eyes glittering from Blake's to the ashen face of Baggy Trimble.

Blake had given up striving to free his arms. They were bound too securely. But suddenly he hurled himself at the mocking figure of the villainous Prince in blind rage.

Akram Vind gave a startled cry, and staggered back. But he regained his balance, and with a cruel blow full between the eyes, sent Blake crashing to the floor beside Baggy Trimble.

"Lie there, you white dogs—till the night of sacrifice!" hissed the Indian, administering a brutal kick to Blake's dazed, writhing form.

He stepped swiftly back through the doorway, and the great brass door clanged shut.

The two gagged and bound schoolboys from far-off St. Jim's were prisoners in the darkness. Blake, as he struggled up, bruised and dazed, heard Baggy Trimble moaning pitifully.

Prisoners in the secret temple of the Brotherhood of the Snake—doomed to be sacrificed on the following night upon the altar to the weird, horrible figure they had glimpsed.

For a moment Blake wondered dully if their mysterious disappearance from the palace of the Maharajah had yet been discovered. Most likely it had. But there was not a chance in a million, he believed, of their whereabouts being traced.

Despite himself, a despairing groan broke from him, behind his gag.

Helpless captives, with only twenty-four hours to live! And they alone could have warned the Maharajah of Zundaki of the horrible treachery of his evil nephew, of the new plot to bring about his death!

And this time, Blake's heart was cold to realise, the chances were small indeed that the plot hatched by Akram Vind and the High Priest of the Snakemen would fail.

CHAPTER 10.

The Visit of the Snakemen!

"WHAT the dickens can it mean?"

"I guess it sure is the queerest thing I've ever struck!"

Tom Merry, Lowther, and Manners, and their American chum, Cyrus K. Hancock, were gathered in their bedroom. They had come up to bed, but so far they had made no move to undress.

They were discussing the startling disappearance of Jack Blake and Baggy Trimble, earlier that night.

It was a staggering mystery.

"It's the sort of thing that happens in a nightmare, not real life," muttered Manners. His face was terribly worried and anxious, as were the faces of the others. "Vanished—off the face of the earth! You'd think it was impossible for—"

"Sure—if we didn't know it's happened!" agreed Hancock.

"And there's no clue to any solution of the mystery!" breathed Tom Merry. "They've gone, that's all! Disappeared!"

"It—it's uncanny!" muttered Lowther, his usually cheery face deeply troubled.

"Well, we know the Maharajah won't leave a stone unturned until they are found," put in Tom. "That's something." His eyes were shadowed as he glanced from face to face. "But this isn't the first strange thing that's happened. First the business of that bridge—"

"But that can't have anything to do with Blake and Baggy vanishing like this!" ejaculated Manners.

"Perhaps not. But—" Tom hesitated. "Look here, I'll tell you something! I've already told Railton, and he laughed at me. I haven't told you chaps before, thinking you would laugh, too. But I've got a queer suspicion that—"

Manners, Lowther, and the American listened in astonished silence as Tom Merry told them his suspicion that Akram Vind knew something of the mysterious attempt on the Maharajah's life at the bamboo bridge.

"My giddy aunt!" breathed Lowther. "Now you mention it, I noticed myself that that chap Akram looked a bit queer! And it was rummy, the way he wouldn't go on the front elephant! Hanged if I don't think there may be something in it. He's a shifty-looking rotter all right. And he doesn't look the sort to stick at much, if he thought he could bag the throne without suspicion falling on him!"

"Great Bohunkus!" muttered Hancock. "I guess that shot may be right on the mark!"

"But—even supposing it's true that Akram Vind is out to see his uncle killed, so that he can grab the throne, how would that explain the disappearance of Blake and Baggy?" cut in Manners, with a helpless shrug.

"I can't explain that any more than you," answered Tom quietly. "But something tells me that there may be some queer connection! If there's funny business going on—why, it's even possible that somehow Blake and Baggy got to know about it!" he added with sudden excitement. "Suppose they learnt something? And Akram Vind and his pals spirited them away so that they couldn't tell?"

"It's possible," agreed Lowther uneasily. "It was dashed queer, Baggy being found where he was last night, anyway. That may have had something to do with it. But it's all such a rum puzzle—"

"I'll tell you what," broke in Tom quietly, "Railton can laugh at the idea if he likes, but I don't like the look of things, and I feel it's up to us to try to see that the Maharajah doesn't come to any harm, anyway!"

"But what can we do?" exclaimed Lowther. "We can't go and tell him we suspect his own nephew of wanting to murder him! He'd only be furiously angry, and—"

"Of course we can't—but there's nothing to stop us watching Akram Vind to-night, and watching the Maharajah as well!" said Tom swiftly. "Both rooms open on to the same balcony above the northern terrace; if we watched outside both their rooms, we'd know the Maharajah was pretty safe—and we might learn something about Akram Vind, if he's up to the foul, murderous game we suspect!"

"My hat, yes!" Manners' voice was quivering with excitement. "We might even learn something about Blake and—"

"I guess that's a swell idea," nodded Hancock laconically. "We'll do it, buddies!"

"Ssh! What's that?"

Tom Merry's whispered words were scarcely audible in the gloom, where he sat in the shadow of the balustrade beside Cyrus K. Hancock. They were out on the broad,

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stone balcony not far from the open french windows that gave entrance to the room of the Maharajah of Zundaki.

Farther along the balcony, Manners and Lowther were watching near the window of Akram Vind's room. The four juniors had brought out cushions with them, so that if their vigil were discovered they could explain it by professing to have come out to sleep in the open, since it would have been so impossible to have admitted the truth.

For an hour or more after their vigil had started there had been not a sound in the warm gloom around them—only the occasional far-off cry of a peacock in the jungle, and once or twice the half-heard howl of some wild beast.

But at last a sudden soft sound had come from somewhere near where Tom Merry and Hancock were sitting.

"Hear it?" said Tom.

The next moment he drew a hissing breath between his teeth. He had not been mistaken! A dark shape was swinging noiselessly over the balustrade—a man who had evidently swarmed up one of the supporting pillars from the ground below.

And the silent, ghostly figure in the gloom seemed to be a man with the head of a giant snake!

It was all so unexpected, so weirdly uncanny, that Tom Merry and the American junior seemed rooted to the spot. They saw the Snakeman slither to the open window of the Maharajah's room. He seemed to be carrying a square box, and for a moment he was busy unfastening the lid. They saw him empty its contents, whatever they were, into the room.

And then Tom Merry sprang to life!

He leapt to his feet and hurled himself at the shadowy figure, Hancock scarcely a second behind him. The Snake-man swung round with a gasping cry, and Tom saw two glittering eyes fastened on him from within the black shadow made by the jaws of the giant reptile-head. Before his arms could close round the evil shape the intruder had leapt for the balustrade and vanished whence he had come.

Tom and Hancock rushed to the edge of the balcony and stared over. They were just in time to see a shadowy figure flit away into the palm trees. The Snakeman had gone!

To have attempted to catch him would have been useless, they both realised. They raced back to the Maharajah's open window, Tom Merry dragging out an electric torch with which he had armed himself. He snapped it on, and a ray of white light leapt into the gloom of the great bedroom where the Maharajah of Zundaki lay sleeping, undreaming of danger.

An exclamation of horror choked in Tom Merry's throat. They knew now what that box had contained.

The floor of the room was swarming with dozens of small black snakes, that writhed, hissing angrily, in all directions spreading rapidly throughout the room. Already one was coiled round a leg of the Maharajah's bed, slithering up it to where the ruler of Zundaki lay breathing quietly. It reached the silken quilt and writhed across it.

Tom Merry, about to raise an echoing shout of alarm, froze to silence.

If they awoke the Maharajah, the chances were that he would make some sudden movement, and that would cause the deadly reptile near his face to strike with its poisoned fangs. At all costs, they must let him sleep on!

"The place is alive with them!"

Hancock's whisper was hoarse in Tom Merry's ear.

"Not a sound!" breathed Tom fiercely. "If the Maharajah wakes now, it'll be all up with him!"

CHAPTER 11.

The Slithering Death!

TOM MERRY'S face was as white as paper as he stared wide-eyed into the snake-infested room. Hancock at his side as white-faced as he.

In the deathly quiet, the faint hissing of the hideous little reptiles could be heard, sinister and evil.

Hurrying footsteps were approaching along the balcony. Manners and Lowther, despite the almost utter silence in which the Snakeman had come and gone, had heard sounds, and were coming quickly to investigate.

They were not long in ignorance of what had occurred! Their faces went as pale as Tom and the American's as they gazed horror-struck into the shadowy room.

"We've got to go in!" snapped Tom Merry. "We've got to save his life—"

"Riding-boots!" cut in Hancock coolly. "I guess that's what we want! Leather riding-boots that the snakes can't bite through—it's our only chance, buddies, if we go in there!"

It was the work of a minute to act on his suggestion.

Leaving Manners at the window with the torch, to warn the Maharajah of his terrible danger if he awoke, Tom and Lowther and the American raced away to their own room. Almost at once, it seemed to Manners, they were back, wearing their high, snake-proof riding-boots, with riding-whips in their hands.

"Buzz off and tell Railton! Raise the alarm!" snapped Tom incisively; and Manners nodded, and hurried away.

With Tom Merry taking the lead, the three Shell juniors stepped as noiselessly as they could into the snake-infested room.

Tom Merry switched on the electric light and thrust the torch into his pocket. Even the glare of light had not awakened the Maharajah, who lay breathing steadily.

On the floor around them the little writhing shapes hissed and slithered!

Despite their boots, the three juniors were taking their lives in their hands, and they knew it.

"That one on the bed——" gasped Lowther, and broke off with a stifled cry as he saw an evil shape glide across his boot. He cut at it with his whip, and the snake turned on him convulsively. But a second lashing stroke of the whip broke its back, killing it instantly—and at the same moment there was a grunt from the bed, and the Maharajah's eyes opened suddenly.

"Lie still—for your life!" panted Tom Merry.

The Maharajah of Zundaki had excellent nerves! Already his eyes had fallen on the venomous thing so close to his face, and his dusty cheeks seemed to blanch.

"O.K., prince!" muttered Hancock. "I guess I'll fix that for you! But the room's alive with 'em!"

The American stamped, with a shudder, on a wriggling shape that slithered past his feet, crushing the deadly head to pulp beneath his heel. From his pocket he had taken a length of thin string. With dexterous fingers he formed a noose, and moved softly to the bed.

The remainder were diminishing rapidly, however, as the three Shell fellows carried on with their task.

"I regret I cannot assist in thee good work!" murmured the Maharajah from the bed. "Butt with bare feet I should stand ass much chance ass a cat in a dogs' home, eh?"

There was a sudden sound on the balcony outside.

The lithe figure of Akram Vind had appeared in the glow of light cast through the open windows. There was a strange look in the glittering eyes of the Maharajah's evil nephew.

Akram Vind's own room was some distance down the balcony, and he had heard nothing of the Snakeman's visit, though he had known that it was to be made that night. Faint sounds from his uncle's room, however, had drawn him forth to find out what was happening. He had every hope that the plan had worked already—until the sight of his uncle, alive in the room, calmly talking to three of his English schoolboy guests, had told the startled villain on the balcony that somehow his schemes had again gone astray!

The Maharajah caught sight of him, and their eyes met.

From where he stood on the balcony, Prince Akram failed to see the snake-infested floor—never for a moment did he dream that to that extent the murderous scheme which he and the High Priest of the Snakemen had

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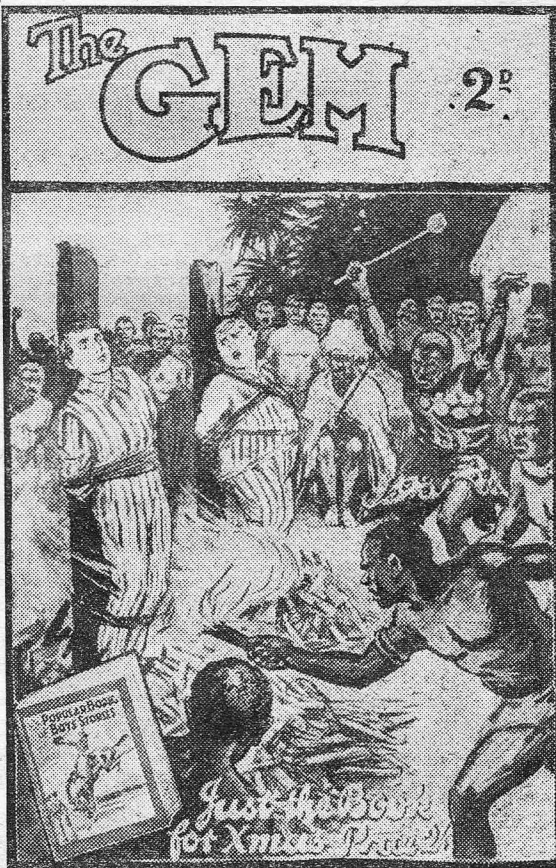
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hatched, had worked well enough! Not dreaming of the danger, and knowing that now he had been seen it would appear more than odd if he failed to show natural surprise at finding the juniors there at that time of night—a fact which was puzzling him terribly—Akram Vind stepped quickly through the open windows into the room.

"Look out!" yelled Monty Lowther.

The Maharajah cried out a hoarse warning in his own tongue at the same moment. But already Akram Vind was in the room.

He was wearing European pyjamas, with thin, heel-less slippers on his feet. At the shouts of desperate warning, he gave a startled exclamation. And then, as his eyes fell on the snake-infested floor, many of the creatures still alive and slithering to and fro, his jaw dropped and his eyes seemed to protrude from his head.

His ejaculation seemed to strangle in his throat. His face

had gone a queer colour, bloodless beneath its dusky skin. Horror seemed to hold him riveted to the spot.

Then, when he staggered back in panic, and half turned to leap to safety, it was too late.

A gliding shape writhed convulsively as one of his shoes came down upon it. The snake struck as swift as light, its fang biting through the skin of his lean, naked ankle. Twice it struck; and a shriek burst from the quivering lips of Akram Vind.

He had been caught in his own fiendish trap!

He reeled, his face working horribly, and he clutched at the long curtains that hung beside the window.

Again a dreadful shriek burst from him; not, like the first, a shriek of terror, but a shriek of agony as the poison gripped him. He writhed convulsively, and fell to his knees. Another of the slithering shapes on the floor struck at him.

Dazed with horror, Tom Merry, Monty Lowther, and the American youngster saw Akram Vind lie writhing where he had fallen, his fingers clutching at the floor. A shudder ran through his whole frame. There was a queer rattle in his throat—and then the heir to the throne of Zundaki lay still and silent, a crumpled shape at the juniors' feet. Akram Vind would plot no more!

CHAPTER 12.

The Hour of Sacrifice!

IN the evil-smelling little room of the secret temple in which he and Baggy Trimble had been confined ever since their capture the previous night, Jack Blake lay staring with glazed eyes into the pitch darkness that enveloped them.

There was no hope in his heart.

They were still bound, but Blake had succeeded at last in biting through the gag that had silenced him for so long. For the last few torturing hours he had forced himself to speak occasionally to Baggy in an effort to cheer the fat junior. But his mouth was parched and dry, his lips cracked, for they had had neither food nor drink for more than twenty-four hours. A ghastly thirst tormented Blake, and he could guess that Baggy was suffering just as much. In fact, he imagined that Baggy was a little light-headed now, for though the Falstaff of the Fourth, still gagged, could not talk, he was making queer, wild noises behind his gag every now and then. Those eerie sounds were strangely unnerving to Blake, who was fighting hard to keep perfect control of himself, against the time when he would need all his strength of will to face the end with a stiff upper lip.

The air in the little room was hot and stifling. Blake had felt his senses beginning to swim for some hours now.

He felt that they had been lying there for an eternity of time. Surely the end must come soon!

He knew that the Maharajah of Zundaki was to be murdered within about twenty-four hours of their capture, and once the Maharajah was dead the celebrations would take place in the secret temple, in which he and Baggy were to play such a terrible role. But to Blake, with no way of counting time, it seemed that far more than twenty-four hours had come and gone since they had been flung into their prison by Prince Akram Vind and the Snakemen.

A faint groan came from the darkness near him where Baggy lay.

Blake stirred restlessly.

His limbs were numbed and aching. He had long given up the attempt to free his arms from their bonds—that was an utterly impossible task.

From somewhere beyond the brazen door that imprisoned them he could hear the faint, muffled beating of tom-toms in the temple, rising and falling eerily.

Why did not the end come? He had begun to long for it. Better to die quickly than endure this lingering torture of ghastly expectation, and of thirst—a thirst that tormented his brain with mental pictures of clear, flowing water, of sparkling fountains, maddening him almost beyond endurance as he lay passing his tongue feverishly along his dried, cracked lips.

The minutes dragged on. The beat of tom-toms seemed louder and quicker, queerly rhythmic.

"Water—water!"

The despairing muttered words broke from him almost without him realising it.

And somehow the picture that lived most persistently in his feverish brain now was that of a clear stretch of the River Rhy, flowing by the green playing fields of far-off St. Jim's.

"Baggy!" he whispered, his voice hoarse and weirdly

unlike his own. But there was no sound from Baggy Trimble now.

And then, with an abruptness that left him dazed, there came a glare of yellow light streaming into their prison, blinding him. The brazen door had swung silently open, and outlined in the square doorway was the figure of a tall man in strange ceremonial robes, a great snake's head with open jaws half-concealing his evil, wrinkled face.

It was the High Priest of the Brotherhood of the Snake, Zahir-u-Khan!

The lean shape of the High Priest stood surveying the two bound schoolboys with triumphantly blazing eyes.

"The time has come!" He was speaking in English. "The Maharajah is dead! Prince Akram Vind rules in Zundaki! At last the sacred snake-knife shall be returned to the Brotherhood of the Snake!"

Blake heard the words dully, almost without interest, though he knew only too well what they meant for him and Baggy Trimble.

The end had almost come! But he had known that it must come soon, and racked with thirst, with his brain swimming, his senses were mercifully dulled.

So the evil schemes of the Snakemen and Prince Akram Vind had succeeded at last! The Maharajah was dead, treacherously murdered!

It naturally did not occur to Blake to question for a moment the truth of that. That the High Priest believed it was evident, and Blake did not dream that there could be any mistake. He did not realise that the scoundrelly native, whose task it had been to let loose the poisonous snakes in the Maharajah's room, having accomplished that much of his task, had been interrupted before he had been able to make sure that the snakes had done their work, and, afraid to admit the fact that he was not certain, believing, in any case, that the death of the Maharajah was bound to ensue, had returned to the secret temple in the jungle with the lying news that he had seen the ruler of Zundaki perish horribly from the fangs of the deadly reptiles!

And even if Blake had known that, it would certainly have made no difference now.

The High Priest and the Snakemen believed the Maharajah dead, and their evil ceremonies of rejoicing were to begin!

Four shadowy figures appeared behind the High Priest. They were lesser priests of the Brotherhood, all in ceremonial robes, their heads encased in the open jaws of giant snakes. At a word from Zahir-u-Khan they entered the little room, and Blake was seized and dragged to his feet.

His legs almost gave way under him as he was forced out through the doorway into the light. He had just had time to see that Baggy was conscious, was being lifted bodily to be carried into the great domed hall of the temple after him. The beating of the tom-toms was loud and insistent in his ears as he stumbled across the floor between the two men holding him, to where the black altar stood before the great stone figure of the Snake-god.

The temple was crowded with the weird snake-headed figures of the members of the dreaded Brotherhood—shadowy figures half-seen in the incense-laden gloom of the pillared hall.

Close by the altar priests were beating tom-toms in a wild, quickening rhythm, and from the shadowy crowd there came a low, weird chant, rising and falling in the gloom.

Half-dazed though he was, Jack Blake felt a thrill of horror leap into his brain as full realisation came to him in that moment of what was in store.

He was hustled towards the altar.

His heart was icy cold. But his face, though as pale as death, was set unflinchingly. He was walking firmly now, pulling himself together with a last tremendous effort. His head was held high as he was led, bound and helpless, up the steps to the black altar.

At any cost, he meant to die with a stiff upper lip. He was going to show these dusky villains how a British youngster could look death in the face!

Two of the priests seized him, and he was roughly laid upon the great black slab. Baggy, moaning behind his gag, was laid beside him, and thick cords fastened the youngsters to the stone.

All around them the weird, monotonous chant of the secret Brotherhood rose and fell on the smoke-laden air.

Blake's eyes fastened upon the face of the huge carved idol of the Snake-god, towering above him in the lofty gloom, its great green eyes seeming to flicker down balefully with an uncanny light, watching him. A shudder ran through the helpless youngster. He bit his lip, fighting to keep back a cry of despair.

"Baggy! Baggy, old chap—"

Baggy moaned faintly.

"Don't worry, old chap," breathed Blake hoarsely. "It—it'll soon be over!"

The High Priest, his skinny arms upstretched before the stone idol, was droning out a long incantation. The tom-toms were silent now, and the chant of the Snakemen had ceased.

"Hazoor! Hazoor! Hazoor!"

The deep voice of Zahir-u-Khan, the malignant old High Priest, droned on.

Would the end never come?

Baggy Trimble had fainted. But Blake lay with staring eyes fastened, fascinated, upon the High Priest as he swayed and muttered before the hideous idol. And at last Zahir-u-Khan picked up the long, curved knife that had been lying on a small slab at the side of the main altar, a knife with a handle fashioned like a writhing snake, its blade thin and sharp. It was evidently a copy of the true sacred knife that the Brotherhood were so desperately eager to regain from the treasure chambers of the Maharajah's palace.

The High Priest held the knife on high before the great idol. His eyes were blazing with a fanatical light as he stared up into the hideous, carved face above.

The tom-toms woke to life, beating out a feverish rhythm, and the chant of the Snakemen broke out afresh. Blake closed his eyes.

At last, then! This was the finish of all things.

His lips muttered a prayer.

He seemed to hear the swish of the High Priest's arm as he raised the knife to strike. And then there was a queer interruption in the chanting voices. From the far end of the temple had come the sound of a muffled tumult!

The High Priest's muttered incantation broke off sharply. He turned his head, lowering the knife.

There were sudden excited shouts from the gloom beyond the farthest pillars. Racing footsteps echoed round the temple, and startled, furious cries. The beating of the tom-toms ceased abruptly, and Blake opened his eyes wonderingly, twisting his head to stare across the pillared hall to the spot from where the unexpected noises came.

A gasping cry broke from his fevered lips.

A dozen turbanned figures, swords in their hands, had raced into view, cutting down an excited group of Snake-men who tried to bar their path. Indian soldiers, in the uniform of the Maharajah! A moment later the Maharajah himself had come into view, clad in khaki, a glittering

English sword in his fist—and beside him were Sir Napier Wynter, Mr. Railton, and Eric Kildare, carrying revolvers.

Even as the delirious cry of joy broke from Blake's lips he saw the captain of St. Jim's shoot down one of the Snakemen, who had leapt at Sir Napier Wynter with a long knife upraised.

The man with the knife staggered back and collapsed.

Other Sixth-Formers had appeared now behind the leaders, and a crowd of Indian soldiers.

An echoing tumult filled the temple as the rescuers fought their way across the floor towards the altar, where Zahir-u-Khan, the High Priest, knife in hand, stood as if turned to stone.

To Jack Blake it was all like a wonderful dream, strangely unreal.

How the rescue-party, led by the Maharajah himself, had come there—and in the nick of time—was a bewildering mystery to him. He was not trying to solve the problem now! All he knew was that they were there, cutting their way through the shrieking, leaping swarms of snake-headed figures towards where he and Baggy lay bound before the idol.

A cracked cheer burst from his lips.

The priests had fled from the altar steps, to join the struggle in the centre of the floor, where with long knives the Snake-men were fighting with fanatical frenzy to overcome the intruders. The High Priest alone stood motionless, watching the scene with baleful eyes, as if rooted to the spot, as, led by the Maharajah whom the Snake-men had believed dead, the rescuers slowly fought their way nearer and nearer to the steps of the altar!

CHAPTER 13.

The End of the Snakemen!

THE clash of steel and the bark of revolver-shots echoed through the temple in a wild tumult of sound.

But it was already clear that the rescue-party were getting the better of things!

Sir Napier Wynter, Mr. Railton, Kildare, Darrell, and Monteith were in the forefront, fighting on either side of the Maharajah, whose sword was leaping dexterously as they drove on towards the spot where Blake and Baggy Trimble lay bound.

(Continued on next page.)

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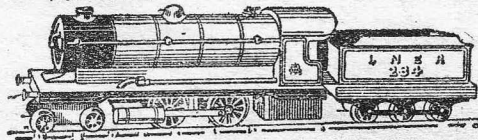
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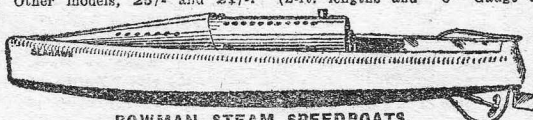
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From the High Priest there burst a sudden snarling, inhuman sound.

How the Maharajah came to be alive was a mystery to him. But that he was alive—and very much alive at that—was abundantly clear! And a fanatical fury seized the evil leader of the dreadful Brotherhood.

As the Maharajah and his companions burst through at last and raced towards the altar, the High Priest leapt down the steps to meet them, the snake-knife upraised.

He hurled his skinny figure straight at the Maharajah.

"Look out!" yelled Darrell.

It was clear that the High Priest intended to kill the Maharajah before he met his own end.

The dusky ruler of Zundaki swung his sword round swiftly to meet the attack. But the High Priest grasped the naked blade with talon-like fingers, wrenching it from the Maharajah's hand, caring nothing that the sword cut his fingers to the bone. The weapon fell to the floor from his bleeding hand, and the Maharajah staggered back, with the High Priest's half-severed fingers clawing at his throat.

The snake-knife leapt for the Maharajah's heart.

There was a spurt of flame from Mr. Railton's revolver.

The High Priest reeled, the knife slipped to the floor. A horrible cry rattled in his skinny throat. He pitched forward on to his face and lay still.

Coolly the Maharajah picked up his sword and glanced at the smoking muzzle of Mr. Railton's revolver.

"Thatt iss good business," he said quietly. "You have rid thee world of veree bad egg, Mister Railton, I assure you. Oah, yess, indeed!"

Sir Napier Wynter and Eric Kildare came racing up the steps to the altar. Blake greeted them with a faint grin. Baggy was still unconscious.

"Thank Heaven we were in time!" panted the baronet, slashing through the ropes with an Indian knife that he had snatched up.

"How—how did you get here?" muttered Blake, as Kildare lifted him gently, supporting him as he stood with difficulty. "What happened? They told us the Maharajah was dead—"

"That's where they were wrong!" smiled Kildare grimly. "Tom Merry & Co. took a hand in the game, and saved his bacon!" Briefly he explained what had occurred. "And the Maharajah's native trackers got on the trail of the merchant who loosed the snakes in his room, and led us through the jungle to here, on the scoundrel's tracks. They're uncanny, these native trackers—they followed a trail no one else could see!"

"But Akram Vind—where is he?" gasped Blake. "He's the chap that's at the bottom of it all! He had us brought here, because we overheard his plot with the High Priest to kill the Maharajah—"

"What's that?" interjected Sir Napier, his voice incredibly startled. "Good heavens, Blake—"

Swiftly Blake explained. He was rapidly regaining his strength now. Sir Napier's face was dark as he finished.

"Well, the villain has met his deserts!" he said in a steely tone. He told Blake of the death of Akram Vind in the snake-infested room.

"Great Scott!" breathed Blake. "Hoist with his own giddy petard!"

Baggy Trimble had been cut loose, but was still in a dead faint.

"He'll be round soon, though!" muttered Kildare. "Poor kid! He's had a bad time! First that fall from the balcony at the palace—now this!"

The struggle in the centre of the temple was almost over now.

The Snakemen had fought with mad frenzy against the Maharajah's soldiers. But they had been rounded up into one corner of the temple, and the fight was about finished.

From the steps of the altar the Maharajah stared across the incense-laden temple with shadowed eyes. He had learnt of his nephew's treachery, and it had been a terrible blow to him. But he shrugged his shoulders philosophically.

"As Heaven wills!" he muttered. He glanced at Sir Napier and Mr. Railton. "My friends, you have helped in veree great work to-night! This iss thee end of Brotherhood of thee Snake! To-night this temple shall be burnt to thee ground; and with thatt veree bad egg, Zahir-u-

Khan as dead as your great Queen Anne, we in Zundaki shall have no more trouble with thee Snakemen!"

And less than an hour later the Maharajah and his party, with Blake and Baggy Trimble, who was still sick and ill, were gathered at the edge of the clearing watching the crimson flames leap skywards from the secret temple as the fire devoured it.

Those of the Snakemen who had not perished in the struggle were standing, sullen captives, guarded by the Indian troops. If they escaped death as punishment for the human sacrifices at which they had assisted, they would, at any rate, suffer long years of imprisonment in an Indian native gaol—a prospect which was perhaps just about as bad.

The roaring flames of the burning temple cast a crimson glow on the faces of the watching throng, ringed about by the black walls of jungle.

And somewhere in that inferno of fire the body of Zahir-u-Khan, the High Priest of the Snakemen, was being destroyed with the hideous idol in whose service he had perpetrated such crimes.

The grim silence, broken only by the crackle of the flames and the faint cries of beasts in the jungle, was suddenly cut in upon by the plaintive voice of Baggy Trimble.

"I say, you know, I'm jolly peckish!"

Blake grinned. He could not help it.

It was quite evident from that remark that, despite his dreadful experiences, Baggy Trimble was pulling round and would soon be himself again!

There were wonderful celebrations at the palace of the Maharajah of Zundaki during the next few days.

The deathblow that had been dealt to the Brotherhood of the Snake was the cause of terrific rejoicing among the native villagers. And, knowing what he did of his nephew's murderous plot against him, the Maharajah did not allow the death of Akram Vind to interfere with the celebrations, which were held on a princely scale.

—And Baggy Trimble, quite recovered at last, found himself—rather to his surprise, but greatly to his gratification—the hero of the hour!

Blake, too, came in for his fair share of credit; and so did Tom Merry & Co., whose vigil on the balcony had saved the Maharajah's life, and assisted more than anything else towards bringing to an end the evil existence of the Snakemen.

Altogether, the Maharajah realised that it had been a very lucky day for him when the St. Jim's party had arrived at the palace to be his guests. And the celebrations held entirely in their honour, immediately after the celebrations of rejoicing at the end of the dreaded Brotherhood, were perhaps more lavish than anything they had struck in all their lives.

Even Baggy Trimble had enough to eat during those celebrations—so much, in fact, that he had not the slightest inclination to leave his room again in the middle of the night for a midnight snack!

It was with regrets that the St. Jim's party at last took their leave of the genial potentate who had been their host through such exciting times. And there was no doubt that the Maharajah was sorry to see them go.

"Good-bye, sars!" he beamed, when the time came for the final farewell, with a glittering fleet of Rolls-Royce cars waiting with their turbanned chauffeurs to drive his guests to the station, on their way to Jomanshore and the S 1000. "It has been jollie good time!"

And there was not a fellow in the St. Jim's party who was not more than ready to agree very heartily that it had been a "jollie good time" they had had, despite the thrills and dangers that some of them had undergone.

By nightfall the St. Jim's party were once more aboard the giant airship.

When the juniors awoke next morning, it was to find the S 1000 sailing high above the jungle, with Zundaki left far behind—off on their travels once more!

THE END.

(A great yarn this, what, chums? Don't miss "The Valley of Slaves!" next week, it's even better!)

COLOURED PICTURES OF FAMOUS FOOTBALLERS

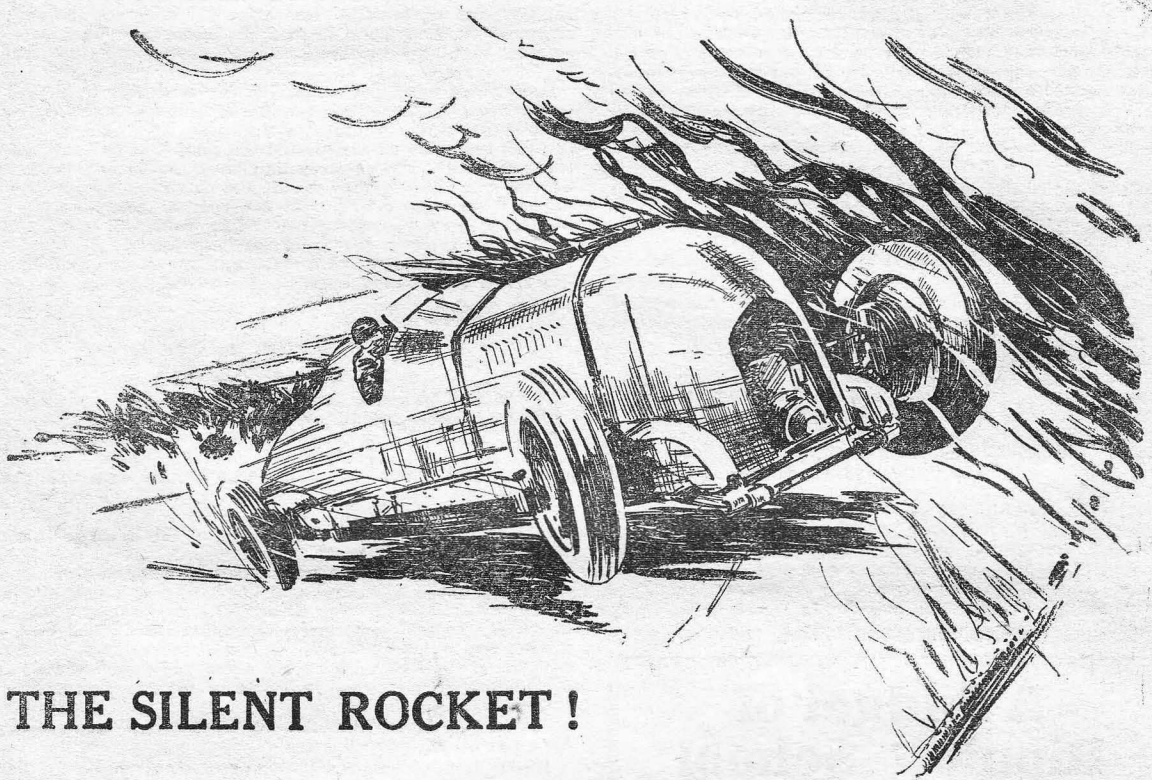
are being presented by our well-known Tuesday Companion Paper, the POPULAR. That's right! Sit up and waggle your ears, for "ere's" some news! (Excuse the pun.) You've all got a favourite footballer—several, I expect. Well, now's the chance to get a coloured picture of him IN ACTION. The great thing about these pictures is that they can be used just like cigarette cards, to collect in an album, swap with your pals, or play "fag" games with. Believe me, you're on to a great treat if you make a start with a collection of these pictures.

Another first-class attraction in the POPULAR is an easy-as-pie competition appearing in which you can choose your own prizes and HAVE 'EM BEFORE CHRISTMAS. Then you'll find SEVEN COMPLETE tales in every issue—just think of that—SEVEN TALES, and every one a winner. Oh, boy! Just hop along to your newsagent, right away, before he sells out his batch of POPULARS.—Ed.

ANOTHER GRIPPING "DICK STANFORD" YARN.

KINGS O' SPEED!

By DOUGLAS MORTON.



THE SILENT ROCKET!

CHAPTER 1.

Captured!

DICK STANFORD, making an ineffectual grab at a too-friendly mosquito, heaved himself out of the bathing-pool and stood dripping on its brink.

"This beats school hollow," he grinned boyishly to himself, as he grabbed his towel. "Plenty to do, and a jolly fine 'boss' in Cyrus J. Arkville. He's a topping chap. I wish I knew as much about motor inventions as he does. Wonder what'll happen next? His old enemy, the 'Wrecker,' must still be on the warpath somewhere."

He rubbed his wet head vigorously.

"Ouch!"

Dick stopped suddenly with an exclamation of pain. He held his towel at arm's length, and then discovered the cause of his annoyance—a pin stuck in the corner of it. And that pin had not been there when he had started bathing. There was a note attached to it. Quickly he read the missive:

"You've had one warning. It'll be death next time. Clear out.—THE WRECKER."

"The Wrecker!"

So he was on the trail again, was he? Dick glanced quickly around. Where the deuce had this note come from? Was someone moving behind that tree? Perhaps he was a fool to stand in the open.

Crash!

Dick instinctively flung himself on the ground. A roar deafened his ears as a great spout of water, ten feet high, reared itself up from the placid face of the pool. It hung in the air like a gleaming silver sword, and then descended

with a resounding crash. Part of it fell on the crouching boy, knocking the breath out of his frame for some moments. He gasped, but quickly recovered.

A very babel of noise was now going on around him. Alarm bells were shrieking their notes of warning from the racing track, and from behind the old courtyard walls which hid his employer's garages and workshops. The figures of his fellow employees were now spraying themselves out like a fan as they charged over the ground and up the slope past him to the woods beyond.

A lean, upright man pulled himself up short at Dick's feet.

"Are you hurt? What was it, sonny? See anybody?"

The words came in staccato jerks from Mr. Arkville, millionaire inventor of secret super-cars. In the American's hand was a wicked-looking automatic which he had snatched up when leaving Benton Manor, his laboratory and home, on hearing the alarm. His cigar was twisting and turning between his teeth.

Dick, feeling that leaving school at seventeen certainly held no regrets if this was an everyday adventure, silently handed his employer the mystic note, and pointed to the woods from which the bomb must have been thrown.

Arkville quickly read the missive.

"Gee! He's back again! Not satisfied with his last hiding—eh?"

He looked at the fringe of trees which edged the woods, and into which his men were now disappearing in their search.

"Are you hurt?" he asked again.

THE CAR THAT MAKES NO SOUND!

Amazing invention of millionaire stolen by the "Wrecker"!

"Not a bit, sir."

"You're not quitting on this, are you?" Arkville went on, tapping the note he held in his hand and looking keenly at his young companion.

"Just let me get my hands on the blighter that threw that bomb, sir, and then you'll know!" And a broad grin spread over Dick's face as he answered.

"That's the stuff! Grab your shoes! We'll try and dig that tough out!"

Dick quickly slipped on his footgear and raced alongside his employer. The taciturn man seldom wasted words, and he jerked out as they ran:

"He's after the Silent Rocket. Finished to-day."

The Silent Rocket! My hat, thought Dick! If the Wrecker gets that wonder car he'll have a snip. For the Silent Rocket represented months of hard work, concentration and organisation on perfecting the first silent engine ever constructed. Arkville invented for the sheer love of the thing, and not for money; but everybody knew the enormous possibilities of the invention, and the terror it would inspire if it fell into the wrong hands.

Such thoughts fairly raced through Dick's brain as he tore up the slope to the woods, eager for the fray. The air seemed filled with shouts.

"Hi, over here!"

"No, they went t'other way!"

"I tell you—"

Arkville's mechanics were beginning to get too excited for his liking, and his voice, crisp and clear-cut, rang out on the air like a knife.

"Quit that row!"

Silence immediately ensued.

"Mold!"

The stocky little Yorkshire foreman ran immediately to the American's side.

"Seen any of the guys?"

"No, sir," came the reply. "I think they must have gone deeper in."

"Well, fan out—all of you! Get in after 'em, and cut the noise!"

Silently, but trembling with excitement, Dick followed the millionaire into the mysterious depths of the woods. The air above them darkened as the tree tops closed over their heads. They seemed in another world—a world of

sinister and menacing evil. To the boy's vivid imagination every bush held a pair of hostile eyes, every tree hid an enemy form. His nerves were steeled to meet any attack, and his wiry body was tense and strung up to the highest pitch.

Suddenly he stopped dead in his tracks as the faint crack of a trodden twig came to his ears.

"What is it, sonny?"

Arkville's whisper was low and shot out of the corner of his mouth as he clenched his now unlit cigar.

"They're behind us, I think, sir."

Slowly, and with infinite caution, the American turned his body on the axis of his feet. Dick, doing likewise, strained his eyes back in the direction they had come. Silence; nothing else. Yet he felt they were being watched by unseen eyes.

Dick would have given anything for something to happen—something to break this terrible stillness, this feeling of impotency. But nothing was stirring. The men nearest to them had gone on ahead, and the wood was still mysterious and dark—as mysterious and dark as the two masked figures which slowly rose out of the earth behind the boy.

The woods awoke to life at the roar of Arkville's automatic. The trees seemed alive and the echoes of shouts and cries rang through the air again and again. Dick's fist shot out instinctively, but a crashing blow on his head sent him down and he only knew blackness and oblivion.

CHAPTER 2.

The Masked Gaoler!

WHEN Dick next was able to take an active interest in his surroundings he found that he was lying on an earthen floor. His wrists were bound and he set his teeth as he turned on his side, for his head was spinning like a tectotum; and it hurt him like the dicken's.

"What a chump I was to let 'em sandbag me like that! I must be getting careless. Heigh-ho, for liberty. Let's have a shot at it, anyway."

With that resolution made and his head seeming now more firmly set on his shoulders and not acting so much like a merry-go-round, Dick strained carefully at the thongs which bound his wrists. But they had evidently been tied by an expert, for nothing he could do would move them. So he cast round for something to cut them with. But the floor of the strongly-built shed in which he lay was barren even of a new pin.

"H'm!" he murmured. "The Wrecker is a downy bird. He's not taking any chances."

He lay back on the floor to conserve his strength, for the walls and door were too stoutly built for him to attempt them at present. Someone would turn up, that he was sure, even if only to twit him.

It must have been wearing on to noon when Dick heard footsteps approaching. Soon a figure stood by him, and, through his eyelashes, he peered cautiously at his visitor. He was a portly-looking customer, somehow vaguely familiar to the boy, and beneath the black mask was a loose mouth. Perhaps this chap could be persuaded—at any rate, it was worth trying.

To Dick, to plan was to act. Quickly assuming a weary attitude, he moaned slightly.

"Waking up, eh?" his visitor queried in a throaty voice.

Dick opened one eye and quickly shut it again. Another moan escaped his lips.

"Feeling pretty groggy, eh?"

"So would you," Dick muttered in a weak voice, "if you had these beastly tight bonds on."

"Ho! Tight, are they? I put 'em on myself, so they ought to be," laughed the man.

"Well, give me a chance to ease my wrists. You're a big, hefty fellow. Are you afraid of me?"

"Afraid of you!" jeered the man. "No! Nor a dozen like you."

"Go on, then. Be a sportsman. You aren't the Wrecker, are you?"

"Never mind who I am," and the man raised his fist as he answered.

"Oh, all right," Dick said, again with weakness in his voice. He mustn't rouse the chap's ire whoever he was. He saw that the man was hesitating, so added:

"You wouldn't like to lie here like a trussed fowl, would you?"

There was no reply, but the man, with a sudden movement of impatience, went down on his knees.

"Turn round," came the order.

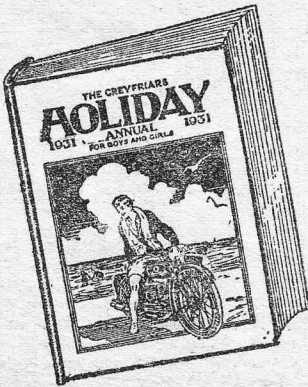
Dick squirmed on to his side.

"No monkey tricks, now!"

The gaoler had evidently resented the sneer that he might

A Budget of Ripping School Yarns

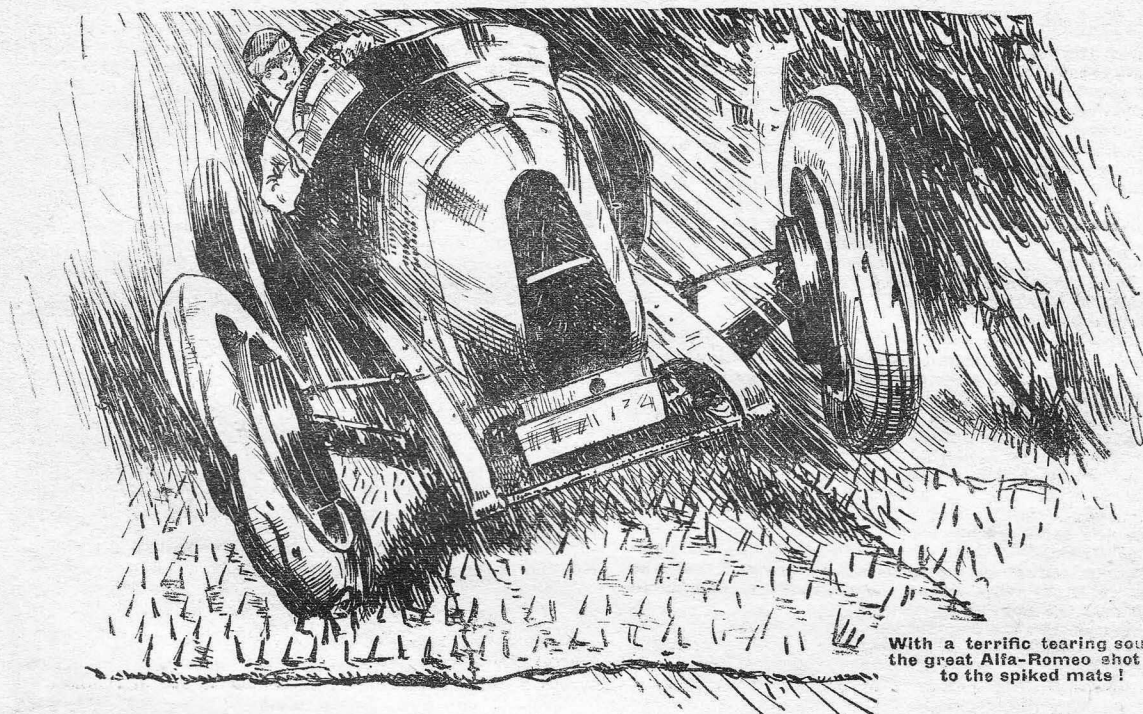
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With a terrific tearing sound the great Alfa-Romeo shot on to the spiked mats!

be afraid of a boy, for Dick felt the knots at his wrists slacken, and the thongs fall away. He brought his aching arms round to the front of him and quietly massaged his hands.

"Great Scott! But it's good to do that," he muttered. The man was now standing over him, watching him carefully—too carefully for Dick's liking. Whilst strength gradually returned to his arms he tried to glean some information.

"What have you got me here for?" he asked.

"You know just as well as I do. You're a menace to us."

Dick smiled at this.

"Go on. Smile if you like. You'll smile the other side of your face before we've done with you! We'll have that millionaire boss of yours on his knees soon. And we'll get the Silent Rocket. Think you can stand against us?"

"Why, of course not," Dick readily agreed. Anything to keep this fellow in a good humour. The boy looked up at him trying to read his covered face, to see how far he could go. He must get out of here and that jolly quickly. He cautiously drew up his right foot under him, watching the man like a hawk.

Suddenly, from the far distance, came the dull roar of a powerful car. Thundering stars! That was one of the Bentley's on the racing track. The shed he was in must be in the woods near the workshops, Dick reasoned. It seemed like home to hear that steady, throaty song from the roaring exhausts.

The man, at the noise, had stiffened and now stood in an attitude of tenseness. Dick thought rapidly. His very fate depended on his next move. His opponent's weak point—that was what he must aim at. His right foot was now in a position for him to spring, but his wrists had not quite recovered their use.

The man, undecided for one brief second, half-turned his head away from Dick.

It was now or never!

Dick, with one lightning leap, thrust his head at the man's middle. Down came the fellow's hands automatically to guard it, but Dick changed his action half-way. With a rapid movement, using his right foot as a powerful spring-board, he brought his head in direct contact with the man's protruding chin.

Crack!

Back went the masked villain's head with a terrible jerk and Dick fell forward with his head in a whirl. The blow had not been sufficient to lay the big man out, but Dick, conquering his dizziness with a tremendous effort of will, had just enough time to spring for the open door before his gaoler could recover. He was through it in a second, and, like a young greyhound, he charged through the bushes outside.

Zipp!pp!

Spurts of flame accompanied the tearing viciousness of the missiles as they cut the leaves around Dick's head, but he

was free, crashing and floundering through thick undergrowth towards the friendly roar of the distant Bentley!

CHAPTER 3.

The Flaming Track!

MR. ARKVILLE, cursing the buried root that had tripped him in those woods and had prevented him from effecting the rescue of Dick Stanford, was at his desk in his library answering the telephone.

"This is the Wrecker's ultimatum!" were the words he heard, and his eyes blazed as the name of his relentless enemy came to his ears.

"We've got young Stanford," the voice went on, "where you can't find him! And I want the Silent Rocket!"

"You'll never get that!" Arkville snapped into the telephone.

"Oh, won't we?" came the calm and maddening reply. "We'll have that and all your other inventions before long!"

Arkville's ears just caught the low, sardonic laugh that accompanied the words, and he realised that these blackguards had Dick in their power. He mustn't let anything stand in his way to release the boy, and he waited tensely for the next words.

"I've got a very good customer for the Silent Rocket," the cool voice went on. "It's worth a million to me, and I mean to have it! You've certainly created a wonder! The first silent engine ever produced! I congratulate you! But to business!" The voice took on a menacing note. "You will take a Bentley—your little foreman can drive it—and in the Silent Rocket, which you must drive, you must put the plans of your engine. Both cars must leave your garages at noon precisely, and go round the racing-track until you see a white flag appear. Halt then! You two must be absolutely alone. I'll release Stanford after that. If you don't obey, then the boy—"

The voice left the terrible threat unspoken.

"If I ever lay hands on your tough hide—" began Arkville, beside himself with righteous rage.

"You never will!" the mocking voice replied.

Click!

Silence.

The inventor fell back in his chair. He'd have to obey. He knew that. Dick Stanford was more to him than any car.

As the clock in the courtyard was striking twelve the mechanics from the many workshops and garages of Benton Manor were clustered round the huge Bentley as it stood on the turntable, its engine roaring its tremendous power

and its noise reverberating from the high walls which surrounded the place.

The men were growling among themselves, for Dick was a general favourite, his light-hearted boyishness and clever driving appealing to them all. But the boss had decreed that they were to hold their hands, and, in his own words: "What he said, went!"

As the Bentley struck across for the old drawbridge which led to the three-mile-long oval racing-track outside, she was followed by the wondrous "hush-hush" car, the Silent Rocket. Beautifully stream-lined, painted a radiant silver which dazzled the eyes in the bright sunlight, her bonnet—low, flat, and long—covering her immense engine, with her lines picked out in bright gold, she was a car fit for the gods. Into the small, green-lined seat Mr. Arkville had clambered, and on the mechanic's driving-seat at his side lay a bulky packet.

The American's face was set in a cold mask. No one could read his thoughts or tell his fears. He laid his capable hands on the low-raked steering-wheel, and glanced but once at the long, tapering fin of his beloved Silent Rocket.

Something might happen yet to save that powerful machine, and Arkville pinned his faith on the hundredth chance.

The last stroke of the midday hour boomed forth as the super-car slid forward like a breath of wind in the wake of the roaring Bentley. Not a sound was to be heard from her save the faint swish-swish of her tyres, and even that would be eliminated later. She passed under the old porticulis, a reminiscence of the times when Benton Manor was a mediæval stronghold, across the drawbridge, and on to the track by the guiding arrows.

The note of the Bentley deepened to a thunderous boom as Mold opened her out and shot ahead. The Silent Rocket, seemingly driven by a mystic power, followed her faultlessly like a guarding shadow.

The two gleaming monsters tore round the track like demons possessed. Four times they circled at terrific speed. On the fifth lap, away ahead of him on the rearing embankment, Arkville detected the gleam of the white flag; and his heart sank as he groaned.

The tyres of the Bentley in front of him screamed their protest at Mold's brakes, and both cars came to a reluctant standstill at the edge of the embankment.

"Put up your hands!" a voice shouted.

Slowly Arkville and Mold obeyed.

"Get out and turn round."

There was nothing for it but to obey the order. Helplessly they stood on the track as a figure stepped out from the undergrowth and slid its hands over them for concealed weapons.

Crack! Crack!

Two shots rang out, and the front tyres of the Bentley collapsed in ruins. It was all over in a few seconds, and they saw the Silent Rocket speeding away from them down the track. The Wrecker had won!

But had he? For a terrific and awe-inspiring miracle appeared before their astonished eyes. On the track in front of the flying super-car had arisen a terrible flame, bright and titanic in its fierce, yellow intensity.

"The testing device, sir! Someone's turned it on!"

Mold, shouting at the top of his voice, made Arkville realise that perhaps the hundredth chance had turned up. For the flame they saw was from the millionaire's device for super-heating part of his racing-track to test his tyre inventions. Someone must have raised the pipe, and the wicked-looking flame seemed an almost impassable barrier in the way of the Silent Rocket.

They saw the driver brake down in his mad career—saw him hesitate. Next, a figure clad in a bathing costume sprang up from the side of the track right in front of the flying car.

"Dick!" yelled the American.

"It's the youngster, right enough, sir!" shouted Mold, in admiration. "He turned on the flame!"

They saw the masked figure at the wheel of the super-car hesitate once more, and that hesitation was his fatal mistake for with one flying leap Dick landed on the car just behind the seat. The moment was tense with apprehension for the watchers. Would the boy be able to hold on—to clutch and tear at that shining, hurtling body, its surface as smooth as a plate-glass window?

Arkville afterwards said that he never drew breath while he waited. Then a shout of joy broke from Mold.

"He's there, sir!"

They saw the boy, scratching and clawing at the back of the seat, his legs dangling helplessly over the side, draw himself up till he was but a swaying figure overtopping the thieving driver.

A flash of an arm from the seat, a hand upraised grip—

ping a bundle of papers, a flying body, and—Dick now a tumbling mass in a bush by the track side—the watchers saw the Silent Rocket shoot out of their view into the fiery furnace at a terrific speed and vanish from their sight.

CHAPTER 4.

The Spiked Mats!

IT was a breathless tale that Dick had to relate to Arkville as they sat in the latter's library after leaving the track. The story of his escape was the first thing he told, and after that was finished he said:

"I know something was up when I heard the roar of the Bentley. I made straight for the track, and saw you and Mold in the distance being held up by that fellow's gun. When he sprang into the Silent Rocket I remembered the track super-heater. It certainly put the wind up him," and the boy grinned at the recollection.

At that moment a footman entered with refreshments on a tray.

"Where's Hoult?" asked the inventor.

"I don't know, sir. He must be out," was the servant's reply.

Hoult! Dick started as he remembered his instinctive dislike for Arkville's butler, a fellow-countryman of the inventor's, and one whom the millionaire had helped in days gone by.

"Never mind," came the crisp tones, and the footman left the room at his employer's words.

"My hat! I'm hungry," laughed Dick, as he helped himself to sandwiches, quickly putting the missing butler out of his mind.

"You've had some exercise this morning—I'll tell the world you have. Sure you're not hurt any?" queried Arkville in his usual clipped tones.

"Not a bit, sir. Lucky that blighter was steering all over the shop when he shoved off."

"Yes. But get right ahead with your story."

"I lifted up the pipe," the boy continued, "and shot the flame over instead of under the track."

"It certainly made the big boy hesitate some," was the inventor's calm comment.

"That was just what I wanted, sir," the boy cried. "It gave me the chance to leap at him. And tucked away behind him when I did manage to claw on to the seat were the plans. I didn't know what they were at the time, but I grabbed them on the off-chance."

"I've certainly got to hand it to you, Dick. Lucky the car was by the side of the track when you heaved off. You fell light, eh?"

"Rather, sir! Into a gorse bush—in my bathing costume!" laughed the boy wryly.

"Guess that was better than a square yard of concrete, anyway," the American commented grimly. "And the Silent Rocket's gone."

"What about the flames, sir?" asked Dick.

"Oh, they're tough guys, those fellows. They've only got a free hair singe at that speed. But they haven't got the plans, thanks to you—"

"But the car, sir?"

"Guess she's hidden somewhere. The only line I've got was from the traffic cop on the Bath road. But he couldn't hold her on his little top speed-iron."

Even at this moment there was a note of admiration for his vanished car in the American's voice.

"What will they do, do you think, sir?" queried Dick.

"They'll lay low for to-day, then get her to London to try and copy her. A few of 'em will need hair-restorers before they've finished panning out her works. We must get her back! I hate to think of my invention in some Dago bombing plane over little London town."

"That shed, sir!" exclaimed the boy.

"No—they'll have quitted there, I guess."

"But perhaps they'll still use it, and think we've imagined they've gone," the boy insisted. "The double bluff, sir," he added by way of further explanation.

"I don't know, sonny—"

"Let me try, sir," the boy broke out eagerly. "I'll get the Silent Rocket back somehow!"

"A long shot. Still, that goes well with me. Take any car you want."

Suddenly they both started from their chairs as an ear-splitting shriek of laughter rang out through the room. What in the name of goodness was the matter?

It was repeated, and they whipped round to face the loud-speaker, and remained rooted to the spot as a sardonic voice shouted:

"You'll never get the Silent Rocket!"

"That must be the Wrecker—here in my house!" exclaimed Arkville.

He dashed to the door, followed by Dick. In the corridor outside they met the butler, Hout, walking with the cats-step which Dick always hated.

"Say!" Arkville cried to him. "Who's around here? Some guy's yelling through the loud-speaker."

For one tense moment Dick suspected the butler, but his suspicions vanished when Arkville suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, of course—that was the voice of the big Swede, Kleinberg. I fired him last week."

Kleinberg! Dick now knew who was his masked gaoler in the shed.

"Get a line on him, sonny. He must be one of the gang. Perhaps he's the Wrecker!"

"Right you are, sir. I'll get to the shed now and see if anyone's there."

Losing no time after his last words, Dick dashed off for the courtyard. Choosing a huge Alfa-Romeo, a powerful "bus," he was soon at its wheel tearing along. He smashed through the open gateway of Benton Park, braked hard, skidded in a spectacular manner, and was soon racing along the Bath road, shouting for joy as he always did when driving such topping cars.

A quick, right-hand turn brought him to the side-road he wanted. It was from the opposite side of Benton Park that he intended to tackle the thieves' headquarters. Soon he had discovered the path that must lead to the shed, and he trod it cautiously.

But the lair was unoccupied.

"Well, the boss was right, after all," Dick mused to himself. "I expect Kleinberg was watching or listening to us in the library. A 'look-see' won't do any harm, however."

He gingerly pushed open the door of the shed. The interior was quite empty. He searched the floor for clues, holding himself taut and ready for instant action should it be necessary.

He was just on the point of leaving empty-handed when a dirty scrap of paper in a far corner caught his eye. Picking it up, it proved to be a business-card—at least, half of it.

"Senson's Garage. Cars for sa—"

That was all, but to Dick, with his intimate knowledge of the countryside, he knew this garage to be one in a little village by the Thames, away from everywhere, and he set out for it right away.

But he was never destined to reach it in the Alfa-Romeo, for he had been spotted, and as he shot a corner he fairly stood on his brakes in a tremendous effort to pull up. For right across the road in front of him were three spiked mats, their fiendish steel points gleaming wickedly in the sunlight.

There was a terrific tearing sound like a thousand ribbons being wrenched to pieces by a giant hand, and the great bulk of the Alfa-Romeo gave a terrible lurch; and, on useless, clanking rims, with the steering-wheel nearly wrenched out of Dick's hands, she came to a sickening halt and remained helpless—the search, for the moment, foiled.

CHAPTER 5.

The Hanging Crane.

CROUCHED on the top of the crane of a breakdown lorry that evening, Dick awaited the Silent Rocket near to Senson's Garage. They were off the little side road under a clump of trees, and Arkville was listening through the earphones of his "sound-detector." The "hush-hush" car would be moved that night, Dick was sure, and it would be like trying to find a nigger in a coal-cellar without the aid of the American's latest invention, the "sound-detector."

By its aid they would detect the swish of the tyres, for otherwise, the Silent Rocket could have passed by on the road, and they would have been none the wiser.

They had decided in favour of the lorry in preference to one of Arkville's well-known racing cars; to try and avoid suspicion. The incident of the spiked mats had convinced Dick that he was on the right track, and that no time would be lost in moving the Silent Rocket.

It was an eerie wait there as the evening shadows fell. They watched the lights in the distant cottage windows wink out one by one. A clock, far away, sent out its chimes to the sleeping world. When night eventually came, it was black, moonless and menacing.



Dick let the heavy hauling block crash directly on to the Swede's head!

Twelve o'clock.

The midnight hour hung heavy with foreboding for Dick. Had he made a mistake? Was the Silent Rocket in this district at all, or was it miles away? He knew that Arkville trusted implicitly to his instinct.

Suddenly he stiffened, for a light touch had fallen on his arm.

"It's coming!" was the magnetic whisper he got from Arkville.

His blood raced with excitement.

"He's crawling. Doesn't want to smash her up. Can you see any lights, sonny?"

Dick looked in the direction of the road, as the inventor spoke.

"No, sir," was his tense reply.

"H'm! Taking the risk till he makes his getaway, I guess."

With taut nerves Dick waited.

"He's passed," came the low whisper, as Arkville caught the faint sounds through his secret invention.

"He'll make for London by the side roads, I think, sir," Dick replied.

"We'll have to take the risk of the wrong track. But we'll grab him before he hits the high-road. Guess we'll get on the trail right now."

As quietly as possible Dick swung the lorry across the grass. The machine was fitted with double tyres and a fairly silent engine, but even then some noise could not be avoided. But that was all in the game.

"We'll get a line on him soon, I guess," said Arkville.

"Then he'll just figure out that we are on the road on business—I'll certainly say we are. Yes, sir." He gave a grim chuckle.

Dick peered ahead, and at last his keen young eyes were rewarded by the sight of a blur on the road.

"He's there, sir!" he whispered, his voice trembling with excitement. Suddenly a thought struck him, and he pulled up.

"Will you take over, sir?"

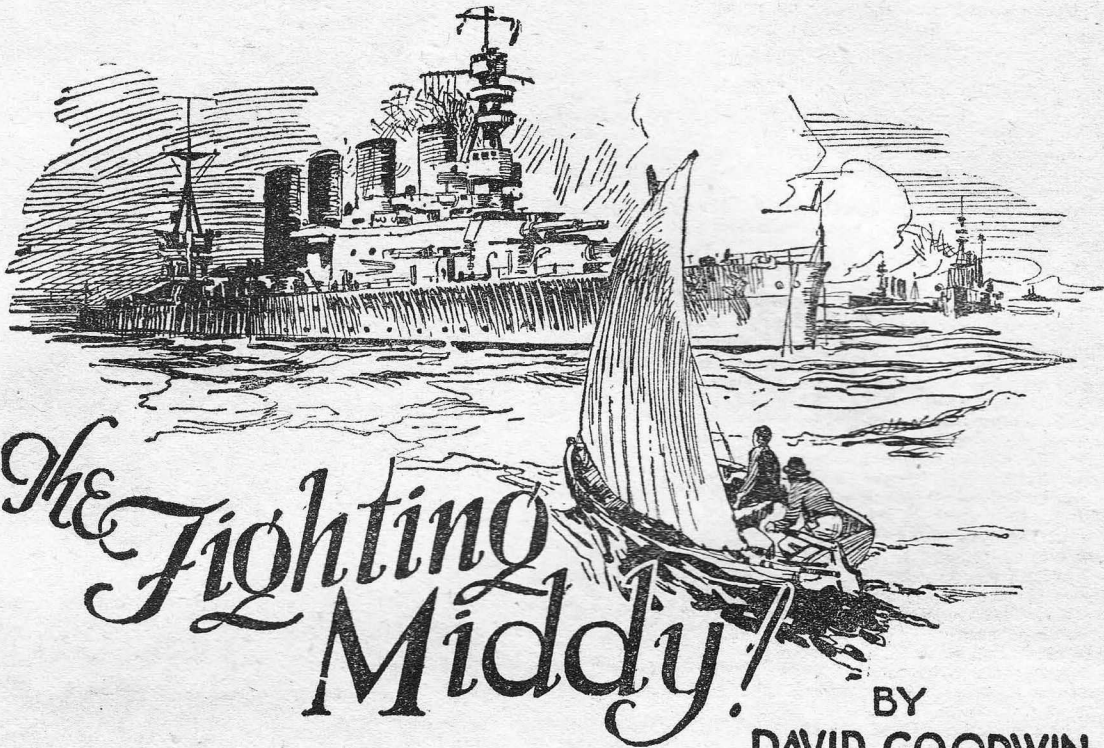
At the words Arkville glanced keenly at the boy's face, dim in the darkness.

"Right, sonny! What you say goes on this trip."

Once more they were on their way, Dick directing his companion on the intricate cross-country route.

(Continued on page 28.)

OUR RIPPING SERIAL OF THE ROYAL NAVY.



BY
DAVID GOODWIN

In the Hands of the Enemy!

THE prisoner looked much altered, but to Ned, at least, there was no mistaking his eyes; and he turned them on the midddy for a moment with a very evil glance. He was in the charge of an officer and escort of military police, and as he was marched down the steps, Ned saw that he had irons on his wrists—not handcuffs, but Service irons with long links between the wrist-pieces.

Ned's Marines took the prisoner in charge, and at once placed him between the two privates on the quarter seat.

Ned glanced at the prisoner as the pinnace went speeding seaward, and saw that the man's eyes were fixed on him with a strange intensity. The sham Private Beckett, alias Dimitri, opened his lips.

"You think you're going to try me—eh? You and your skipper? Well, there's no harm in thinking," he said rather insolently. "I'm just a Marine private—"

"That'll do!" said the corporal sharply. "Silence, d'ye hear!"

The man made no reply, nor did Ned answer him. As they cleared the harbour and came well out into the open again, Ned heard a slight ejaculation from Brinkman, and turned his head.

The same craft they had seen on the way shoreward, the long, black steam-yacht, hove suddenly in sight again, running out at full speed from among some hulks that lay at anchor off the shore.

"What in thunder is she about?" said Ned, and then he gave a shout. "Look out, coxswain—she'll be into us! Hard a-starboard!"

There was a warning cry from the pinnace, and her helm was put hard over; but nothing could save her from the sudden, swerving rush of the steam-yacht.

There was a rending crash as the yacht's sharp bow cut clean into the pinnace amidships, and even as the short bowsprit came overhead, the spy gave a sudden leap upwards and caught at the chain-sheave with his manacled hands, a sailor leaning over the yacht's bulwark gripping him as he sprang.

"Stop him! Shoot him!" yelled Ned, his first thought for the prisoner in his charge. But it was all over in a flash. The words were hardly out of his mouth when the

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pinnace was cut down amid a cloud of steam, and the black waters closed over Ned as the yacht surged on her way at full speed.

Ned heard the cries of the pinnace's crew that were instantly drowned by the roar of the water in his ears as he went under, and he found himself struggling in the choking blackness. He had been flung fully six feet clear of the wrecked pinnace as the steam-yacht drove over her, and he went down with a heavy plunge.

In spite of the danger, one thought shot through Ned's brain above all others—this was no accident. The steam-yacht, in that one brief glimpse, had shown her purpose; she was there for the sole purpose of attempting to rescue the spy.

The sight of the man springing upwards in the very nick of time had photographed itself upon Ned's brain, almost with a flash of admiration for the fellow's daring. A moment afterwards, and Ned had quite enough to do to look after himself.

"They'll leave us to drown," thought Ned, as he shot to the surface amid a hissing lather of froth that surged all round him.

RUN DOWN BY A STEAM YACHT!

**The first pinnace of the Victorious,
with Ned Hardy in charge, cut
clean in two!**

It was like swimming in soda-water, and right against him was the smooth, black wall of the steam-yacht's side, sweeping swiftly past.

In a few moments she would have gone by, and it was odds on Ned being cut to pieces by the propeller as her stern swerved across him.

Something smote him sharply on the head, and he made a blind grab at it. It was a

rope trailing overboard from the yacht's side—a white cotton rope that belonged to her gangway-ladder, and ought to have been coiled up on deck. Little enough Ned cared what it was or where it came from. He hung on to it like grim death, and was towed along bodily with his shoulders well above water.

He was so dazed with the sudden shock that he hardly knew what was happening to him. He seemed to hear voices shouting and to catch a glimpse of men swimming in a black welter of sea, but it was gone again in a flash as the steamer swept ahead. But one single idea fixed itself in Ned's brain amid the turmoil. The prisoner for whom he was responsible was on that boat. The spy was

escaping, and Ned must stick to the vessel at all risks.

What a mad thing he was doing the boy hardly guessed.

"Are we all clear of 'em? Pull that rope in astern, can't you?" cried a harsh voice through the darkness from the yacht's bridge.

He was answered in a guttural foreign tongue, and two men came aft to the gangway-head. Ned, who felt his grip relaxing, caught a glimpse of their heads close above, showing against the cloudy sky, and heard an unmistakable English oath.

"Here's one o' the beggars hangin' on to it!"

"Down with him! Give me der long boathook!" exclaimed the other man.

"Hold on there! Let's see!" cried the rough voice from the bridge, and a man came hurrying aft. "Haul him aboard, you fools; it's the snottie in charge of the pinnace. I reckon we want him!"

"Get him! He has seen too much, and he might get ashore!" said the other.

Ned felt himself dragged upwards. At that moment he felt a strong impulse to let go and take his chance in the water; but before he could do so, a boathook was stuck into his clothes, and in a few moments he was hauled, gasping and dazed, on to the yacht's deck. The moment he was aboard, one of the crew pinned him down and put a knee on his chest.

He looked up at his captors, whose faces were lit up dimly by the glow from the engine-room hatch. They were peering at him keenly and threateningly. One, evidently the skipper, and the owner of the raucous voice, wore a scrubby black moustache, and was dressed in yachting uniform; another was a regular deck-hand in jersey and stocking-cap; and the third a sharp, weasel-faced foreigner whose voice when he spoke was unmistakably Russian.

"You drunken swabs!" panted Ned Hardy. "You've run down my pinnace, and left her crew to drown! You'll get your deserts for it, I promise you!"

"Hear the little rooster crowin'?" said the deck-hand, with a laugh. "Wot is he—a real live horficer, or an admiral, or what?"

They were interrupted by an angry voice from the foot of the bridge, where two or three men were gathered together.

"Alexis! Jakoff! Can't any of you get these cursed things off for me?"

"Haven't any of you a key, you swabs?" called back the skipper.

"Dere's not a key on de ship," said a sailor in broken English.

"What infernal bad management!"

"You'll have to wear them till the engineer has time to cut them off with a cold chisel," said the skipper. "You ought to think yourself lucky to be out of it at all, Pete!"

"Oh, I'm all that! Don't you make any mistake about it, lads!" was the answer; and striding aft along the deck came Dimitri himself, the rescued spy—Ned's old enemy of the train and the guard-room.

"Who have you got there?" he exclaimed, coming up to the group, and his eyes met Ned's. "Why," he cried, "it's the young pup himself! Let me get next him!"

The spy's face lit up with hatred, and he made a swift movement towards Ned with his iron-shod hands raised to strike. But the yacht's skipper thrust an arm between, and held him back.

"Steady, Pete! Wait a bit for that," he said, in a voice like a saw. "Is this here the young 'un who's given so much trouble?"

"Yes, don't I tell you!" cried Dimitri. "It's Ralph Hardy's brother—the cub Jakoff and I stopped in the train! It was he who gave me away on board the Victorious. I could have carried the job through but for him!"

"Ay, it's him!" said the Russian sailor to the skipper. "Much better we put six inches of iron in him and drop him over de side again!"

"So says I!" growled the deck-hand, for they all seemed to be allowed to air their opinions as they pleased.

"He's given us work enough. Here's the riskiest job o' the lot we've just had to tackle, gettin' Pete out o' the soup. All through this young son of a dog! Make a job of him while you're about it!"

"Not here, anyhow!" returned the skipper sharply. "You pack of fools! Wait till we get to sea. Some of us risk our necks often enough without doing it for nothing."

"I don't believe in waitin'!" growled the deck-hand.

"Shut your head!" said Dimitri, getting control of his temper, but with an ugly side-glance at Ned. "Sam's right. Better get clear of the Solent. Are you on your course, skipper?"

The skipper peered astern through the darkness, and nodded. He hailed the bridge.

"Keep her going wide of Calshot, Jake!"

"Ay, ay! She goes so," came back the answer from the wheel.

"Tell 'em to ginger her up a bit more in the engine-room! We've got to get all we can out o' her!"

"We was goin' to der last ounce, captain. We make good sixteen knots," came the reply; and the skipper nodded, as he turned to the others. The yacht was racing along under forced draught, and the beat of her engines made her quiver from stem to stern.

"Now, about this pup," said the skipper. "You say he's the one that spotted you on the ship?"

"Yes; an' nobody'll make me believe he did it on his own!" growled Dimitri. "He must have got the wire from that brother of his, or else from old Elking. It was Ralph Hardy who got on to my track and found I was aboard the ship."

"He wouldn't be likely to trust a kid like this with the news," said the skipper. "Here, put a piece of line round his wrists, and heave him below into the sail-room. We can't have him on deck, an' I've got the ship to attend to. We want to get out o' this quick!"

"Search him first, before you put him below," said Dimitri. "No saying what there is on him."

Ned, who was gradually getting back his wind, made a sudden violent effort to free himself. But his captors were too many for him, and he was dashed to the deck and held down while the skipper, who went by the familiar name of Sam, went through his pockets with the deftness of an expert.

"Purse—coins—keys," said the skipper. "Here's two letters." He glanced through them quickly by the light of a deck-lantern as the two sailors bound Ned's wrists behind his back with spun yarn. "One's from his father."

"He'll soon have a son the less!" growled Dimitri viciously. "What's the other? I know that handwriting! It's Ralph Hardy's! Give it here!"

"You beast! You thieving swabs, give that here!" cried Ned, nearly frantic. "That's my letter! You're a plucky lot, aren't you?"

"Gag the pup, and keep him quiet!" said the skipper, and a ball of tarry spun-yarn was thrust into the middy's mouth. But the tar was not a hundredth part as bitter to him as the thought that he had failed in his trust to his brother. Ralph had ordered him above all things to burn that letter at the first opportunity. But, whatever the reason, Ned had not done so. Perhaps he had forgotten, or had not had the chance to do it secretly on the ship. At any rate, he had carried it with him ever since, and now it was in the hands of the enemy. Dimitri read through it swiftly.

"This is the letter that warned the boy I was on the ship!" he cried. "This piece of paper let me in for the whole thing!"

"An' let us in for riskin' our necks to get you out of your trial," said the skipper sourly, "for the sake of the lot of us, an' the chief's orders."

"What d'ye mean?" cried the spy, turning on him savagely. "D'you want me to start on you, Sam? Why don't you say right out that you were told to get me out of it for fear I'd split on the others?"

"I don't say that, nor anything else!" said the skipper roughly. "Belay this jaw, an' let's attend to business. Here, you two, put that cub in the sail-room! Don't you hear me?"

Ned was forthwith dragged below down the companion-hatch, along a narrow alleyway, and through a door into a sail-room that was little more than a locker with a porthole in the side. He was thrown down on a heap of rolled-up sails, the door was slammed and locked, and his gaolers returned on deck.

(Ned is in the hands of a Russian spies. They're a desperate crowd who stop at nothing. Can he escape? Don't miss next week's great instalment.)

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 set upon by four roughs. In the ensuing fight Jinks' uniform is ruined and he is forced to buy a second-hand one from a wily tailor who charges him twenty pounds. Jinks pay two pounds, but fails to pay the rest. In consequence of this the tailor sneaks aboard the Victorious only to be chased off again by Smiler, Ned's bull-dog. Shortly after this Ned is ordered to proceed to Portsmouth to collect Dimitri, the spy who had so nearly ruined him.

(Now read on.)

THE SILENT ROCKET!

(Continued from page 25.)

Then he decided his plan of action.

"I am going to climb on to the crane, sir. I can perhaps dazzle him with the searchlight. We mustn't arouse his suspicions too soon or he'll be off like a shot, and we'll never catch him in this old ark."

"Right!" came the prompt reply. "I'll try and get ahead of him and hold the road. Give two knocks on the wagen-side for more gas and one to slacken up. Get right to it, boy."

From his vantage point on the crane, Dick saw that the side lights were now on the big super-car, which lay low under him as Arkville tore past it. A hunched-up figure was crouched over the wheel, and in his excitement, Dick peered over the side. Then he drew sharply back, for the figure at that moment looked up from the Silent Rocket, now camouflaged a dull grey.

It was Kleinberg! And the boy knew that he had been recognised. He slapped at the side of the lorry for more speed. They must keep ahead of the Silent Rocket! The Swede could not turn that huge car in these narrow lanes, and his only hope was to shoot past them at some vantage point if Arkville couldn't hold the road. Well, it was best to let him!

As if his thoughts had telegraphed themselves with lightning precision to the mind of the Swede, Dick saw the Silent Rocket shoot forward under its terrific power.

Quick as a flash Dick clambered out to the end of the massive crane which hung over the back of the lorry, taking with him the switch of the revolving spot-light. He

switched it on, and he saw Arkville glance back at him. The American's magnetic brain took in the boy's manoeuvre in an instant, and he began to draw cautiously into the side to lure the Swede into the trap Dick was setting for him.

Hurting along through the night, the two machines tore along like maddened monsters. Dick wrenched the chain of the crane from its fastening as he saw Kleinberg swing over his wheel to flash past the lorry.

Judging things to a nicety, but with his heart in his mouth, Dick leant down and flashed the searchlight full into the Swede's face. Straightening himself up to his full height, he raised the chain, with its heavy hauling block, high into the air, and let it crash directly on to the Swede's head as the miscreant, in his mad career, drew alongside.

There was a guttural shout, and Dick leapt—full into the mechanic's seat of the Silent Rocket. Clutching and clanging as he had done that morning, he hung on like grim death to the figure now sagging over the wheel. He felt the super-car give a great heave as it took the grass, and tearing and fighting its way like a shell from a gun, it ended its lurching run, still luckily on four wheels, in the gorse-bushes of the common-land fringing the roadside.

Dick stretched his arms with boyish delight—and at that moment Kleinberg leapt over the side of the car and disappeared.

"Me and the Wrecker'll get you yet!" came the guttural snarl to the boy's ears as the man vanished into the blackness.

THE END.

(Dick Stanford has won through again, but the Wrecker's getting pretty desperate. Will he succeed in next week's great yarn of "Kings o' Speed"?)

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