

TRIUMPH 2^d
Every Tuesday

"FIGHTER PLANES OF BRITAIN" SIXTEEN-PAGE
BOOK INSIDE

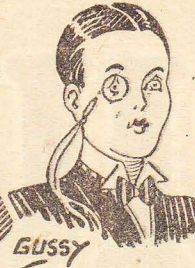
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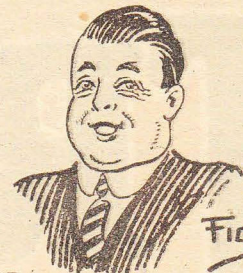


CROOKE'S DILEMMA! A BURNING BARN PUTS HIM ON THE SPOT. THRILLS IN THIS FINE YARN OF—

The Boys of ST JIM'S



GUSSY



FIGGINS



FATTY WYNN.



SEFTON



TALBOT



TOM MERRY

THE FIGHT

GERALD CROOKE, the cad of the Shell Form at St. Jim's, was feeling fed-up. Several masters had jumped on him during the course of that morning's lessons, and the chaps of St. Jim's had administered summary punishment to him for a series of particularly caddish and sneakish actions.

Feeling at war with the world in general, the cad of the Shell had walked out of the school grounds and into a barn not far from the school, where he was smoking a secret cigarette and pondering on what he would like to do to those who had opposed him.

The old barn stood in a field some three hundred yards from the edge of a wood, and was far from any other building. It was a ramshackle sort of place, and had been disused for as long as Crooke could remember.

But suddenly the rotter of the Shell snatched the cigarette out of his mouth, and, snuffing it between his fingers, threw it away. Somebody was approaching the barn.

A moment later the newcomer revealed himself as a youth of about Crooke's own age. Perhaps a year older, but slimmer, and rather more frail. Crooke looked at him from beneath lowering brows.

He was a stranger; at least, Crooke had never seen him before. He was ill-dressed, and his shoes showed visible signs of hard wear. On his back was a bundle, and a cigarette-end reposed over his left ear.

"Allo, cock!" he said familiarly. "You're looking mighty sick!"

Crooke scowled. The stranger's face wasn't exactly a pleasant one. It was a small face, sunburnt, but sharp-featured, and his eyes were shifty.

"Mind your own confounded business!" said Crooke sullenly.

"Yes, I 'spect you do feel that way," said the newcomer. "You looks sore enough."

Crooke gritted his teeth.

"Go away, hang you!" he exclaimed. "I don't want any rotten cheek!"

"Rats!"

"What!"

The youth grinned again.

"I never spoke," he said coolly. "Never said a word, cock!"

Crooke breathed hard.

"You cheeky cad!" he snarled. "For two pins I'd thrash you!"

"Right!" said the stranger promptly. "I'm willin' to oblige. Take your coat off, an' we'll 'ave a little bout!"

Crooke hesitated. He didn't particularly want to fight, but this cheeky stranger looked just about his mark. He could wipe him up in two minutes, and work off some of his over-charged feelings at the same time.

He looked round the ramshackle building. The floor was of stone, and rough bricks lay on every side. Crooke shook his head.

"Can't fight here!" he growled. "We should be stumbling over every minute."

"What about the loft?"

Crooke directed his eyes towards a rotten ladder which led up to a hole through the upper flooring.

"Come on, then," he said gruffly. "My hat! You'll be sore when I've finished with you!"

"We'll see about that," said the other darkly.

They climbed up into the loft. The floor was sound enough, and there were some tufts

This Week's Story

THE BURNING BARN

By
**MARTIN
CLIFFORD**

of straw lying about. It was just the place for a fight, and Crooke noted with satisfaction that there was no window.

The only light that was admitted came through a hole in the roof. As a matter of fact, there were quite a number of holes.

In a businesslike way the shabby youth removed his bundle and coat. Then he proceeded to turn up his sleeves. Crooke did likewise, eyeing the other's skinny arms with satisfaction. He would soon wipe the floor with him, and it would be a first-class safety-valve for his pent-up feelings.

"I'm ready!" he grunted.

Crooke lunged out viciously. The coolness of his opponent exasperated him beyond measure, and he threw caution to the winds. But he was soon brought to his senses.

Crash!

Something that seemed as hard as a brick struck Crooke on the jaw, and he went down with a thud that shook the whole tottering building. Crooke saw about a million stars in three seconds, and sat up dazedly.

"That's one to be going on with!" chuckled the sunburnt lad. "Ave some more?"

Crooke staggered to his feet.

"You—you hound!" he snarled.

They went at it again. Crooke was simply mad with rage. He caught his opponent a heavy drive on the cheek, but in return received a violent tap upon his already aching nose.

The tears started to his eyes as he staggered back.

"I'll pay you!" he muttered thickly.

He lurched forward and flung himself at the other. In a second he had got his opponent's head beneath his arm, and was hammering away for all he was worth.

"Ow! Stoppit!" roared the stranger.

"You cad! You blinkin' worm! Yaroo!"

He made a violent effort and succeeded in getting away from Crooke's clutches. Then, with no trace of his former coolness, he kicked out with all his strength, and Crooke only just dodged in time.

Had the blow gone home, Crooke's shin would have been fearfully jagged.

"You cad!" panted Crooke.

But he was not averse to the same tactics himself, and he immediately proceeded to put them into execution.

The sunburnt youth, his face distorted with vicious hatred, was kicking out continuously.

Crooke danced from side to side, and dodged some of the blows. Others got home, and his fury increased accordingly.

In a moment it wasn't a fight at all—it was a wild, kicking contest.

It could not last long—and didn't.

Crooke received two painful kicks upon his legs, but in return he delivered some violent blows from his own foot, which, being better shod than his opponent's, had more effect.

It was an altogether unsporting brawl. Suddenly the sunburnt youth uttered a gasping cry. Crooke's foot had just landed in the pit of his stomach.

He collapsed, and lay still upon the floor.

"Get up, you rotter!" gasped Crooke pantingly.

But the other lay without moving.

"Winded, eh?" said Crooke. "Well, I've given you something to go on with, you kicking beast!"

Crooke picked up his coat and put it on. He was not particularly hurt, and was feeling satisfied that he had taught his opponent a lesson.

But he'd had quite enough fighting for one afternoon, and was only too pleased to clear off without any further altercation.

So he descended the rickety ladder and stood for a moment upon the rough stone floor of the barn. The hole in the floor above was a good distance up, and the ladder was loose.

A vindictive smile appeared upon Crooke's face.

"You can get down the best way you can!" he muttered maliciously.

He grasped the ladder and moved it away from the hole. It was a frail thing, but, being high, Crooke required all his strength to move it.

He lowered it as gently as he could, but it got beyond his power to hold it, and crashed to the floor, the rotten wood smashing to fragments.

Crooke grinned.

"That's done it!" he muttered callously. "You'll jolly well have to jump down now, my beauty!"

Crooke lit another cigarette and walked slowly out of the barn, and as he did so something happened of which he was entirely unconscious. There was a little pile of dry straw against the wooden wall.

Crooke carelessly threw away his match as

he passed out of the barn, and there was a sudden, almost noiseless hiss. Crooke did not hear it, and passed on, slamming the door after him as he went.

But that insignificant hiss was to mean much for Crooke of the Shell.

For the match flared up, and instantly a piece of straw caught light. Perhaps it would have gone out harmlessly, but for the fact that Crooke slammed the door.

The draught fanned the flame and drove it into the little pile of straw against the wall.

In an instant the whole lot was ablaze, flaming furiously against the dry, rotten woodwork of the old building.

FIRE

TOM MERRY & CO. were on the banks of the Ryll. There being no football that afternoon at St. Jim's, the chums had set out together on a ramble.

"I say, what's all that smoke?"

Tom Merry suddenly pointed across the wood. In the distance a great column of smoke was rising into the still air. Manners and Lowther looked; they hadn't noticed it until Tom Merry had spoken.

"My hat! It's thick!" ejaculated Manners. "I wonder what's caused it?"

"It looks pretty serious," Tom Merry said quickly. "All that smoke wouldn't come from a bonfire. It must be something jolly big!"

"Some of the Third Form fags, perhaps, cooking herring," suggested Monty Lowther.

But his chums took no notice of his humorous explanation. Undoubtedly a fire was raging on the other side of the wood, and a big fire, too.

"I vote we go and investigate," said Tom Merry.

Manners and Lowther were quite ready, and the three set off at a run. They pushed into the wood, and at last came to a spot where they could see through the trees.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Manners. "It's the old barn!"

"And it's alight from end to end!" exclaimed Tom Merry excitedly.

"Come on!"

They sped on now at an increased pace, and the fire was lost to view by the thick trees intervening.

Suddenly, on rounding a bend in the path, Tom Merry & Co. nearly bumped into Crooke, who was leaning against some railings, gently rubbing his nose. Obviously, he had seen nothing of the fire.

Under ordinary circumstances, the chums would probably have ignored Crooke, but now they halted breathlessly.

"Seen the fire?" gasped Manners.

"Fire?" echoed Crooke. "What fire?"

"Why, the old barn is alight from end to end," said Tom Merry. "Come on! We're going to have a squint at it at close quarters."

And the three chums rushed on.

Crooke stared after them, a curious sensation in his heart. The barn—on fire! He had only left it ten minutes before. Who had done it? What could it mean?

Crooke started. He remembered now, with a sudden, sickly feeling, that he had looked back at the barn as he had walked away. He had seen a waft of something emerge from a gap in the building, but at the time had never suspected anything wrong.

Yet it must have been the commencement of the fire. In some manner the building had got alight. A fear grew in Crooke's heart.

What about the strange boy? Crooke had left him knocked out!

"Of course, he's all right now," thought Crooke. "He must have scrambled down—"

He caught his breath in sharply, and his face blanched sickly white.

"The ladder!" he muttered. "I pulled it down! The chap had no means of getting out of the loft! There wasn't even a window! He must have— Oh, it's too awful!"

He shook and gulped back a sob. Then, as though in panic, he turned and ran after Tom Merry & Co.

The awful thought that had come into his mind almost turned him sick. He must see for himself.

Perhaps the strange youth would be there, calmly watching the fire. It must be so. The other possibility was too ghastly even for a moment's consideration.

Crooke burst from the wood, and the barn was in full view. It was now nothing but a raging mass of flames from end to end, shooting up to the sky with a dreadful roar.

Even as Crooke watched, the roof fell in and a dense mass of sparks shot skywards.

But Crooke did not see it; his eyes were searching the field in the vicinity of the barn. Tom Merry & Co. were there, but nobody else— Yes! A figure appeared from the other side.

For an instant Crooke's heart leapt with hope; then he groaned.

The figure was that of a man.

The man came towards Crooke.

"I want a word with you, young fellow!" Crooke's heart beat a little faster. He

looked round. Tom Merry & Co. were standing close to the barn.

The man was rather short, and Crooke could see that he had one leg longer than the other, for he walked with a curious, ungainly motion, and his left foot was turned inward.

His face was bearded, and a pipe stuck out from between his teeth.

"What do you want?" asked Crooke.

The cad of the Shell felt half-inclined to run after Tom Merry & Co. and seek the shelter of their company from this man.

Instinct told him that the stranger knew about the boy who had been left in the barn. Crooke had no desire to speak of that boy, or to tell anyone that he might still be in the barn.

He feared that if he did so the truth would come out that he was responsible for the fire—and perhaps the death of the strange boy!

Crooke had visions of police investigations; of himself arrested for manslaughter!

Rather than that, Crooke meant to be silent about his part in causing the fire. He eased his conscience by telling himself that it would be too late, even if anyone did try to enter the barn now—when the roof had fallen in the boy must have been killed!

"You and me are goin' to 'ave a business deal!" he heard the deformed man say.

"I—I don't understand!"

The man chuckled.

"Of course not!" he leered. "Well, I'll just explain. Mebbe you're a little scared, but there's no need—I'm your pal."

"But—"

"I guess I'll do the talkin'," interrupted the deformed man, pulling gently at his beard. "You've never seen me before, but I've seen you. I saw you go into that barn this afternoon, and I saw a shabby young chap of your own age go into that same barn a little while after you. You had words, didn't you? And you fought!"

Crooke turned deathly pale.

"Good heavens!" he muttered, panting.

"Don't put yourself out, young 'un. I'm not goin' to blab," said the deformed man coolly. "I saw the pair of you enter the barn, and I saw you come out! But the other poor youngster remained there. He's there now, buried amid—"

"Don't!" gasped Crooke hoarsely.

He stared at the man in terror.

"It was an accident!" he panted frantically, and rushed on, scarcely knowing what he was saying. "I took the ladder down, I know, but I didn't set fire to the place. I swear it! It was all a terrible trick of Fate. When I took the ladder down I had no idea—"



"You left a poor youngster in that burning barn," said the shabby stranger. Crooke stared at him in horror. "It was an accident!" he panted. "I didn't set fire to the place on purpose!"

CROOKE'S SCHEME

The deformed man removed the pipe from his lips.

"So that's why the youngster couldn't get out, eh?" he said calmly. "You took the ladder down, and he was trapped there. Poor kid! The place was ablaze from end to end in less than five minutes. He had no time to escape. I saw him try—"

"You saw him?" gasped Crooke.

The man nodded.

"Yes. He was round the other side of the building," he explained, "and I was just in the wood. I saw you leave, and I saw the place on fire directly afterwards. Looks suspicious, don't it?"

"I didn't do it!" sobbed Crooke huskily.

"Well, I ain't goin' to take your word for that," said the deformed man roughly. "Five minutes after you had gone I saw the other poor kid climb through a hole in the roof."

Crooke gave a gasp.

"He escaped, then?" he asked eagerly.

"Not he! The poor chap didn't have a chance. Overcome by the smoke, I expect, for he fell back through the hole. I didn't see him again."

The wretched Shell fellow covered his face with his hands. Then, in a sudden, furious outburst, he faced the other.

"The evidence is all against me," he cried. "But I didn't deliberately set fire to the barn. I swear I didn't!"

"Then the affair was accidental?" asked the man sharply.

"Yes!"

"I believe you. I believe that it was accidental—"

"Then—then you won't give me away?" asked Crooke eagerly.

"Hold on; not so fast, young 'un!" exclaimed the deformed man. "If I decide to keep your secret, I do so only on one condition."

"A—condition?"

"That's it. It happens that I'm rather hard-up," said the deformed man coolly. "I want ten pounds to—pay a pressin' debt. If you can manage to lay hold of that amount and give it to me, I won't blab."

Crooke stared.

"Ten pounds?" he faltered. "You want me to give you ten—?" He uttered a forced laugh. "I haven't got ten shillings!"

The man frowned.

"You can get it!" he said. "Borrow it from your schoolfellows."

"I can't! Even D'Arcy couldn't lend me a tanner!" gasped Crooke. "Besides, he wouldn't if he could. I'm not on friendly terms with his rotten set!"

"Then I shall inform the authorities."

Crooke clenched his fists.

"You scoundrel!"

"What!"

"I called you a scoundrel!" panted Crooke. "And so you are! This is nothing but blackmail!"

"Call it what you like," said the deformed man calmly. "I reckon it's an easy way out of a pretty deep hole for you. You've either got to give me a tanner or be arrested."

Crooke groaned. He saw that the man's words were only too true. He was in the scoundrel's power, and was helpless. Yet he must never allow him to take his story to the police. It would mean arrest—trial—conviction.

"I've only got five bob," he said huskily. "I'll try to get ten pounds—"

"I'll give you until to-morrow evening," said the man roughly. "I'll be at this spot. If you don't turn up, I shall go and blab."

Footsteps sounded down the lane, and the deformed man looked round quickly. Two seniors were approaching from the village.

"We mustn't be seen together," muttered the man. "To-morrow evening, remember, at this time, I shall expect you. If you don't come—"

He left the sentence unfinished and hobbled to the side of the road. Next second he had disappeared through the hedge.

"By George!" ejaculated Crooke.

He was staring interestedly at a scrap of newspaper. The paragraph he had just read was quite short, but full of meaning for Crooke:

"Reported Missing.

"We hear, with regret, that Corporal F. Jacobs and Sergeant Arthur Hills are reported missing in the latest casualty list. Both were members of the Tank Corps, and are believed to have been killed in a recent action in France."

"By George!" repeated Crooke. "Old Hills killed, eh?"

Crooke was naturally interested, because Hills had been in the employ of Crooke's father before the war. He had been Crooke senior's chauffeur, and had, indeed, visited St. Jim's at the commencement of the summer holidays last year to take Crooke away.

It had been such an unusual occurrence for Crooke to depart from St. Jim's in a car that it had attracted quite a lot of attention, so Tom Merry & Co. knew Hills by sight. In fact, they liked him, because when a party of chaps had attempted to board the car just as it was going off Crooke had been fearfully ratty about it, but Hills had grinned and taken it all in good part.

In Crooke's present state of mind he didn't waste much time over the old servant of his family. He had his own troubles to worry over.

He stared unseeingly before him.

"How shall I get that ten pounds?" he asked himself again and again. "It's no use going to D'Arcy, because he wouldn't let me have anything. The same with Lumley-Lumley and Bernard Glyn. They've got plenty of quids knocking about, but if I asked them to lend me any, they'd want to know what I wanted it for."

Crooke's dilemma was a knotty one. There wasn't a single fellow from whom he could borrow such a large sum, and it was equally impossible for him to go round asking for small loans.

What could he do, then?

There seemed no way out of the difficulty. He would have to meet the deformed man the next evening empty-handed, and the man would go to the police.

"No, not that!" muttered Crooke. "I must get the money somehow!"

He rose from his chair and paced the study in a fever of anxiety. His mental anguish with regard to the unknown youth who had, he thought, come to such an untimely end was overwhelmed by the new problem which confronted him.

He almost forgot the burning of the barn in the worry of the moment. The most important thing now was to satisfy the deformed man's demands.

"There's plenty of money about now," thought Crooke. "There's no fund being raised, or anything—"

He started.

A fund!

Why shouldn't he raise a fund on some pretext—a fund of ten pounds? If he made the object sound plausible enough the fellows would contribute readily. It was an idea, and if he developed it he might be successful.

For ten minutes he paced up and down, turning over idea after idea. But all were dismissed as useless. The fellows would never contribute to a fund organised by Crooke unless they knew positively what the object was.

Crooke sank into a chair, and his eyes fell upon the scrap of newspaper. Suddenly he started to his feet with a triumphant expression upon his face.

"My hat!" he ejaculated. "I've got it!"

It didn't strike him that the scheme which had come into his mind was a basely fraudulent one.

"A fund," he muttered; "a fund of ten pounds for the widow of Sergeant Hills! Hills wasn't married, and there isn't any widow, but that doesn't matter a hang; the

fellows won't know it. They'll contribute liberally for such an object. By Jove, I shall get out of the hole, after all!"

A little colour had come back to his cheeks. He picked up the piece of paper, switched off the light, and left the study. Then he descended to the Common-room, and found the apartment crowded with juniors.

Tom Merry & Co. were there, and Blake & Co., Talbot, Bernard Glyn, and many others. Evidently a meeting of some sort had just been held, for everybody was talking football.

"Bai Jove!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. "What have you come down here for, you awful boundah?"

"As a matter of fact, I've had bad news, and I'm rather cut up," said Crooke gravely.

The juniors gave Crooke their attention at once. He was not at all popular, except among his own particular set, but if he had received bad news they were all ready to extend him their sympathy.

"Bai Jove, I twust it is nothin' sewious, deah boy?"

"Well, it is pretty serious," said Crooke. "You remember I went away from St. Jim's in the pater's car last summer?"

"Yaas, wahthah!"

"Yes, we remember it."

"Well, the chap who drove the car—the chauffeur, you know—was named Hills—"

"A decent chap, too," said Tom Merry. "We had a lively time with your pater's bus, Crooke. Hills seemed to enjoy it all, though. Well, what about the merchant?"

"He was in the Army," replied Crooke. "He's been killed in action in a tank raid on the Siegfried Line."

"Bai Jove! Bad luck, poor fellah!"

"Yes, rather!"

"It's in the paper here," went on Crooke, passing the piece of newspaper round. "I'm a bit cut up about it, because Hills was a jolly decent chap. I'm blessed if I know what his wife will do. He's left a few debts, I believe, and the Government pension won't be sufficient to clear them off."

"Weally, this is vewy sad, Cwooke!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

The fellows looked at the paragraph interestedly. There was no doubting the truth of it. And as many of them had seen Hills, they naturally felt the tragedy of it more keenly.

Crooke hesitated. He wondered whether it would be wise to launch the idea of a subscription immediately.

After all, the money was not needed till the next night, and perhaps it would be better not to mention the matter until the morrow. It would certainly look more genuine, for he could say that the idea had just struck him.

Crooke decided to wait, especially as several of the fellows left the Common-room while he was hesitating. But the cad of the Shell was feeling in much higher spirits; he was positive that the scheme would work out satisfactorily.

He was glad when bed-time came. The day had seemed the longest within his memory. And as he lay in bed, tossing uneasily from side to side, he found sleep impossible.

SUCCESS—AND FAILURE

"WEALLY, I am quite surprised at the amount of feeling Cwooke is displayin'," said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, as he lounged elegantly upon the School House steps after morning lessons. "The poor chap appears to be quite cut up."

"Yes; it's a bit surprising, Gussy," said Jack Blake. "I didn't suspect, myself, that Crooke had such a thing as a heart. He must have been pretty fond of Hills, I should think."

"Bai Jove! Cwooke is appwoachin' us now," said D'Arcy, gazing across the quad through his famous monocle. "He has got a sheet of papah in his hand—impot paper, by the look of it."

Crooke faced Blake & Co.

"I say, you chaps, I've got a little scheme on," he began. "It's just struck me that as the widow of poor Hills is in a pretty rotten

position, it wouldn't be a bad idea to get up a subscription."

"My hat!"
"I expect the pater's doing something for the woman," went on Crooke, "but as I knew Hills and his wife—well, I should like to do my little bit, too. Or, rather, I should like St. Jim's to have a look in."

"A subscription?" said Herries slowly. "Well, it's a worthy object, anyhow. How much do you want to raise? I can't contribute more than a tanner, because I'm nearly stony."

"Well, I was thinking that ten quid would be a nice surprise," said Crooke. "What do you chaps think?"

Arthur Augustus took out his pocket-book, and a crisp fiver rustled in his fingers.

"Pway do me the honah of acceptin' this little donation, Cwooke," he said gracefully.

Crooke stared.
"A— a fiver!" he ejaculated. "Do you mean it, Gussy?"

"I twust you do not think I would tweat such a delicate mattah in a wibald spiwit?"

"No, of course not!" stammered Crooke. "But it's too much, Gussy. I shouldn't like to take this and leave you stony."

D'Arcy waved his hand vaguely.
"I am nevah stony," he replied.

Digby wasn't exactly overflowing with filthy lucre, but he managed to rake out half-a-crown, and Blake dubbed up willingly.

Crooke's next visit was to Little Side, where several groups of fellows were watching Figgins & Co. at practice. There was to be a House match on the next half-holiday, and the School House fellows were curious to see their rivals' form.

"Oh, we shall whack 'em!" declared Kangaroo of the Shell confidently. "We shall put a jolly good team in the field, anyhow."

"Best not to be too confident," said Talbot. "I think— Hallo, Crooke, you look jolly businesslike with that pencil and paper. What's the idea?"

Crooke explained, and a crowd of fellows gathered round, including Tom Merry & Co.

"I've got five pounds eight already," said Crooke. "It would be jolly decent if ten pounds could be raised. D'Arcy contributed a fiver alone."

"Good old Gussy!" chuckled Lowther. "He's always to the fore when it's a question of tin."

"Well, we're not all weighted down with cash," said Bernard Glyn, fishing in his pocket. "Still, here's a quid, Crooke."

"And here's another ten bob."

"Five shillings any good?"
Crooke did great business, and almost before he realised it, the fund of ten pounds was completed. He could hardly realise his good fortune. He had raised the tenner with scarcely any trouble at all.

"It's awfully decent of you all," he said. "You don't know what a load it's taken off my mind. I—I mean," he went on hastily, "it will give me great pleasure to send this money to poor Hills' widow."

And Crooke departed.

"I'm not so blessed sure about that giddy fund," said Gore, who hadn't contributed anything. "I shouldn't be surprised if Crooke sends a fiver and keeps the rest for himself."

"Oh, shut up!" growled Manners. "You took jolly good care that you didn't give anything, Gore."

And George Gore subsided.
During afternoon lessons Crooke was quite cheerful, and the other fellows couldn't help noticing it. The haggard look still lingered on his face, but it was not so apparent.

After tea Crooke prepared for his appointment with the deformed man, having told the fellows that he was going to post the ten pounds to Hills' widow.

Quite a number of fellows were strolling in the quadrangle. It was a fine evening, but there was not enough light for much footer practice. So some of the juniors were punting a football about in the quad, while others stood in groups and chatted.

Just as Crooke approached the entrance-gates, there was a sudden commotion.

Mellish of the Fourth came running up with something white in his hand.

"Where's Crooke?" he bawled.
Crooke felt a sudden sinking sensation and dreaded that something disastrous was about to happen.

He was right.
"Oh, there you are, Crooke!" exclaimed Mellish, with an unpleasant grin. "The postman's just been, and there's a postcard for you—from your mater—and it proves that you got up that subscription under false pretences! Hills isn't dead!"

Hills not dead!
Crooke felt his heart sink. He realised that in justification of himself he would have to read the postcard aloud. Anyhow, he had really thought that Hills was dead.

"Make him read it!" shouted Gore.
"Keep your wool on!" growled Crooke, as compositely as possible. "You shall hear it!"

And they did.
It was merely a few lines from Crooke's mother to say that he may have seen a report of Hills' death in the newspapers. It was wrong, for Hills himself had written to say he was quite well, and was coming home on leave.

"There you are!" shouted Mellish triumphantly. "What did I tell you? Crooke got up that subscription under false—"

"Rats!" exclaimed Tom Merry hotly. "Nothing of the sort! Crooke thought the chap was dead, as he saw the report in the paper, and he got up the subscription from a generous motive. But, of course, now that he knows the truth he'll hand back the subscriptions to their various donors. It's the only thing to do."

Crooke gritted his teeth, but managed to sustain a bold front.

"Of course I'll return the money!" he said thickly. "No need for all this fuss, though. How was I to know? I think Mellish ought to be bumped for making such a rotten accusation!"

"Yaas, wathah!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "And frog-marched, as well!"

A SURPRISE

TOM MERRY looked serious.
"Crooke has gone out!" he said.
Jack Blake nodded.

"Yes; and he looked pretty worried and haggard again, too," he remarked.

"No need for him to go out," Tom Merry mused. "He said he was going to post that money off to Hills' widow, but now he's given the money back, there's no need for him to go."

"The queer thing," replied Blake, "is that he didn't look in the least pleased that Hills was not dead, after all. He seemed to me to be furious with rage, and only with an effort able to bottle his feelings up."

Tom Merry turned towards the gates.
"I don't like to spy on a chap," he said, "but we know Crooke, and I'm beginning to feel there's some hanky-panky about that subscription business he originated. I'm going to follow him."

"I'll come with you," said Jack Blake.

"Oke," answered Tom. "But we'll keep this to ourselves—for the present, anyhow."

They slipped out of the gates unnoticed by any of the other fellows, and turned along the lane in the direction Crooke had taken a few minutes before.

They went some distance before, in the gloom, they caught sight of Crooke striding towards the village, a hundred yards or so ahead of them.

Crooke disappeared round a corner, and Tom Merry and Blake hurried after him.

They had almost reached the corner when a surly voice reached their ears.

"Ave you, or 'ave you not got that ten pounds?" it was saying. "Right! Then I'm going to the police straight away to tell them that you set fire to that barn—and that some poor kid was probably burnt to death in it."

"No, no!" came Crooke's voice, almost in agonised tones. "It was an accident, I tell you!"

Tom Merry and Blake looked at one another grimly.

They didn't know exactly what was happening round the corner, but they had heard enough to tell them that Crooke was being blackmailed.

Crooke had had something to do with the fire at the barn, though Tom Merry couldn't understand the reference to someone dying in the fire.

They had been near the barn that afternoon, and they had heard nothing to make them suspect that anyone was in the blazing building when they had reached it.

"Shall we slip round the corner and take a hand in the matter?" Blake whispered. "Or shall we let that toad, Crooke, fight his own battle? After all, even if he is being blackmailed, he probably deserves it."

"Hist!"
Tom Merry suddenly signalled to his chum to be quiet, and then pointed to the hedge, near which they had stopped.

At first Blake could see nothing; then he made out through the hedgegrowth the figure of a lad of about their own age, but clothed in old and disreputable garments.

That lad had his back to them, but he had pressed himself into the hedge, obviously near to where Crooke and the unknown man were still talking.

As Blake watched, the lad turned his face slightly, and the St. Jim's fellows saw that he was grinning.

"Let's see if we can collar Mr. Peeping Tom," whispered Tom Merry, and led the way back a short distance to a hole in the hedge he had noticed as they came along.

Tom Merry and Blake stalked that eaves-dropper without very much difficulty. The youth gave such a squeal when they pounced on him that Crooke and his companion broke off their conversation in alarm.

"Just a moment, Crooke!" called Tom Merry. "I think you ought to know that someone has been listening to your conversation."

Tom Merry pushed his way through the hedge. Then he stopped, staring into the lane in amazement.

A shabbily dressed man was disappearing down the lane as fast as an awkward limp would allow him to travel. Crooke, too, looked as if he had started to run—back towards St. Jim's.

But he turned as he recognised Tom Merry's voice.

At that moment, behind Tom Merry, Jack Blake said very determinedly:

"No good struggling, young fellow-me-lad! We want to know what you found so funny in one of our fellows being threatened."

Tom Merry turned and helped Blake, who was finding the shabby youngster rather a handful.

Together they pulled the youngster through the hedge into the lane, and as he emerged an exclamation of surprise came from Crooke.

"You!" the cad of the Shell cried. "Then you did escape from the barn! It was a lie that you were burnt to death in it!"

The shabby youngster suddenly ceased struggling.

"Let me go, misters," he begged, in pleading tones. "I'll tell you everything. Yus, I escaped from the barn. I climbed out through a hole, and was some yards away when the roof fell in."

Blake held firmly on to him until Tom Merry and he, from the combined stories gabbled out of them by Crooke and the boy, got the hang of what had happened.

"And who was that man who's just run away?" asked Tom Merry.

"Me father," replied the shabby boy. "It was his idea that if we pretended I was dead he could make that young gent"—he scowled at Crooke—"give us money. Let me go, hang yer!"

He gave a sudden wrench, and succeeded in breaking free from Blake's grasp, and the St. Jim's fellows made no effort to pursue him.

They turned their backs on Crooke and walked back towards St. Jim's. They had inadvertently saved Crooke from a worry that had been weighing on him for days, but they had no sympathy for the cad of the Shell.

Another grand St. Jim's yarn next Tuesday. Please show the TRIUMPH'S booklet of Fighter Planes to your chums.